Thesis Title: *"School has killed all of the creative spark that a lot of people - including myself - had"*: **An ethnographically-oriented qualitative study of Year 10 students' engagement with, and identities, attitudes and beliefs associated with, creative writing.**

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Abstract

My doctoral research uses ethnographically-oriented arts-based workshops and semi-structured interviews to explore how 14 to 15-year-old students' experiences of creative writing affect their authorial identities. At this level, creative writing is dictated by the GCSE English Language exam, an exam taken by all UK students at age 16, where it accounts for 25% of the final grade (AQA, 2014; Edexcel, 2022). Students are assessed based on the content, organisation and structure of the work, and for technical accuracy and the use of 'Standard English' (though what precisely this is remains undefined by exam boards). The shift from letter grades to numerical grades has further contributed to a culture of quantification, where students define themselves by their scores (Goodacre, 2023). The aim of this research is to answer the following research question: How do students' experiences of creative writing affect their identities as 'writers', both within the curriculum and outside of it? To answer this, I designed and ran a series of six ethnographically-oriented writing workshops between January and July 2024, where my six participants experimented in genre and style and conducted three semi-structured interviews with each of my participants: at the beginning, middle and end of the study. In these hour-long interviews, participants discussed different aspects of their beliefs, identities, views, attitudes and opinions on various aspects of writing, being a 'writer' and on how their identities shaped their writing. I analysed the data using a thematic analysis approach, and I identified four themes in the data: writing in the GCSE English Language curriculum; the influences of identity on extracurricular creative writing; the literacies and multimodalities that students chose to engage in; and the nature of creativity and writing itself. The findings indicate a need for reform in the assessment of creative writing at KS4, prompting recommendations for curriculum revision.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Margaret Warner, Arthur Timothy Warner, Doris 'Dot' Wright and Eric Wright, all of whom I believe would have been incredibly proud of my work.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
KS3	Key Stage 3
KS4	Key Stage 4
NaNoWriMo	National Novel Writing Month
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education, terminal examination taken in Year 11 in England.
DfE	Department for Education
SLE	Spoken Language Endorsement
FSM	Free School Meals
EAL	English as an Additional Language
AO3	Archive Of Our Own
NAWE	National Association of Writers in Education
SSP	Systematic synthetic phonics
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the thesis

> Becoming a writer is about becoming conscious. When you're conscious and writing from a place of insight and simplicity and real caring about the truth, you have the ability to throw the lights on for your reader. He or she will recognize his or her life and truth in what you say, in the pictures you have painted, and this decreases the terrible sense of isolation that we have all had too much of. (Lamott, 2020, p. 90).

Writing is communication. It connects us to other people and, as Lamott (2020) argues, makes us feel less alone. It is how we can join an increasingly global conversation; how we can express ourselves and our feelings; a way in which we can create art. Writing is, and has long been, incredibly important to me – personally and professionally – which is why I was drawn to studying it. This doctoral thesis explores the ways in which secondary school students in Year 10 (those students who are 14 and 15 years old) engage in creative writing as an art form, and how students' experiences inside and outside of the National Curriculum in England can help to shape students' authorial identity. This introductory chapter will give an overview of the context of this research, the focus of the study, my research aims and questions, my positionality as a teacher, artist and researcher, the significance of this study, and an overview of the structure of the rest of the thesis.

1.2 Context

In this section, I contextualise my research through a discussion of literacies and writing for pleasure. My research is contextualised within the state secondary education system in England, and data collection took place at the mainstream comprehensive school in which I work as a Teacher of English. In England, state secondary schools are bound by the National Curriculum, and the vast majority of students have to take GCSE examinations in core subjects, including English Language, English Literature, and Mathematics, in Year 11 (Department for Education, 2014). Students are told that employers accept a minimum of a Grade 4 (equivalent to an old C grade) in these subjects, and if students do not pass GCSE

English Language or GCSE Mathematics at the age of 15 or 16 in Year 11, then they are made to resit these qualifications until they pass, or until the age of 19 (National Careers Service, n.d). An 11-mark increase of the grade boundary needed to pass meant a record number of students had to resit GCSE English in 2024/2025 (Shearing, 2024).

There is an increasing focus on "literacy" in schools, although I would argue that there is some element of confusion, even amongst educators, about what this term actually means within the school context. I have chosen to use a definition of literacy (or rather, of *literacies*, recognising the multiple and multimodal nature of literacy practices) aligned with the New Literacy Studies approach for this thesis (see Chapter 2), but this definition is not something which is acknowledged or commonly discussed amongst practitioners (Dwi Jayanti and Damayanti, 2023; Fisher et al., 2023; Lim et al., 2023. Piasta et al., 2009; Honan, 2008). Even within the secondary school context, there are multiple understandings of the abstract noun "literacy", which is often combined with another concept, including, but not limited to: disciplinary literacy (where students are taught how to read, write and communicate effectively in different disciplines), oracy (the way in which students use language to articulate themselves orally), and digital literacy (the ability to effectively use technology). Sometimes, multiple types of literacy can be at play in a single scenario, for example, with a child who struggles to physically write things down on paper (written literacy) navigating Microsoft Word to access speech-to-text tools (digital literacy). This lack of clarity can lead to miscommunication between professionals and students about what "literacy" is, or which type of "literacy" is being referred to in a specific context. This is significant because this misunderstanding can affect how teachers plan, teach, assess and support literacy in the classroom, and can lead to negative outcomes for students.

Since the onset of COVID-19 pandemic, literacy in general has become a more pressing issue than ever before, with the number of children in the UK entering secondary school without basic literacy skills increasing post-pandemic, with an estimated quarter of a million students leaving primary school without basic Maths and English skills (Savage, 2023). In addition to this, another lingering effect of the pandemic is a degradation of the relationship between home and school, and in particular, between parents and teachers (Busby, 2025; Oliver, 2025). This

breakdown in relationships impacts the ability for schools and families to work together to improve technical literacy skills. The OECD collected international data which showed that England was an outlier in that the data saw the oldest age group (55 to 65 years) perform at roughly the same level as the youngest age group (16 to 24 years). This suggests that there is indeed "long-term stagnation in improving literacy in England" (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2022, p. 2). England has some of the lowest literacy rates in the OECD (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2022, p. 8), with 16.4% of adults in England estimated to struggle to access longer texts and unfamiliar topics (p. 1). These teenagers then go on to be marginalised adults, impacted by low socio-economic status, poor life expectancy, difficulties in family life and relationships, wellbeing and health (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2022, p. 2). According to Teravainen-Goff et al. (2022), "if more action is not taken to tackle low literacy in [our population], we risk perpetuating and reinforcing an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage" (p. 8). The findings of this report resonate with Bowles and Gintis' (1976) social reproduction theory, which argues that education systems in capitalist societies (such as the UK) reproduce and reinforce existing class inequalities, rather than promoting meritocracy. To try to break this cycle of low adult literacy, the National Literacy Trust is exploring "unusual" avenues, such as literacy in laundrettes, barbers, and at other community events (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2022, p. 9), targeting hard to reach adults who perhaps have negative associations with formal education settings.

However, whilst this approach might go some way towards helping adults with low levels of this kind of technical literacy, it does not tackle the root of the issue. After all, students in secondary school today are at risk of becoming adults with very low literacy, and as this issue is generative (Teravainen-Goff et al., 2022, p. 8), future adults with very low literacy are currently students in secondary schools across the country. As teachers, we aim to make English and literacy practices accessible and engaging to promote improvements in reading and writing, but sometimes students' refusal to even attempt tasks is embedded by the time they reach secondary school. Anecdotally, I teach a number of students who absolutely refuse to write anything down in their books, not just in English lessons, but across the curriculum. In their 2020 report, "Inequalities in Children's Experiences of Home Learning during the COVID-19 lockdown", Andrew et al. (2020) agree with this view, writing about the

"significant heterogeneity" in children and young people's experiences with learning during the COVID-19 pandemic which was "concerningly" associated with family income (p. 654) and arguing that "learning attitudes […] may already be crystallised among older children in ways that they are not among younger children" (p. 678). Their report found that some schools were reluctant to move to provide online support during the periods of school closure, even though policy dictated that this was best practice, in order not to further disadvantage children from lower socio-economic backgrounds who would not be able to access such support. These schools reported preferring the use of printed home-learning packs as schools viewed them as a "more equitable" tool (Andrew et al., 2020, p. 678). The full impact of the periods of school closure during the COVID-19 lockdown is still unknown, but the pandemic and associated school closures have undoubtedly had a negative effect on literacy practices as they are used at school, even if children and young people developed different literacy practices during this period. For these reasons, schools are under pressure to improve literacy outcomes. The government, and inspection bodies such as Ofsted, use GCSE examination results in English Language and Mathematics as an accountability measure for schools and colleges (Edexcel, 2014). As Goodacre (2023) argues, "under the guise of rigour and equity, GCSE English is now exclusively assessed through terminal public exams, removing the variety (and relative humanity) that came in the past with coursework" (p. 9). In response to this, most schools hold series of mock exams which are "set up as to closely simulate the formal (and restrictive) process of real GCSE exams" (Goodacre, 2023, p. 9), and are marked in accordance with GCSE mark schemes (see chapter 2.4).

However, curricular literacy practices are only part of this story. We know that students also engage in literacy practices outside of the curriculum, but this area is comparatively under researched. The UK's National Literacy Trust surveys school children in the UK annually and reports on their findings. In a research report produced for The National Literacy Trust about *Writing in 2023*, Bonafede et al. (2023) conducted an online survey between January and March 2023 of 64,066 children and young people aged 8 to 18, including a number of open-text questions designed to hear in more depth about children and young people's views on writing. This report is relevant to my study because it used a large sample size of students in

the UK and asked questions about students' writing practices that I was particularly interested in researching within my own cohort. Similar themes were evident in my own data collection. According to Bonafede et al. (2023), the number of children and teenagers who reported enjoying writing in their free time in 2023 has decreased by over a quarter since 2010 (p. 1). Although education discourses often revolve around "reading for pleasure", with the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) referring to this phrase, the phrase "writing for pleasure" has not had the same importance attached to it by official policymakers, though this is a growing area (Pearson, 2021). Writing is therefore at a "crisis point", with statutory assessment data showing that in 2022, 31% of all pupils arrived at secondary school unable to write to the expected level (Bonafede et al., 2022, p. 2).

The Writing for Pleasure report offers a three-pillar model to support writing: inspiring teaching of writing through memorable experiences; modelling "real writing" and working with professional writers; and providing a real audience and purpose for writing (Bonafede et al., 2023, pp. 2-3). All of these three pillars are linked to cultural capital – with the report highlighting the words of one of the participating educators describing students from disadvantaged backgrounds as being "trapped in their postcodes" (Bonafede et al., 2023, p. 3), as well as the cost of living crisis impacting affordability of school trips. As discussed in the Clark and Picton report (2023), author visits are also significant in building confidence and positive relationships in our most disadvantaged students. Additionally, the report highlights data from a small-scale study called Amazon Young Storyteller which "suggests that becoming a published writer has a positive impact on pupils' motivation to write, and how proud of their writing they felt" (Bonafede et al., 2023, p. 3) This is supported by other published research, such as in *Adolescent Literacies in Multicultural Contexts* which details how a student self-identified as a successful writer as he had had his work published in the school newspaper (Cumming, 2012, p. 78).

This idea forms part of the rationale for my study. Although these ideas for supporting writing for enjoyment are, in my view, sound, I remain acutely aware that writing for enjoyment is not prioritised in policy and not all schools in England have the funding or staff with the specialism to facilitate something as outlined in Bonafede et al.'s report (2023). Writing for wellbeing is particularly important as a tool for catharsis after such a turbulent time. Writing, as a hobby, is also something

that the majority of people can access in some way and is not a hobby that is the preserve of the wealthy, as some extracurricular activities tend to be. This said, there are still constraints on the most disadvantaged students, where it is important to note that quiet spaces and dedicated time for writing might not be easy to access for all students, many of whom may have to share the space with siblings, have caring responsibilities or have to work to earn money towards their household income.

Given the focus on "literacy", and the use of GCSE English Language examinations as accountability measures for schools and employability measures for students, there is growing focus on extracurricular writing for pleasure (Young, 2019; Bonafede et al., 2023). This, therefore, is a growing area of research with a renewed focus from educationalists and government agencies alike, and is the focus of my research.

1.3 Focus of the study

Taking these above contextual factors into consideration, the focus of my study is the interaction between creativity and literacies in a secondary school context. I worked with a group of six Year 10 students in a series of arts-based workshops and semi-structured interviews over a period of seven months in 2024, exploring their experiences of creative writing inside and outside of the English National Curriculum, and providing them with an opportunity to attend arts-based workshops which aimed to encourage students to experiment with their writing, and ultimately ended up becoming what Gee (2000) would term an "affinity space" for students.

I had access to my participants due to my employment at the school they attend. In this way, the research can be considered as "insider research", as I share an understanding with the students about the "sociohistorical situation of the field being studied"; in this case, our school (Gelir, 2021, p. 234). In this way, and as a writer, researcher and teacher myself, I also situate this research as ethnographically-oriented, as I consider myself to be a member of the community that I am researching throughout the study and beyond it. Our school, which serves a socio-economically diverse, semi-rural community, has a large catchment area comprising different types of areas. Additionally, (traditionally defined) literacy levels in the school are low compared to the national average, which has meant that literacy has

been a whole-school focus and priority for many years. This low literacy could be linked with the level of socio-economic disadvantage that many students face: we have 33.4% FSM students (compared to a national average of 25.7%, according to the Department for Education (2025b)). There is an attainment gap between students of low socio-economic status and their peers, which as of 2025, is around 18.6 months by the time students reach the age of 16 (Hunt et al., 2025, p. 29). This statistic illustrates some of the difficulties faced by our students. First, there was a period of school closure due to COVID-19. Additionally, when we returned from the summer break in September 2020, we were told that it was unsafe to open several key school buildings due to structural issues – including the building which housed my classroom. Twenty-six classrooms in total were decommissioned and I spent a term teaching in the Sports Hall, alongside eight other teachers and their classes, with only a makeshift MDF wall separating us. We eventually were moved into demountable buildings, which came with their own challenges, such as isolation and lack of running water, and the DfE awarded a contractor the contract for the demolition and rebuilding of the school buildings. The demolition took place, but unfortunately there was asbestos in the school when it was demolished, which was not originally detected by the contractor, and for health and safety reasons, the school was forced to close once again in November 2022, only to reopen at the end of January 2023, after a period working partly remotely and partly on the site of a neighbouring school. We finally moved into the new building in September 2025. This experience is not unique to our context after a spate of building issues affecting UK schools since 2003 (Sheikh, 2024).

These three periods of school closure have been highly detrimental to our students' education, and we are now in the process of trying to "relaunch" a school and identify gaps in students' learning. Student confidence and identity has also anecdotally been affected by these closures, and consequently I feel that my study is more relevant than ever.

Following the GCSE examination reform in 2015, Goodacre (2023) argues that the new system stifles creativity to a large extent, whereby students can become obsessed by numerical grades (pp. 9-10), or with having to write to a set proforma, asking for ideal numbers of paragraphs or sentence starters. My study has aimed to help students to recontextualise creative writing and build a love of writing and

creativity (that I argue is somewhat lost for a large number of students within the curriculum) by building their confidence as writers and as artists.

1.4 Research aims and questions

My main research question, in bold, and the two subsequent sub-research questions, underneath, are as follows:

How do Year 10 students' experiences of creative writing affect their identities as 'writers'?

How do students perceive themselves as writers <u>within</u> the National Curriculum?

How do students perceive themselves as writers <u>outside of </u>the National Curriculum?

I believe that it is important to recognise that it is not solely through creative writing in a traditional sense that young people engage with creative writing. We are increasingly moving into a multimodal world and students have been creating narratives and other kinds of "new literacies" on online platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, as well as the types of informal literacy practices observed by Chamberlain et al. (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic (pp. 251-2). This question considers both curricular and extracurricular writing, which makes it distinct from other literature, as discussed in Chapter 2.

1.5 Researcher positionality

Researcher positionality is important to consider and to reflect upon during all stages of the research. As a teacher and a researcher, I found that often policy was something which was enacted onto students, which created school environments in which student voice was deprioritised, which I feel demotivates students within the education system. In the 1980s, sociological thinking started to construct the notion of the "child" within education research as "agentic" rather than a "passive object" of the research (Patton and Winter, 2023). Research participant agency is particularly important in my study, where I seek to learn more about students' beliefs, attitudes

and perspectives. I wanted students to feel empowered through the research and the workshops they participated in, not like "passive objects", who have research done to them.

Positionality can encompass a broad range of concepts within the research, for example, considering both the world view of the researcher and the position that they adopt in terms of the research situated within their unique political and social contexts (Holmes, 2020). In this subchapter, I discuss my chosen research paradigm, and then some significant experiences and events which have shaped my positionality in relation to this thesis.

Denscombe (2007) argues that "the social world" should be seen as "socially constructed", opening up the possibility that different groups of people might "see things differently" (p. 79). This view suggests that there are a number of alternative realities which can vary based on a number of factors such as social group, class, culture, age, and so on. Different people within each individual group might also have differing perspectives. With this in mind, there are a number of research paradigms that might be appropriate for my study. As discussed in my research proposal,

> social constructivism and social interpretivism share the same ontology but have a different epistemology. If I view my study through a social constructivist lens, I am seeking to answer how realities for my participants are constructed, but if I view my study through a social interpretivist lens, I am seeking to answer how the realities my participants exist within are experienced by them. I think that my study fits better within the social constructivist paradigm, because the paradigm sets out how people continuously and actively construct their subjective worlds through social interactions with others around them, and how they use these interactions to co-construct meaning. In this way, change can be effected in the context of the creative writing workshops, through a thorough understanding of how an individual's experience is socially constructed (Davis-Wright, 2023, pp. 11-12).

In summary, I position my study within the social constructivist paradigm, as it best fits my focus on how participants actively construct their realities and co-create

meaning through social interactions, in contrast to a social interpretivist lens which would emphasise how those realities are experienced.

1.5.1 Reading and writing in my childhood and adolescence

I have always derived a great deal of pleasure from both reading and writing. Books were valuable objects in my family home growing up, and my whole immediate family were prolific readers. Before I started school, I was looked after full time by my paternal grandparents. My grandmother worked as a teaching assistant in a special school in Islington, London. Sometimes I would accompany her and listen to the stories being read to the children there. My grandad and I bonded over stories, and he was able to recite most of my favourite books on demand by the time I started school, as he read them to me daily. We also wrote 'books' together too – stories I devised – and he helped me to create them as physical objects.

When I started school, this focus on reading and writing for pleasure helped me to excel in English and develop a wider love of learning. I went to the local girls' grammar school, where I continued to love English, creative writing, and languages in general, writing short stories in French and German as well as in English. I discovered and wrote fanfiction and the idea of playing with language, in the style of Wodehouse and Fry.

1.5.2 MA in Creative Writing

From September 2016 to September 2018, I undertook a Master's degree in Creative Writing, specialising in literary fiction. This was an intense, part-time course for which I had to produce large amounts of fiction each week to be workshopped with my peers, my course director, my tutors and other visitors, often well-known published authors. I enjoyed myself immensely. To be eligible to be awarded the Master's degree, I had to produce a full draft of a literary novel which was 85,000 words in length. This was an arduous process; one which felt at times like a labour of love, and at other times left me feeling absolutely talentless and dismal. On reflection, I think this represents the creative process. To write 85,000 words on any topic is difficult, especially if those words need to be cohesive, entertaining and literary. This process of writing my first novel was transformative, too: it showed me

that I could write a novel, something which I had been intrigued by doing since childhood; and it showed me that I could find things immensely challenging and still persevere and succeed. When I reflect on that time now, I relate it to the experiences of my students as writers. I now know what it is to struggle with concepts and creativity in a way that I never struggled with during my own schooling.

1.5.3 Writing as Identity

Teaching can feel all-consuming at times, and there have been several points in my career so far where I have admittedly prioritised work over my own well-being. This is a relatively common theme in teaching in the UK, with Beames et al. (2023) asserting that "school teachers are a vulnerable workforce" due to the high levels of reported stress, burn-out, depression, fatigue and reduced self-confidence, amongst other negative risk factors (p. 26). Certainly, excessive workload and consequent scarcity of time contributed to a period of time in which I consistently prioritised my professional and academic workloads rather than my own physical or mental wellbeing. When presenting my work at doctoral study weekends (weekends where doctoral students congregate for teaching), or when presenting to other teaching staff at my school, I asked the audiences: *Is the concept of a writer, for you, more bound in the noun ('I am a writer') or in the verb ('I write, so I'm a writer')?* In theory, I related more to the verb, but on reflection, I felt like a fraud. At the time of this reflection, I hadn't written anything creative in over six months. I questioned whether I was still a writer, or an artist. If I wasn't, I would need to rethink my proposed study. If I was, then it was clear that I needed to write.

I decided to take a break from academic work in November 2023 to conduct a personal experiment and to take part in National Novel Writing Month. On the NaNoWriMo website (NaNoWriMo, 2023), the organisers describe the challenge thus:

> National Novel Writing Month began in 1999 as a daunting but straightforward challenge: to write 50,000 words of a novel in thirty days. Now, each year on November 1, hundreds of thousands of people around the world begin to write, determined to end the month with a first draft. They enter the month as

> elementary school teachers, mechanics, or stay-at-home parents. They leave novelists. (NaNoWriMo, 2023)

With this in mind, I made time to write in November 2023. I completed 50,000 words by 24th November and noticed a huge, positive difference in my wellbeing. Whilst this is clearly not a writing pace that would be sustainable long term, it showed me that I *am* still a writer, regardless of hiatus. This refreshed insight into writing through the process of writing my own second novel subsequently helped me to identify with research participants, who told me they feel similarly challenged when considering their own identity as writers.

1.6 Significance

My research is significant in that it is a contemporary study into the imaginative writing aspect of the GCSE English Language curriculum, which the vast majority of students in England will study, as a compulsory part of the English National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). Although previous studies have been done on the GCSE English curriculum, these have tended to focus on GCSE English Literature (Elliott et al., 2021), and those which have been relating to English Language have looked at the impacts of exam reform (Goodacre, 2023; Verhoeven, 2022).

My study, then, is different in that it considers the tensions and points of intersection between the experiences students have within the curriculum and the experiences that they have outside of it. I have synthesised theory from Craft (2001) pertaining to the nature of creativity and relating to Gee's (2000) theories of identity, and have applied these theories to the transcripts of interview data I collected after a series of arts-based workshops and semi-structure interviews through a thematic analysis approach. Combining this with an analysis of policy from the Department for Education (2014) and the exam boards Pearson Edexcel (2014) and AQA (2014) in my literature review, this study considers the breadth of students' creative writing experience and how this affects their developing identities as writers.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

My thesis is divided into five chapters: the introduction, the literature review, the methodology chapter, the analysis and discussion chapter, and the conclusion.

This chapter, Chapter 1, has contextualised the research and gives an overview of my positionality, research questions and aims, and the significance of my research and the structure of the thesis.

Chapter 2 is the literature review: in this chapter I review a range of literature that underpins my research, and present my theoretical framework for this study.

In Chapter 3, I focus on methodology and methods, and consider my ontological and epistemological positioning in terms of how it relates to my chosen methodology. I also consider research ethics.

In Chapter 4, I present the analysis of my semi-structured interviews using a thematic analysis approach, and discuss the findings as linked to my theoretical framework.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, where I discuss how my findings from policy analysis and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts can be used to answer the research questions I have set out in Chapter 1. I also present the implications of my research, identify the strengths and weaknesses of my study, set out a plan for dissemination and outline areas for future development.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction to the literature review

My feelings about writing pedagogy are eloquently expressed by Freire, who argues that:

> Teaching kids to read and write should be an artistic event. Instead, many teachers transform these experiences into a technical event, into something without emotions, without creativity - but with repetition. Many teachers work bureaucratically when they should work artistically (Freire, 1985, p. 79).

There are many factors affecting creative teaching in UK schools, especially the teaching of reading and writing, including the long-lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the restriction of the curriculum by successive governmental policies, the prescriptive nature of the National Curriculum and exam board specifications, teachers' performance-related pay making them unwilling to take risks, other accountability measures such as Ofsted, and also lack of teacher confidence in creative practice (See, 2024, p. 22). However, even with all of these constraints, in my own practice I have always aimed to work "artistically", moving away from the "technical" and "bureaucratic" (Freire, 1985, p. 79). If teachers are able to inspire a passion for reading and writing in their students, then this act of teaching reading and writing lingers outside of the classroom, and can have wide-reaching effects on students' literacies which can impact their lives more generally. This belief is what led me to this avenue of research, and is what makes my research relevant.

In this chapter, I aim to set out the role and purpose of this literature review, before defining key terminology and addressing and critically analysing the key literature pertaining to my research aims. According to Lingard (2018), the purpose of the literature review is to ascertain what remains "unknown", and Lingard suggests that a useful strategy in doing so is to use the metaphorical approach of "mapping the gap" (p. 47). This suggests that the researcher should set out the key literature in such a way that the gap, or "knowledge deficit" (Giltrow et al., 2014, p. 193) is presented to the reader, allowing the reader to clearly see the need for this study.

In this way, I have divided the chapter in several sections. First, I consider the literature around "literacy" (including a discussion of why I argue that we need to consider a model of multiple literacies) and "creativity", choosing a definition of these terms that I will use in my research. I then discuss the links between literacy, creativity and creative writing to critically analyse what I mean by creative writing, before analysing what the current climate for creative writing is in England, considering factors both within and outside of the National Curriculum. Finally, I set out the theoretical framework that I have developed for this project, largely a synthesis of Gee's (2000) theories of identity and Craft's (2001) everyday creativity theory. In doing this, I aim to contextualise my study and *map the gap* where this research is situated.

2.2 New Literacy Studies

In this section, I consider the key literature pertaining to New Literacy Studies, a term which describes the approach of viewing literacies as situated in social practices. This approach is critical of binary dichotomies between oral and written forms of language, and foregrounds plurality and multimodality through use of the affordances and constraints of new technologies and textual artefacts (Adams, 2013).

As Street (2003) argues, researchers have increasingly come to understand "literacy" as a multifaceted, multimodal, and complex set of social practices; arguing many "would find it problematic to simply use the term 'literacy' as their unit or object of study" (p. 78). This section will explore ideas about literacies, critiquing key literature from scholars in the field of New Literacy Studies, such as Vygotsky (1978), Freire (1996), Giroux (1983), Scollon and Scollon (1980), Street (2003), Gee (2000) and Rowsell and Pahl (2007).

Vygotsky's theory of learning through social activity is central to an understanding of New Literacy Studies, and is something that is still being debated within education discourses (Hull and Moje, 2012; Mahmoodi-Shahrebabaki, 2019). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory argues that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those

around them" (p. 88). This recognition of the socially-bound context of learning is important in New Literacy Studies, as it identifies that learning is not a neutral or discrete package, and is always linked to relationships with others, whether that is a hierarchical teacher-student relationship with its associated power dynamic, or between peers. Vygotsky (1978) develops this further when he writes about how:

> the acquisition of language can provide a paradigm for the entire problem of the relation between learning and development. Language arises initially as a means of communication between the child and the people in his environment (p. 89).

Writing is not something that occurs in isolation: there is an audience for the text, whether that is a teacher, peer, another kind of intended reader, or even the writer themselves reading the text at a later stage. Recognising that writing (and speaking) is first and foremost a mode of communication is important, because students can use this form of communication to express ideas, thoughts and feelings. Students must first have a message that they wish to convey to their reader.

This focus on communication was also prevalent in Freire's work on dialogic classrooms. In the 1970s, Freire wrote about radical literacy and critical pedagogy. Freire was a renowned thinker and writer in education, particularly known for his work around adult literacy intervention and freedom from oppression (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, p. 205). Freire's own childhood in a deprived area of Brazil heightened his awareness of the dual realities of oppression and poverty, especially after the death of his father when Freire's secondary education was disrupted and delayed (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, p. 205). He first rose to prominence as an adult educator due to his radical adult literacy programme in Brazil working with oppressed populations, and his deep belief in the programme's utility in freeing people from oppression (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, p. 204), by enabling them to join political discourses through the acquisition of literacy skills, which links to Vygotsky's ideas about literacies being socially-bound. Recognised as an enduring important figure in education (Aubrey and Riley, 2022), a key theme of his work which resonates with my project is the theme of hope, which is interwoven through many of his works. The appropriately named *Pedagogy of Hope*, in which he emphasises the importance of hope as a tool for progression and as a movement away from "hopelessness and

despair" (Freire, 2014, p. 3) is particularly resonant in today's political climate. It is vital to approach these serious issues of inequality within education with a sense of hope – an understanding that the inequalities being experienced now are being seen, researched and acted upon (albeit slowly) to improve society for future generations, a view shared by other scholars such as Bourn (2021) and Misiaszek (2021). Pahl and Pool (2020) argue that "a hopeful approach to literacy practices helps us to see the many threads of the web of meaning that flow through the past, into the present, and on into all potential futures" (p. 67). This statement itself is hopeful and links to the motivations of many authors to weave a lasting legacy in print (or in other media).

For Freire, literacy went beyond the acquisition of the mental and physical skills needed for reading to seeing literacy as a process rather than a product (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, p. 207). Freire (1996) argued that in order to make literacy (and more generally, education) accessible, the traditional pedagogies employed by educational institutions and policymakers should be abandoned in favour of new and different pedagogies, and that the traditional "banking model" of education, where teachers used their own "perfect knowledge" to fill students' minds as blank vessels filled by liquid (p. 45) was flawed and undemocratic. He argues that "in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those who they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 1996, p. 53). The model Freire proposed in its place, dialogic learning, recognises the knowledge and schema that all learners bring to the classroom, and in this scenario, Freire (1996) argued that "the teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but the one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, by being taught, also teach" (p. 61). Although the use of this gendered address is outdated, I agree with Freire's argument.

Dialogic learning is based upon mutual respect between students and their teacher, especially if dialogic teaching leads to the opening of "dialogic space", defined by Bouton et al. (2024) as a "space of possibilities, in which novel, shared meanings and ideas can develop through the serious consideration of other people's perspectives and opinions" (p. 183). This links to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory because without the dialogic space for these kinds of discourses, it has been

my experience that some students struggle to write, because they are not sure what they want to communicate. Open dialogue about their ideas, whereby those ideas are valued and heard, is imperative in creating a classroom environment where respect and democratic principles are foregrounded, because without this discussion and structured talk, achieving authentic communication is more difficult. While Vygotsky (1934) argues for the value of a More Knowledgeable Other, I am more aligned with Freire's concept of the dialogic classroom, and challenging the hierarchical power structure of the classroom. Further, I argue that Freire's concept of the dialogic classroom, and the recognition of the knowledge that all students bring to the classroom, is an important facet of New Literacy Studies because this is what makes dialogic classrooms democratic.

The concept of reading the word and reading the world foregrounded the importance of being literate in being able to fully participate in modern society, and in doing so, to move away from oppression (Freire, 1996). Freire's critical literacy practices were not just about the technical skills required for reading (for example, decoding and comprehension), but also about how learners could use these skills to actively pursue collaborative critical consciousness. Through this lens, then, illiteracy is not just an inability to read or write, but a more complex concept of social inequality, creating historically compounded systems of oppression which are hard to escape without transformative cultural action. However, the term "illiteracy" itself is problematic: New Literacy Studies views literacy not as a measurable set of skills, but rather as contextually-bound social practices that are embedded in social, cultural and political contexts (Street, 2003).

Following on from this, Giroux (1983) writes about his frustration with the literacy discourse at the time where "the issue of literacy has been removed from the broader social, ideological forces that constitute the conditions for its existence" (p. 205). Seeking to address this, Giroux (1983) argues that the production of knowledge and meanings are governed by external and broader power relations (p. 205). He argues against a prominent definition of literacy as purely the technical skills of reading and writing, and argues that within existing political systems, literacy had become a form of capital by which worth was defined and measured, resulting in "literacy, in this case, becom[ing] the new admission ticket for the poor in their

attempt to enter an economy that regards them as second class citizens" (Giroux, 1983, p. 206). This perception of literacy, not as an abstract idea, but instead as a socially-situated concept, best understood in terms of its broader social, historical and economic context, was radical, and possibly a reaction to the "increasing use of neoliberal and corporate strategies" that Giroux was angered by as he saw them impinging on education in the US (Aubrey and Riley, 2021, p. 222). This supports Freire's ideas about critical literacy pedagogy, specifically that the technical skills are not enough to understand literacy; rather that literacy should be understood as an approach which actively engages with the world (Aubrey and Riley, 2021, p. 226). This view of literacy as context dependent, rather than something fixed, was important to the development of New Literacy Studies.

Similarly, Scollon and Scollon (1980) argue that instead of considering literacy as a "monolith", literacy should be reconceptualised as *literacies,* as there are "at least several kinds of literacy" (p. 26). They argue that a "narrowly restricted" view of literacy, involving "the ability to read and write material that is decontextualized, high in the proportion of new information to old information and internally logical" is artificial and fails to account for literacies outside of formal schooling (Scollon and Scollon, 1980, p. 26). This recognition of literacies occurring outside of a curriculum is important, as the writers acknowledge they did not know how many kinds of literacy there were (Scollon and Scollon, 1980, p. 26). This recognition of the potential for an unknowable quantity of literacies is interesting because, like Giroux and Freire, it marks the move away from the concept of fixed forms of literacy in literacy studies, recognising many more literacy practices than the common discourse was suggesting.

Another influential theorist in New Literacy Studies is Street (2003), who developed the concept of literacy practices being context dependent, as well as ideologically and culturally situated. Street (2003) sets out that his work "begins with the notion of multiple literacies" (p. 77), powerfully asserting his ontological standpoint. Street (2003) challenges "the standard view in many fields" that "literacy in itself – autonomously – will have effects on other social and cognitive practices" (p. 77). This links to Giroux's (1983) critical metaphor of literacy as "an admission ticket for the poor" (p. 206). Although dominant discourses believe that the introduction of literacy

to "illiterate" groups will have the effect of "enhancing their cognitive skills, improving their economic prospects, making them better citizens" (Street, 2003, p. 77), this is not a position supported by New Literacy Studies, as discussed above. Street (2003) argues that this "disguises the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it" (p. 77), and seeks to separate literacy as a neutral idea from the political currents that govern it. However, as Apple (2000) argues, education, including literacy education, is political. He writes that the nature of literacy as an activity that engages with text is one of the aspects that makes literacy political, asserting that the literacy tasks teachers give to students which are as "as basic as reading and writing, can be at one and the same time forms of regulation and exploitation *and* potential modes of resistance, celebration and solidarity" (p. 51, italics in original text). This recognition of literacy education as inherently political, and, crucially, an understanding of the political nature of literacy education as something that can be harnessed for "exploitation" or "celebration" raises questions about the power of policy makers who decide on curriculum choices and become what Apple (2000) would call "official knowledge" (p. 9). Additionally, Giroux (1983) writes about the "hidden curriculum" - the implicit, obscured lessons that schools provide students with, serving to reinforce power structures, authority figures and social norms. Giroux (1983) argues that by recognising this "hidden curriculum", educators, teachers and academics can take "the first step toward a pedagogy that challenges the ideological foundations of schooling" (p. 75). Anecdotally, it is clear from my dialogic classroom that students are often, but not always, aware of systemic social inequalities, but they are seldom aware of the ways in which the "hidden curriculum" serves to reproduce these social conditions (see chapters 4.4.2 and 4.4.3).

Street (2003) proposes a different model of literacies as more than the acquisition of technical skills, to include literacies as a social practice, which is "always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles" (p. 77). Street (2003) argues that "literacy practices, then, refer to the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (p. 79). Street (2003) writes about some teachers' anxieties about the practicalities of knowing what their students' cultural contexts are, and about understanding how these cultural contexts shape their literacies (p. 83). This marks a divide in the field of New Literacy Studies between those primarily interested in curricular literacy, and those interested

in cultural and contextual literacy. This is significant in the context of my own research because my study aims to research the tensions between curricular and extracurricular literacies, and whether curricular literacies can be separated from their social, cultural or historical contexts.

For Gee (2000a), "reading and writing only makes sense when studied in the context of social and cultural (and we can add historical, political and economic) practices of which they are just a part" (p. 1). Gee (2000a) writes in this chapter at length about fourteen different movements associated with the "social turn", that is, movements that reacted against behaviourism and cognitivism which were popular in the twentieth century (p. 2). In movements associated with this social turn, such as New Literacy Studies, "knowledge and meaning are seen as emerging from social practices or activities in which people, environments, tools, technologies, objects, words, acts and symbols are all linked to ('networked' with) each other and dynamically interact with each other" (Gee, 2000a, p. 4). Here, Gee makes the case for a definition of "literacy" that recognises the multifaceted and multimodal nature of the practices that people engage in, recognising the nature of relationship between the "technologies" or "objects" and people. This links to other movements too, such as the post-digital movement. Rowsell (2025) argues that "being postdigital means taking for granted that screens move in and out of practices, spaces, and time fluidly and tacitly, and postdigitality has become a part of the fabric of being human" (p. 7). My participants are postdigital, having grown up in a world shaped by posthuman conditions, where both in and outside of school, they navigate life through screens.

Gee (2000a) argues that both words and contexts are important for meaning making. He writes that "words and contexts are two mirrors facing each other infinitely and simultaneously reflecting each other" (p. 10). This metaphor illustrates how the components of literacies – the smallest units of meaning, words – are contextually bound, a key tenet of New Literacy Studies. It also means that there can be a context specific agenda enacted through the utterance or writing of words, whether or not this agenda is conscious (Gee, 2000a, p. 10). It also recognises that situations and contexts are ever changing, "rarely static or uniform", and "actively created, sustained, negotiated, resisted and transformed moment-by-moment through ongoing *work*" (Gee, 2000a, p. 11, italics in original). The italicised word "*work"*

emphasises the function that words play in making meaning. Writing, in this context, can be seen as an attempt to transform a situation, as we write for selected purposes and audiences. As Gee (2000a) explains, "We attempt, through our words and deeds, to get others to recognise people, things, artefacts, symbols, tools, technologies, actions, interactions, times, places and ways of speaking, listening, writing, reading, feeling, believing, thinking and valuing as meaningful and valuable in certain ways" (p. 11). Literary writing is in some ways dialogic: there is an assumed and intended audience, and an actual audience, some of whom may go on to write a review of the work, contributing to the conversation; and there is also an argument that to write is to add to an existing corpus of literary conversation. Although it is true that most people will not be traditionally published, the internet has afforded new ways of publication without the gatekeeping of the traditional publishing industry, for example, fanfiction writing (see chapter 2.5.2). Gee's recognition of the multimodal aspect of these literacy practices (for example, "technologies" and 'things' and "artefacts") is important too, and links to the work of Kress (1994; 2003; 2010), Pahl and Rowsell (2007; 2015), and Lankshear and Knobel (2011).

However, some researchers such as Snow (2000) disagree with the New Literacy Studies approach to conceptualising literacy, arguing instead that in order to be able to function and survive with the educational system, educators should choose to focus on "schooled literacy". Writing in response to Gee's 1999 essay "Reading and the New Literacy Studies", Snow criticised New Literacy Studies for its "inability […] to account for, even to talk sensibly about, development – a failure associated with their unwillingness to accept a view of literacy as involving subskills" (2000, p. 117). Snow advocates for a componential view of literacy, in which literacy is a compilation of a number of technical skills (Verhoeven and Snow, 2001). These skills, taken out of context, or considered only in one context, are opposed to the ontological standpoint of New Literacy Studies.

 I argue that this dichotomy in the field represents the "theoretical clash" (Snow, 2000, p. 117) between the New Literacy Studies and Snow's more technically-centred approach. It also highlights the disconnect between researchers and teachers working at the "coalface" of education, who face many constraints in teaching children to read and write. Indeed, I argue that the term "literacy" is not

always fully understood by teachers working in the English education system: even within education, there are multiple understandings of literacy, including, but not limited to: disciplinary literacy, scientific literacy, oracy, digital literacy, decoding, comprehension and phonics (Kenna et al., 2018). Even 25 years after Snow's article, at a time when exam boards expect the vast majority of students to sit terminal exams through the medium of pen and paper (unless they have specific access arrangements), it is unlikely that there would be a paradigm shift where all teachers would reconceptualise this nebulous and messy idea of "literacy" into an idea that recognises the multimodal and creative potential that the multiple "literacies" encapsulates in the educational and political climate of the UK. Until this paradigm shift occurs, however, I argue that the education system will continue to fail to recognise the broad spectrum of literacy practices that students are engaging in, both in and out of school, as creative and worthwhile activities, and in doing so, will neglect to add more multimodal forms of assessment to the curriculum, with the effect that only one type of literacy practice is prioritised and legitimatised within the curriculum.

Whilst I am ideologically aligned with Gee and the New Literacy Studies approach, I do agree with some of Snow's arguments. As a teacher working within the constraints of the UK education system, I understand Snow's argument about "schooled literacies", which Cook-Gumperz (1986) defines as the literacy skills that develop throughout a student's school career which are directly associated with their academic study (p. 315). As a teacher, I want the best possible outcomes for the students I teach, and the reality for these students is that they will have to sit GCSE examinations which are assessed in a pre-determined way against published mark schemes (see Chapter 2.4). This means that in order to do well, I not only have to teach my students subject English, but I also need to make sure to teach them exam technique, which is arguably a form of "schooled literacy". Ultimately, students and teachers are judged on examinations results, so I understand why this dichotomy exists – many teachers of English may be interested in and supporters of their students' engagement in multimodal literacy practices, but also recognise that due to curriculum time constraints, they must prioritise "schooled literacy". Snow somewhat recognises this debate about how valuable personal knowledge and experience can be, highlighting that "Good teachers possess a wealth of knowledge about teaching

that cannot […] be drawn upon effectively in the preparation of novice teachers or in debates about practice" (2001, p. 9). She argues that academics should instead seek to "elevate" this knowledge, namely through systematising teachers' knowledge (2001, p. 9). Whilst in theory, engaging with what Snow (2001) refers to as teachers' "largely untapped" knowledge (p. 9) is a more democratic approach which includes teachers in the discourse about literacies education, it ignores wider barriers to this in practice, such as teachers' reluctance to engage in education research (Cloonan, 2019) and concerns around teacher workload. I argue that it also helps to reinforce a hierarchical power structure, where Snow's language around needing to "elevate" teachers' ideas suggests that teachers are not equal to researchers, even "good" teachers, which could partially explain some teachers' unwillingness to participate in education research, as supported by Guerrero-Hernández and Fernández-Ugalde (2020, pp. 430-432).

In opposition to this, Kress (1994) positions the significance of literacy practices as socially and contextually bound, supporting Freire's view on literacies as democratic, by arguing that "being unable to read […] carries with it heavy penalties in terms of exclusion from a wide range of knowledge, activities and hence power, in a society." (p. 11). Kress (1994) recognises here the power that the education system and its policy makers wield when recommending strategies for the teaching of the technical aspects of reading and writing (such as policy springing from research by Cook-Gumperz (1986) and Snow (2001)); Kress' concern over "exclusion" from society being the "heavy penalty" (1994, p. 11) is related to Snow's concerns about "schooled literacy". Certainly, an inability to read is a factor which can and does exclude people from society; from students unable to access a wide and varied curriculum, to adults struggling to engage in everyday activities such as navigating public transport or grocery shopping (Channel 4, 2020). UNESCO's 'Policy Guidelines to Inclusive Education' state that "an inclusive education system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive - in other words, if they become better at educating all children in their communities" (UNESCO, 2009, p. 8). However, Kress' (1994) view does not entirely support Snow's, as it associates literacy practices with "social, economic and political consequences" (p. 11). This focus on literacy practices as political aligns with Apple's (2000) views, where the curriculum (or, "what counts as legitimate knowledge") is conceptualised as "the

result of complex power relations and struggles among identifiable class, race, gender and religious groups" (p. 44). Apple (2000) goes on to assert that "It is at times of social upheaval that this relationship between education and power becomes most visible" (p. 44), and I argue that this is evident in the censorship and book banning debate happening in the United States now (Laats and Meehan, 2024; Dernikos, 2024). The censored books often relate to those belonging to "class, race, gender and religious groups" (Apple, 1992, p. 4), though sometimes the reasons for censorship are vague.

Kress also recognises the importance of multimodality. Writing about children's multimodal literacy practices, Kress (1997) argues for the recognition of the ways in which children are actually engaging in meaning making, and the "multiplicity of modes, means, materials which they employ in doing so" (p. 96), and how, up until this point, a discussion of multimodal literacies had tended not to appear in theoretical or pedagogical discussions of literacies, because "many of these means and materials are not recognised by the adult forms of the culture" (p. 96). Lankshear and Knobel, in their book 'New Literacies' (2011) discuss how technology has shaped the way that people engage with literacies, and the affordances and constraints that technology can have on literacy practices, explaining how Web 2.0 has impacted them (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011). The term "Web 2.0" refers to a second wave of internet resources which enhance user experiences, are easier to use, and foreground user-generated content (Fuchs, 2012, p. 31), which have helped the Internet to "become more social, more participatory, and more democratic", through the use of sites such as "Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Blogspot/Blogger, Wordpress, Twitter [now X], Flickr" (p. 31), and since the time of writing, I would add several more prolific social media sites to this list, which is by no means exhaustive, such as Reddit, TikTok, Instagram and Pinterest, fanfiction.net and Archive of Our Own (AO3). Lankshear and Knobel (2011) discuss the concept of "digital remixing", which they define as "mixing digital images, texts, sounds and animations" (p. 100) and emphasise the importance of this digital remixing to their literacy practices.

The use of sounds, images and animations makes the experience of the text more sensory, and therefore more engaging for the audience. This is the central idea

behind what Pahl and Rowsell (2020) term "living literacies", about which they write, "For us, as literacy researchers, literacy comes alive through observations and reflections on the many ways people engage with texts and technologies across varied spaces" (2020, p. 1). I echo this sentiment: as a teacher of English I am particularly interested in how people engage with texts, though the unwillingness of UK examination boards to move away from pen and paper exams, and the general lack of funding allocated to UK schools, means that schools cannot invest in new technologies (National Literacy Trust, 2019), so this aspect is under-explored.

Rowsell and Pahl argue that although New Literacy Studies recognises the multifaceted and multimodal literacy practices that people engage in, "It is one thing to theorize lived literacies and even to illustrate them within research, but it is quite another to apply a living literacies approach […] across learning sites such as schools" (2020, p. 165). This highlights once again the dichotomy between literacies that we know people are engaged in outside of the curriculum, and the schooled literacy approach that the curriculum encourages. I agree with Rowsell and Pahl that their approach to embodying living literacies in schools is not only laudable, but necessary in making literacy come alive for students. A barrier to this is gaining a sense of buy-in from schools, who may feel like devoting time to this approach rather than more traditional, curriculum-focused activities is too large a risk. However, regardless of this, as Rowsell and Pahl (2020) assert:

> What we cannot do is turn our backs on how literacy is lived. This means engaging in research that is "with" rather than "on" participants. […] This requires educators and literacy policy makers to become attuned to a conceptual framing of literacy as *lived*. Our hope is that, if they do, the emergent, messy stuff of literacy will become part of the experienced moment-by-moment unfolding of the literacy event (p. 166, italics in original)

I join them in this hope, because I believe that an acceptance of literacies as lived would set the stage for educators and policy makers to take seriously the funds of knowledge and funds of identity (see chapter 2.6) that students bring to the classroom, making classrooms more dialogic and democratic spaces, such as those Freire (1996) hoped for.

Papen (2023) notes one barrier to the recognition of such literacies and democracy in schools, arguing that policymakers sometimes ignore literacies research, especially when it does not align with official, government-sanctioned ideas. For example, literacy policy in the UK centres around systematic synthetic phonics (SSP), and although Papen (2023) argues that "it would be wrong to say that the shift to SSP in England's literacy policy has not been informed by research", the research that the policymakers have drawn on "consistently" is limited to a small number of studies, most notably from the US National Reading Panel in 2000 (p. 68). Linked to this is the implied preference for quantitative studies, specifically a rise in the use of randomised controlled trials for literacy, as they are believed to offer the kind of knowledge that policymakers feel suit "sector-wide reform" (Papen, 2023, p. 70). Papen (2023) argues that this focus has "created an environment where extended views of literacy and related approaches to teaching are marginalised and have little traction" (p. 74). However, Papen (2023) maintains that it is vital that researchers working in the domain of NLS persevere, as there is scope for "infusion of wider ideas about literacy" to permeate lessons whilst still adhering "to the curriculum and to the local guidance on learning aims" (p. 76). This approach is similar to what my research has aimed to achieve.

In conclusion, I have chosen to adopt a New Literacy Studies approach because it aligns closely with my own view of literacies, in that it foregrounds multimodality and everyday literacy practices outside of the classroom. What happens in the classroom is only a partial view of young people's engagement with literacies: they have varied, multifaceted and multimodal interactions with texts of all kinds throughout their lives, and the traditional, pen-and-paper, "schooled literacy" that teachers ask students to engage in as part of the curriculum is only part of the story. This is not to underestimate the importance of their curricular literacy practices: they form a basis of shared understanding as all students must undergo this qualification in mainstream education in the UK; they are likely the only part of students' literacy practices which are formally assessed; and in some cases, the creative writing section of the qualification is the only place in which students engage in narrative or creative writing, which is the focus of my study. Rowsell and Pahl's (2020) ideas about "living literacies" and Gee's ideas around the social, cultural and contextual

bound nature of literacies, much more fully encapsulate my views on literacy and have helped to form my understanding of the field.

2.3 Theories of creativity

In this section I will discuss some different theories of creativity, as well as where creativity is seen in subject English. In chapter 2.3.1, I will consider how creative "creative writing" is, in comparison to other forms of art taught in school.

Carter (2004) argues that "linguistic creativity is not simply a property of exceptional people, but an exceptional property of all people". This is a view that echoes theories of creativity from Craft (2001), on which I will draw heavily, both in this subchapter as well as in chapter 2.6. There are many different ways in which people conceptualise the concept of creativity, and the very definition of creativity is the subject of much of the literature surrounding the subject (Bruner, 1962; Gilhooly, 2025; Glück et al, 2010; Runco and Jaeger, 2012). For the purposes of this study, I am particularly drawn to Craft's (2000) theories of creativity, with her theories of big C and little c creativity forming a key part of my theoretical framework.

Craft (2000) argues that "big C creativity", or "high creativity", refers to extraordinary creative genius, performed by people who are outstanding in their fields, and recognised for their brilliance (p. 46). This is supported by Gardener (1997), who attempted to classify these archetypes of creative genius into a taxonomy of sorts: masters, makers, introspectors and influencers. On the other hand, 'little c creativity' is creativity which focuses on the "resourcefulness and agency of ordinary people, rather than the extraordinary contributions and insights of the few" (Craft, 2001, p. 49). This recognition of creativity as the domain of all people, not just a talented few, is important in education, especially in comprehensive secondary education where we teach a cross-section of people from many different backgrounds and of many different abilities.

Runco and Jaeger (2012) set out the "standard definition" of the term "creativity":

The standard definition is bipartite: Creativity requires both originality and effectiveness. (p. 92)

The article goes on to expand on why both parts are necessary: originality because "if something is not unusual, novel, or unique, it is commonplace, mundane or conventional" (Runco and Jaeger, 2012, p. 92); however, in isolation, originality is not enough. Effectiveness, the second criterion, is also needed, and often this means the "value" that a work holds (Runco and Jaeger, 2012, pp. 92-93). This criterion of value can be hard to define, because it is often subjective.

McCallum (2012) argues that as the uses to which creativity can be applied are so far-reaching, it can be complex to apply ideas about creativity to both the subject of English and to learning in general (p. 20). As with literacy practices, it is helpful to consider a model of multiple creativities (McCallum, 2012, p. 20) which are at play together in the specific arena of teaching creative writing in schools, in a similar way to how New Literacy Studies considers multiple literacies. For McCallum (2012), understanding creativity starts with Vygotsky, who, in "Thought and Language", theorises about the processes of thought and speech, and about existence of "inner speech" and "outer speech", where a single word of "inner speech" can evoke many images in the mind's eye and would need many words of "outer speech" to express the same ideas (Vygotsky, 1934, p. 235).

Vygotsky argues that "a thought may be compared to a cloud shedding a shower of words" (1934, p. 251), explaining that thoughts do not occur in single units, like words. In this way, linguistic creativity is a markedly different process to the thought processes involved in conceptualising an idea for a piece of creative writing. The process of creative thinking is different to the process of creative writing, although it does share some similarities. Kogawa (2021) argues that people, including herself, make judgments based on the way others speak, and this paper narrates her growing realisation that she is propagating this phenomenon in her career as a primary school teacher ("Am I teaching my pupils that their family's English – their culture's – their region's – their social class's – is wrong? Well, yes.") (2021, p. 355). This sense of prescriptivism comes from the emphasis on the use of Standard English in the National Curriculum: the idea that the only form of "correct" English is 'Standard English' (see Chapter 2.3.1). Kogawa (2021) writes this essay reflecting

upon a Year 5 lesson on reading and writing beyond Standard English, and approaching this issue from a theoretical standpoint, she asserts that although there are "countercurrents" leading towards greater representation of non-Standard English in teaching reading, there is very little evidence of "representational creative writing" in the classroom (p. 356).

For some educators, their own creative identities influence the types of creative practices that they foreground in their classrooms. Frawley (2020) published from her doctoral thesis on what it means to be a teacher-writer and in doing so learnt how the two identities worked together in teaching creative writing in school. She argues that having a good understanding of creativity itself is key, and in the words of one of her teacher-writer-participants, it is "informed by self-identification as a writer" (Frawley, 2020. p. 296). My approach to creative writing pedagogy is shaped by my own experiences as a writer, alongside my knowledge of how the task will be assessed. The tension between these two factors is what sparked my research interest into this topic: I am interested in how students and teachers feel the constraints of the curriculum impact their ability to be creative. This view links to Gilbert's (2021) autobiographical account of how he brings creativity and his own authorial identity to his subject English lessons. Gilbert (2021) argues:

> At this time of political, social and environmental crisis, there has never been a more important moment for teachers to become blacksmiths of the imagination. They must learn to work with the furnaces of their own and their students' creativity and hammer out new solutions. (p. 166).

This idea is also supported by Goodacre (2022), who shared something personal about his name with students as a way of connecting with them. He writes about a time when he revealed different nicknames he is known by outside school, which "spark[ed] a series of questions from students" and moved "towards the notion that my English classroom is a place in which we are allowed to share experiences of our 'outside' selves" (Goodacre, 2022, p. 117-118). Where teachers are allowed to showcase and share aspects of their identity, and thus, invite students to share in "similar candour", English classrooms become a place for sharing stories. This is underpinned by Freire's (1996) idea of dialogic classrooms, as discussed in chapter 2.2, where students feel empowered to bring their own experiences to the

classroom, which affords a sense that the students are being valued as storytellers in their own right.

Students have their own stories to tell but are to some extent being silenced or constrained by the curriculum which seems to prioritise established canonical stories and rejects students' own stories if they do not reflect this mould. This supports Verhoeven's (2022) view that the prioritisation of literature in the Key Stage 4 English curriculum is seen and felt in GCSE English Language, because skills are assessed through students' engagement with literature (p. 247). For the purposes of my research, as my research into creative writing is situated within an education context, I will adopt the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) benchmark statement for creative writing, which argues that it can take many forms but these "tend not to be informational, but imaginative interpretations of the world that invite the complex participation of the audience or reader" (National Association for Writers in Education, 2008). This definition recognises that students are able to write complex and imaginative responses to writing prompts; even if this imagination and creativity is not something valued by the mark scheme.

2.3.1 How creative is creative writing?

This section will discuss how the areas considered in the two previous sections – New Literacy Studies and creativity – are linked within subject English, and how these concepts are related to my study of creative writing practices in Year 10 students.

One barrier to the possible creativity in Creative Writing is a prescriptivism around language use: this was seen in the growing dichotomy in schools and in the education system more widely between traditional or conservative pedagogies and those which are more dialogic, democratic and progressive. This is exemplified in policy with the Govian exam reforms that came into play in 2015, and in the updated examination board specifications, where in GCSE English Language, the use of "Standard English" is stipulated, but not defined anywhere in the document (AQA, 2014; Edexcel, 2014). Crowley (1987) argues that the term "Standard English" is "not in fact the descriptive tool that they claim it to be, but a term that has sense only within a strict form of prescriptivism" (p. 199). There is still no accepted definition of this term, yet teachers are expected to mark answers worth 50% of the GCSE

English Language qualification against it. This seems nonsensical, yet the idea of "Standard English" is so rooted within our collective consciousness that it seems obvious at first glance. However, on deeper examination, the prejudices below the surface are clearer.

In Cushing's 2020 paper, *The policy and policing of language in schools,* he argues that the education system and policy makers police language, particularly non-Standard variants of English, in a variety of ways. Cushing (2020) argues that policing grammar and language in this way can also transcend the metaphorical, in a climate where many schools now have their own dedicated police officers, which he argues is "linked to a wider shift towards discipline, surveillance, and control throughout society in general" (p. 437). In such an environment, where control and discipline are imperative, creativity can be constrained and students may feel that what they are being asked to write is inauthentic (see Chapter 2.5.3). As Drummond (2018) argues*,* linguists largely recognise that there are standard and non-standard forms of English, but beyond this, society at large attaches a value judgement to language variants. He asserts that:

> Such standard varieties are not intrinsically more sophisticated or linguistically 'better' than all the other 'non-standard' varieties - they are simply different. […] Unfortunately, many other people put the notion of 'standard English' on a pedestal, seeing it as something for young people to aspire to at the expense of whatever their natural variety may be. (Drummond, 2018, p. 10).

This loss of natural variety, in my view, is not something to be celebrated, but instead something to be mourned – a loss of something natural, and something with its own linguistic merit. Unfortunately, this particular brand of prescriptivism, with roots in classism and racism (Drummond, 2018, pp. 10-11), is prevalent in our society.

VanDeWeghe (2007) argues that although teachers try hard to encourage their students' creative pursuits, the way that the education system is set up makes it difficult to "nurture and protect creativity" (p. 91). This is an interesting metaphor: the verb "protect" suggests that creativity is under attack, presumably by the curriculum. This idea is echoed by Beghetto (2008) who asks whether assessment kills creativity. Beghetto (2008) argues that it is not through assessment itself that

creativity in subject English is affected, but instead through the "goal-oriented messages sent by […] teachers' assessment practices" (p. 259). As Barrance and Elwood (2018) argue, a move toward the English EBacc system where subject choice is prescribed restricts student choice, a decision which diverges "sharply" from the GCSE systems in Northern Ireland and Wales, which both attempt to "extend choice" (p. 21). When students from all three countries are potentially competing for university places based at least partly on their performance at GCSE, this seems unfair. He recognises that success can look different for different people and implies that he thinks the education system values only one type of success. A number of educationalists have suggested the use of alternate mark schemes for the marking of creative writing, such as Morris and Sharplin (2013) and Mozaffari (2013). Morris and Sharplin (2013) assert that "students require a clear understanding of what constitutes good creative writing, and of the criteria by which their writing will be assessed" (p. 56). Whilst I agree with this, I would like to add the distinction that these students need to be made aware that what is being positioned as success criteria does not always constitute good creative writing. Discussing the development of a new model for the assessment of creative writing in Australia, Morris and Sharplin (2013) explain the ongoing debate about whether it is possible to ensure that the marking of something as "subjective" as creative writing is, or could ever be, deemed "valid" or "fair"; and that the focus on technical accuracy remains in many assessment policies as it is one of the few "unproblematic" judgement areas (p. 54). Mozaffari (2013) also suggests an alternative rubric for assessment where areas other than technical accuracy are foregrounded, such as "images, characterisation, voice and story" (p. 2217). Weldon (2009) and her colleagues settled on a different focus for assessment in their practice, including "originality and imagination, use of language, structure, expression of theme, maturity of style and awareness of the reader" (p. 172). This seems to be situated somewhere between the existing mark schemes we have been left with post-2015 exam reform and the other reformed rubrics suggested above.

Other arts subjects – namely GCSE Art and Music – do not have the same constraints placed on them as creative writing (Edexcel, 2021; Edexcel, 2024), and students studying GCSE Art and Music are afforded much more time to think and develop their art – in whatever medium that looks like – as the assessment is non-

examinable, and is instead a coursework led approach. This seems much more democratic and dialogic than GCSE English Language.

This subchapter has discussed various theories of creativity and their relevance to creativity within the curriculum and creative writing. It explored how creativity is positioned within the subject of English and compared creative writing to other art forms taught in schools, as detailed in chapter 2.3.1, focusing on the idea of "Standard English" and what this means for teachers and students engaging with a GCSE English Language qualification.

2.4 Creative writing within the National Curriculum

In this section, I analyse two key issues in the current curriculum design: the requirement for strategic "deployment" of grammatical features, and the stipulated use of 'Standard English'. There is a well-documented history of creative writing in the curriculum, including work in this area from: Barnes, Britton and Rosen (1969); Barton and Hamilton (1998); Bleiman (2015); Dixon (1967); Goodwyn et al. (2019); Graddol et al. (1991); Holbrook (1961; 1964); and The Cox Report (1989). However, due to the scope and scale of this thesis, I have decided to prioritise current policy.

Schools in England typically begin Key Stage 4 in Year 10, though some start GCSE courses in Year 9 to spread content over three years. Retaining a full three-year Key Stage 3, however, affords students greater creative opportunities. This aligns with Craft's (2001) concept of "possibility thinking," which underpins creativity by encouraging students to ask "what if?", rather than being funnelled into narrow exam preparation. As schools adopt varied Key Stage 3 models, student experiences at this stage differ widely. From Year 10, however, creative writing becomes more uniform, as outcomes are tied to GCSE examinations. In these exams, work is assessed out of 40, divided between "content and organisation" and "technical accuracy" (AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2017). For many students, this curricular writing may be their only consistent creative writing practice.

The National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) argues that English holds "a pre-eminent place in education and in society", fostering students' cultural, emotional, intellectual,

social, and spiritual development (p. 13). It is notable that the curriculum states that the study of English offers cultural development, though I would question which cultures are prioritised. Perhaps it is a monoculture, as this reformed version of the specification removed "seminal world literature" from the study of English. There was widespread criticism of this reformed qualification, with Okolosie (2013) writing in the Guardian, "What we have in its place are a set of ideological convictions that view the study of English literature as a means through which a nationalistic and ossified vision of England can be propagated". This is supported by Talbot (2022) who writes that to expose students to literature solely from "their" culture is to "conceptualise individuals as born with an inherent fidelity to 'their' cultural origin" (p. 285), whereas Talbot argues that culture is "something more contested, diffuse, and malleable" (p. 286). I agree with Talbot's view, recognising that the cultural backgrounds of my students is not homogenous, and I believe that it is important for all of our students to see themselves represented in the curriculum in order to feel a sense of belonging, and indeed, to "[participate] fully as a member of society" (DfE, 2014, p. 13).

Despite this stated aim, over a third of students fail to achieve a Grade 4 in English (Norden, 2024), raising questions about equity and access. Exam boards such as AQA and Edexcel, tasked with interpreting the National Curriculum and designing assessments, thus play a central role in shaping this de facto curriculum and determining how cultural and creative opportunities are realised in practice.

Figure 1, below, is taken from the AQA GCSE English Language specification document (2014, p. 11).

3 Subject content

Students will draw upon a range of texts as reading stimulus and engage with creative as well as real and relevant contexts. Students will have opportunities to develop higher-order reading and critical thinking skills that encourage genuine enquiry into different topics and themes.

This specification will ensure that students can read fluently and write effectively. Students will be able to demonstrate a confident control of Standard English and write grammatically correct sentences, deploying figurative language and analysing texts.

For GCSE English Language students should:

- read fluently, and with good understanding, a wide range of texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, including literature and literary non-fiction as well as other writing such as reviews and journalism
- read and evaluate texts critically and make comparisons between texts
- summarise and synthesise information or ideas from texts
- use knowledge gained from wide reading to inform and improve their own writing
- write effectively and coherently using Standard English appropriately
- use grammar correctly and punctuate and spell accurately
- acquire and apply a wide vocabulary, alongside a knowledge and understanding of grammatical terminology, and linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language
- listen to and understand spoken language and use spoken Standard English effectively.

Figure 1, taken from AQA GCSE English Language specification (2014, p. 11)

AQA (2014) explain in the specification for GCSE English Language that students are expected to develop their creative writing skills through "genuine enquiry" following exposure to a "wide range of texts", saying that this will help students to "use knowledge gained from wide reading to inform and improve their own writing" (p. 11). It also sets out a clear expectation that "Students will be able to demonstrate a confident control of Standard English and write grammatically correct sentences, deploying figurative language" (AQA, 2014, p. 11). The connotations of the verb "deploying" are militaristic, implying a need for students to use "figurative language" in a methodical and tactical way, perhaps in order to obtain marks. As discussed in chapter 2.3, there is no existing, agreed upon definition of the term "Standard English", so to include this in a GCSE specification lends itself to subjective interpretation as different teachers, and examiners, are left to decide what constitutes "Standard English", and when it should be used "appropriately".

Edexcel published a similar document, the specification for their GCSE English Language qualification, from which I have taken an extract from in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2, taken from Edexcel GCSE English Language specification (2024, p. 8)

Rationale

The Pearson Edexcel Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9–1) in English Language meets the following purposes, which fulfil those defined by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) for GCSE qualifications in their *GCSE (9–1) Qualification Level Conditions and Requirements* document, published in April 2014.

The purposes of this qualification are to:

- provide evidence of students' achievements against demanding and fulfilling content, giving students the confidence that the literacy skills, knowledge and understanding that they will have acquired during the course of their study are comparable to those of the highest performing jurisdictions in the world

- provide a strong foundation for further academic and vocational study and for employment, to help students progress to a full range of courses in further and higher education. This includes Level 3 English courses, as well as Level 3 courses in other disciplines such as drama and theatre studies

- provide (if required) a basis for schools and colleges to be held accountable for the performance of all of their students.

The Edexcel (2024) Rationale for this qualification asserts that the GCSE English Language qualification is "demanding" and "fulfilling"; however, I argue that the idea of being "appropriately demanding" is problematic, given that over a third of students will not pass this qualification. Weale and Larsson Piñeda (2019) also report that students are much less engaged with the reformed English Language curriculum, quoting a teacher who described the qualification as a "joyless slog" for students, and describing the "mechanical" and "tick-box" nature of the reformed specification. This is certainly the case in the teaching of creative writing, where students are sometimes literally given checklists of techniques to use in their writing, as in Figure 3, below.

Figure 3, taken from an exam-board ratified text book, shows an example of how students are expected to use the "checklist for success" in their writing (Darragh et al., 2015, p. 125).

Students are here explicitly told that to be successful they must use: "imagery or symbolism", "personification", carefully chosen "verbs and nouns" (Darragh et al., 2015, p. 125). This image has been taken from a textbook aimed at "advanced students", though I would argue that advanced students of creative writing would likely be adept enough at crafting stories that they would have little need of a "checklist for success" in this way (Camilleri et al., 2024).

In Figure 4, below, Edexcel (2024) set out the learning outcomes for the qualification:

Learning outcomes		Students will:
1.2 Writing	1.2.1	*produce clear and coherent text*: write accurately and effectively for different purposes and audiences: to describe, narrate, explain, instruct, give and respond to information, and argue; select vocabulary, grammar, form, and structural and organisational features judiciously to reflect audience, purpose and context; use language imaginatively and creatively; using information provided by others to write in different forms; maintaining a consistent point of view; maintaining coherence and consistency across a text
	1.2.2	*write for impact*: select, organise and emphasise facts, ideas and key points; cite evidence and quotation effectively and pertinently to support views; create emotional impact; use language creatively, imaginatively and persuasively, including rhetorical devices (such as rhetorical questions, antithesis, parenthesis).

Figure 4, taken from Edexcel GCSE English Language specification (2024, p. 18)

Edexcel (2024) sets out that the first learning outcome is to "produce clear and coherent text" (p. 18). Creativity is not mentioned in the learning outcomes until later, where it is the fifth item in the list, and even so, the outcome is specifically to "use language imaginatively and creatively" (Edexcel, 2024, p. 18). This suggests that creativity primarily arises though language use, and fails to acknowledge more multimodal aspects of literacies (see chapter 2.2).

Edexcel (2024) states that students' creative writing should be informed by their study of English Literature (p. 18), encouraging them to draw on writers' craft, develop techniques, and practise planning and proofreading. However, the assumption that creative writing skills can be absorbed through exposure is flawed. While planning and proofreading are integral to writing, the 45-minute exam format offers little time for these processes, and teachers often overlook them under exam pressures.

Teacher confidence also shapes how creative writing is taught. Cremin (2006, 2019, 2020) and colleagues highlight that teachers often feel trained more in criticism than in writing, which limits their ability to model creativity. This imbalance is compounded by a prescriptivist curriculum that prioritises technical features of writing under the pressures of accountability (Cremin, 2006). As Myhill et al. (2023) note, treating writing as an art form rather than solely an exam task is what is missing from the curriculum. Instead, creativity is often reduced to "checklists" of techniques, with grammatical terms such as "fronted adverbials" becoming shorthand for frustration (Rentzenbrink, 2022; Hardman and Bell, 2019; Wyse et al., 2022).

 Throughout the specifications for this qualification, the term "Standard English" is repeatedly used (AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2014), yet it is never defined by exam boards or any central authority. This absence of definition creates inequality in how assessment criteria are applied (Goodacre, 2023). Teachers and examiners, who must apply mark schemes, are placed in the contradictory position of enforcing "Standard English" while simultaneously teaching texts that often deviate from it. Prioritising "Standard English" disadvantages students who do not use it, disproportionately affecting those who speak English as an additional language, non-white students, speakers of regional dialects, and working-class students (Goodacre, 2023). Baker-Bell (2020) argues that "Standard English" has become a euphemism for "White Mainstream English."

Analysis of Edexcel's (2014) English Language specification (see Davis-Wright, 2023; Appendix 12) shows that while the qualification claims to be "inclusive" and "empowering," the reliance on "Standard English" undermines both aims. Ambiguous terminology risks disadvantaging minoritised groups and limits creativity. As Morris and Sharplin (2018) note, students need a clear understanding of assessment criteria, yet such clarity is impossible when key terms remain undefined. Carter (2004) further highlights how written forms are culturally privileged over spoken ones. Creative writing that draws on spoken language, dialects, and vernaculars is often devalued by exam boards' emphasis on Standard English (Davis-Wright, 2023, pp. 7-8).

This contradiction is stark: though sometimes texts which celebrate linguistic diversity are included on GCSE English Literature set texts lists, including poetry by

Benjamin Zephaniah and John Agard, both of whom use non-Standard English (AQA, 2017; Edexcel, 2014), students are penalised for doing the same in their own work. Such contradictions create confusion for students. Verhoeven (2022) critiques the underlying assumption that exposure to literary texts leads to proficiency in writing 'good English', noting this is flawed, especially as much of the curriculum relies on 19th Century literature (p. 249). She asks whether it is reasonable for 21st-century students to be expected to emulate 19th-century writing styles (p. 249). Marton and Säljö (1976) similarly argue that predictable assessment demands reduce learning to exam technique, over-emphasising trivial criteria at the expense of deeper understanding (p. 124). In this context, students may come to believe that conforming to "Standard English" is more important than creativity, despite much literature not adhering to it.

Wheeler and Lindblom (2005) argue that insisting on a single version of English erases cultural differences and silences students' unique voices (p. 108). Denham and Lobeck (2010) point out that this creates a gap between everyday English and the variant expected in exams, requiring students to develop code-switching skills, arguing that "in the case of learning about the differences between Formal and Informal English, children must learn to actively code-switch – to assess the needs of the setting (the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose) and to intentionally choose the style of language appropriate to that setting" (p. 138). Wheeler and Lindblom (2005) describe code-switching as part of a student's "linguistic toolbox" (p. 110). I argue it has become more than that: it is now a strategic necessity for examination success.

2.5 Creative writing outside of the National Curriculum

In this section, I discuss creative writing outside of the literacy practices that students are engaging in at school. In chapter 2.5.1, I elaborate on chapter 2.2 with a fuller discussion of multimodality, as it relates to New Literacy Studies and the ways in which young people like my students are engaging with multimodal literacies, drawing on ideas from Gee, Rowsell and Pahl, and Curwood, among others. In chapter 2.5.2, I introduce Gee's affinity identity theory, discuss the significance of

affinity spaces, and then identify some physical and online affinity spaces young people might be immersed in, specifically considering fanfiction as an affinity space. Finally, in chapter 2.5.3, I explore the idea of authenticity in creative writing, and identify why a sense of authenticity is important in creative writing.

2.5.1 Multimodality

Children and young people engage in multimodal literacy practices in a number of varied ways, but due to the scope and scale of my research, I cannot include them all here. In this section, I discuss online social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Jerasa and Boffone, 2021), as well as other multimodal practices, such as those researched by Rowsell (2020) and Colvert (2020).

As Jerasa and Boffone (2021) wrote, "As school doors closed and Zoom became a part of our everyday vernacular, our reliance on digital spaces became essential to connect with friends, family and school" (p. 219). Wang (2024) researched young children's use of TikTok during COVID-19 and how TikTok became a literacy practice. She writes about the unprecedented and viral popularity of TikTok as a social media platform following the challenges of 2020 (2024, p. 2) and explained the affordances of this app: namely, that users are able to create "short, fun videos" and add "background music and audio-visual effects" (2024, p. 2); as well as create profiles solely to view videos that other people upload. Wang (2024) argues that children "have been provided more opportunities to delve into online spaces for learning and playing" (p. 7) since the pandemic, when circumstances meant that people could not easily meet in person, so online spaces became a necessity. Jerasa and Boffone (2021) argue that TikTok became a space for adolescent readers to share their passion for reading, through the creation of a shared space named "BookTok" – a portmanteau of "books" and "TikTok" – which has become powerful enough to influence and revolutionise the publishing industry (Harris, 2021). Jerasa and Boffone argue that after the pandemic reignited a societal engagement with digital literacies, people engaged:

> with social media and digital literacies as spaces that allow users freedom to communicate, create and even collaborate with others. Unlike school spaces,

where directions and boundaries are often explicitly controlled, digital spaces such as social media apps have the potential to permit creative content without critical response or judgement. (2021, p. 219)

This recognition of digital spaces affording users the freedom to create "without critical response or judgement" is important, as is the recognition of school spaces as "explicitly controlled" (Jerasa and Boffone, 2021, p. 219): part of the appeal of digital spaces for young people is the freedom they find there, and the ability to create using multimodal methods, such as adding pictures, music, special effects and texts to videos. This process is collaborative and dialogic, which is how New Literacy Studies might define a literacy practice. Jerasa and Boffone (2021) scratch the surface of the literacies of TikTok in their consideration of BookTok, recognising that these videos are not a homogenous group, but are also varied, "vast and far-reaching" (p. 222). They describe how some users use their videos as spaces to give a full review of a book that they have read; others use the space as a more dialogic space, asking other users to join the conversation in the comments section; and others "engage with popular TikTok trends, enabling young adults to use their creativity to produce short-form video book projects that marry the book's content with TikTok aesthetics" (Jerasa and Boffone, 2021, p. 222). This makes BookTok an authentic and dialogic affinity space for book lovers.

Colvert's (2020) work around ludic authorship foregrounds the importance of playfulness in our postdigital world, where students authored video games, acknowledging that in the media age, the nature of play itself has changed due to technological affordances. Unfortunately, as Colvert asserts, there is a "slow pace of innovation" leading to a widening gulf between the "schooled literacies" that students experience in school, and the literacies that students experience and engage in outside of the classroom (p. 145). Colvert (2020) designed the model of ludic authorships in order to "map the terrain" (p. 145) of digital play and to provide a lens for the analysis of purpose, processes and products of literacy practices (2020, p. 146). Colvert (2020) introduced an innovative practice of Alternate Reality Game authorship into a primary school curriculum, and allowed development of transmedia, multimodal literacies to be taught as a part of this primary school curriculum. While I support the aims of the study and agree that focusing on transmedia literacies is

essential, it is a shame that this is not currently a priority in the UK national curriculum and would therefore likely receive little space, time, or resources in the secondary school context in which I work.

Instagram is another digital space that young people interact with to engage with multimodal literacy practices. Kovalik and Curwood (2019) study the Instagram poetry community (Instapoetry), and how adolescents interact with it. They argue that although poetry remains an integral part of the subject English curriculum, "it has long held a negative reputation amongst both students and teachers" (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019, p. 185), but that Instagram poetry affords an online space for adolescents to access and engage with poetry. According to their study, Instagram is increasingly being used:

> to share digital poems that incorporate multimodal elements including texts and images with a vast global audience. It is a unique tool as writing occurs in the digital poems, comments and the hashtags used to share and categorise the posts (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019, p. 186)

This vast global audience offers something different to students' peers and teachers in the classroom: supporting the New Literacy Studies approach of literacy practices as social practices. Kovalik and Curwood (2019) argue that "collaboration in the Instapoetry community extends beyond feedback to include emotional support and community building" (p. 190). This kind of support and feedback is a key tenet of Gee's (2000) affinity space, where people choose to interact with other people, and people using Instapoetry enjoy this built-in audience, where other Instagram users can find their work by searching for a specific hashtag that they are interested in. This collaboration with others can motivate young people "to practise using language features, as well as poetic structures" (Kovalik and Curwood, 2019, p. 194), in a way which an English literature lesson perhaps does not, linking to Jerasa and Boffone's (2021) ideas about how creativity can flourish away from critical judgement from teachers or peers.

Multimodal literacy practices can also take place in offline spaces. Rowsell (2020) writes about a project where participants were asked to create a multimodal selfie in order to make a stance on the world (as opposed to the more passive action of

"taking" a stance, "making" a stance is active). This stance, as a multimodal literacy practice that could incorporate different media and design features "such as colors, paint versus photographs, and sculpture versus image" would signal a move away from "linguistic paradigms and logic" to enable participants to express their feelings and thoughts in these ways instead of trying to find the words to do so (Rowsell, 2020, p. 627). Participants found that these multimodal expressions of self-made them consider their own identities deeply, and during fieldwork Rowsell observed students engaged in dialogic practices, discussing their artistic choices (2020, p. 628).

2.5.2 Fanfiction and affinity spaces

As discussed in previous sections, in modern society, children and young people are afforded more opportunities to take part in literacy practices outside of the curriculum by technology (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, pp. 55-59). In this subchapter, I firstly discuss affinity spaces, then what fanfiction is; then, the ways in which people engage in fanfiction as a multimodal literacy practice; then, fanfiction as a communal and collaborative space; and finally, I discuss fanfiction through the lens of queer theory, specifically considering Sedgwick's "reparative readings" to understand slash fiction.

Gee (2001; 2017; 2018) argues that affinity spaces are places where groups of people are brought together via a shared interest or engagement in a common activity. These affinity spaces may be physical spaces, but as discussed in chapter 2.5.1, they may also be online affinity spaces. Gee (2018) argues that "within these affinity spaces, people are fully engaged in helping each other to learn, act, and produce, regardless of their age, place of origin, formal credentials, or level of expertise" (p. 9). In this 2018 paper, Gee writes about how video game communities become affinity spaces, because "when [gamers] have a real interest or passion for a game […] they often take their game-based learning into many other locations such that it becomes a truly sociocultural experience" (Gee, 2018, p. 10). Gee uses the example of a teenage girl engaging in an affinity space, and associated multimodal literacies, associated with the game "The Sims", a life-simulation game, where players create and control virtual people (their Sims), taking care of their

needs and directing their actions. These practices include character creation and creating "compelling narrative" (Gee, 2018, p. 11), which might not be typically associated with video gaming, but I argue is a form of fanfiction.

Curwood (2013) also writes about online affinity spaces at the height of popularity for "The Hunger Games" series. In this article, she writes about a teenage boy's engagement with fanfiction as an online affinity space for the series, arguing that young people often engage with online affinity spaces due to the affordance of "multiple modes of representation" and "an authentic audience who reads and responds to their work" (2013, p. 420).

Fanfiction is an enduringly popular literacy practice, in which fans of a particular fandom (which could be a book, a TV series, a film or a video game), write their own stories about the characters or settings explored in the original canon (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 76). According to Lankshear and Knobel (2011), these writers often write in order to: "chronicle alternative adventures, mishaps or even invented histories or futures for main characters"; "relocate main characters from a series or movie to a new universe altogether"; "create 'prequels' for shows or movies"; or to "fill in plot holes or realise relationships between characters that were only hinted at, if that, in the original text" (p. 76). In an article for Slate magazine, Plotz (2000) describes writing fanfiction as a communal art in which he emphasises the "collaborative nature of writing and reading". Plotz (2000) writes about the historical precedence of fanfiction, dating back to the Victorian era where fans of Sherlock Holmes started their own stories of the sleuth's deductions after Arthur Conan Doyle stopped publishing new stories, with a revival in the 1960s, from people inspired by Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Dhaenens et al. (2008) argue that the characters Kirk and Spock inspired the first Kirk/Spock "slash" stories, where "an italicized punctuation mark between the two names [indicated] an attraction between these protagonists" (p. 343). The Internet has now afforded new audiences and publication platforms for fanfiction writers, meaning that their stories have the potential for both global reception and long-lasting permanence on internet archives, such as Archive of Our Own (AO3), fanfiction.net, or MuggleNet.com, with some archives, such as the latter, having been created for fans of a specific fandom.

One element of fanfiction which gives writers a space to explore fictional worlds is the phenomenon of "ships" or "[relation]shipper narratives" which focus on intimate or romantic relationships between two characters (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p.111). Although these texts are often heterosexual in nature, for example, through pairings like Draco Malfoy/Hermione Granger at Hogwarts, a large proportion of fanfiction focuses on homosexual relationships (sometimes known as "slash fics") (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011, p. 112), for example, Remus Lupin/ Sirius Black (Wolfstar) in the Marauders' Era Wizarding World or Elim Garak/ Dr Julian Bashir (Garashir) on Deep Space Nine.

As a multimodal literacy practice, fanfiction is communal and collaborative. Fanfiction uses established textual worlds (often referred to as the "canon") as a place for fans of that textual world to interpret, rewrite, develop and explore possibilities for characters, settings and plots. Fanfiction encompasses a large community of readers and writers, which is organised into smaller communities depending on user preferences. Within this community, then, there are a myriad of different writers, with different ideas about the fandom, its canon, and its "fanon" (defined as "fantasy based on the needs of individual writers rather than the reality established by the shared source text" (Driscoll, 2006, p. 88)). In this sense, different works of fanfiction are "working with and against one another [and] this multitude of stories creates a larger whole of understanding of a given universe" (Busse and Hellekson, 2006, p. 7). In this way, fanfiction is not fixed or static, thus making it a prime example of what Gee (2000a) considers a multimodal literacy practice. Although, as discussed before, fanfiction was originally published in print, with Web 2.0, there was a move to online communities of fanfiction, such as MuggleNet, FanFiction.net and AO3. This move to a digital space offers several affordances for writers and readers of fanfiction; firstly, the vast majority of fanfiction published online is accessible for free; and secondly, the demographics of people engaging with fanfiction have changed so that a younger group of people who "previously would not have had access to the fannish culture except through their parents can now enter the fan space effortlessly […] and national boundaries and time zones have ceased to limit fannish interaction" (Busse and Hellekson, 2006, p. 13). These affordances democratise fanfiction as they are inclusive spaces where people with shared interests can discuss canon and fanon with like-minded people.

As discussed in the previous subchapter, Gee (2000) calls these spaces "affinity spaces" and links them to his notion of "affinity identity". The inclusive and accessible nature of these spaces could also mean that they are safer spaces for queer people, as discussed further below. Fanfiction offers writers the opportunity to write within a pre-established world; this reduces the need for world-building and allows fanfiction writers to focus on only the elements of stories that they want to. In addition to this, it affords writers what Craft (2001) termed "possibility thinking" as it allows writers to "posit the question "what if" to every possible facet of a source text (asking "What if these two characters became romantically involved?" "What if this significant event had occurred earlier/later/never?"[…])" (Derecho, 2006, p. 76). This element of fun and opportunity to explore areas of interest untouched by canon texts, for me as a writer of fanfiction, is the most enjoyable part of the practice.

Meers (2004) argues that the audience's construction of the meaning in the textual world is a complex process, and that the way in which meanings are constructed are also socially and culturally bound, and based on the audience's class, ethnicity, gender and nationality. Dhaenens et al. (2008) argue that "for some, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003) could be read as a queer quest involving an unspoken love between Sam and Frodo, whereas other readers would never consider the adventurous epos as having a non-straight subtext" (2008, p. 342, italics in original). This is where fanon offers an important affordance – a space to explore textual worlds in an alternative and non-heteronormative way. This links to Barthes' (1977) idea of the death of the author, where "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (p. 148). This idea is central to many writers of fanfiction, who interpret textual worlds in different, culturally and socially bound ways. Coppa (2006) argues that:

> In fandom, the author may be dead, but the writer - that actively scribbling, embodied woman – is very much alive. You can talk to her; you can write to her and ask her questions about her work, and she will probably write back to you and answer them. (p. 242).

This idea of the living author, and fanfiction as a living literacies practice (Rowsell and Pahl, 2020), is central to understanding the collaborative nature of fanfiction. There is an assumed and built-in audience – the fans. Therefore, as Busse and

Hellekson argue, "this notion of a work in progress is thus central to fandom" (2006, p. 7). In this way, the product (a finished story) is not what matters in fanfiction, rather what matters is the process of writing and collaborating with other people within the affinity space.

Popular tags on the popular fanfiction archive AO3 include "canon compliant" and "alternate universe", and are used to delineate whether or not a fic complies with an established reading of a textual world. Dhaenens et al. (2008) assert that slash is "a reaction against the normative construction of male sexuality on screen and against predetermined stereotypes of gender and sexuality" (p. 343). This is supported by Sedgwick's (2003) theory of reparative reading, where she argues:

> The desire of a reparative impulse, on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self. (p.149).

This is sense of harm being done to queer people through culture itself is interesting: existing in a society where there is little to no representation of people like yourself can feel isolating over time and, certainly, if this is the case during a formative time like adolescence, this can lead to feelings of inadequacy, being othered, and shame. For Sedgwick (1993), this lack of representation in society can be harmful, leading to a number of negative effects such as shame. On shame, she argues:

> I want to say *at least* for certain ("queer") people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities. (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 14, italics in original).

Perhaps this is why slash fiction is so popular, because it is a vehicle to write for some kind of reparation, as in Sedgwick's (2003) reparative readings. For me, these acts of reparative reading of a textual world and fanfiction writing are inextricably linked – I argue that fanfiction is reparative writing. Derecho (2006) writes about the long history of fanfiction appealing to minoritized people, who she argues use fanfiction "to express not only their narrative creativity, but their criticisms of social

and political inequalities as well" (p. 76). In support of this, Willis (2006) argues that:

> It is through writing fan fiction that a fan can, firstly, make space for her own
> desires in a text which may not at first sight provide the resources to sustain
> them; and, secondly, recirculate the reoriented text among other fans without
> attempting to close the text on the 'truth' of her reading: but these desires and
> these demands circulate unpredictably, in ways conditioned by the
> discontinuities between the author's world and the fictional world (pp. 155-
> 156).

This affordance for writers of fanfiction is that they can use their own writing and the
other texts produced by other fans of their favourite shows to explore what a world
with full representation of their own queer identities might look like: in this way it
might be considered reparative.

In this sense, as Dhaenens et al. (2008) argue, fanfiction is a politics of
transgression (p. 344). This supports the views of scholars such as Derecho (2006,
see above), Freire (1996) and Giroux (1983) who argue that literacy, and education
more generally, is political; and aligns with the New Literacy Studies in this way of
being politically bound, as part of its social and cultural binding. Due to the scope
and scale of this thesis I cannot elaborate more on this topic: however, I have
presented on fanfiction at conferences, and have been accepted to write a book
chapter about fanfiction as reparative writing, which is currently under review (Davis-
Wright, 2025).

2.5.3 Authorial identity and authenticity

In this section, I will discuss the concept of authenticity and authorial identity. When
considering creative writing, this is an important idea for many authors (and their
readers) who feel that retaining a sense of authenticity is a vital affordance in
creative writing.

The concept of authenticity, particularly in the sense of constructing a sense of
authorial identity, is important. As Canavan and McCamley (2021) argue, authenticity

is a concept to do with what is real and what is fake, and this notion can be expanded on in terms of ideas around "sincerity, innocence and originality" (p. 1). Canavan and McCamley (2021) view authenticity through a theoretical lens of existentialism, which they define as "the study of being and existence that stresses our lived sense of morality, autonomy and freedom" (p. 2). Although Canavan and McCamley's research is situated within the domain of tourism, and concerned primarily with the notion of authentic travel experiences, I argue that authenticity viewed through the theoretical lens of existentialism is equally valid in my research context. When conceptualising authenticity in writing, one might consider autonomy, freedom and morality as key areas to achieving a sense of authenticity. If the writer of a text has autonomy to write about whatever they want to write about, and the freedom to write in whichever way they want to, then surely, that text is more authentic than a text produced by the same writer in which those conditions have not been met. However, the concept of authenticity is more complex than that; I argue that it is also relative. It could be argued that a piece of creative writing produced during a GCSE English Language examination is an authentic piece of *curricular writing*, and in that sense, it would be authentic as it meets the criteria for sincerity and originality set out by Canavan and McCamley (2021) above. Nevertheless, I argue that it does not fully meet the criteria of autonomy or freedom, because of the contextual factors which are in play. On the other hand, writing produced by young people outside of the curriculum, for their own purposes and audiences, other than that of being examined in a formal examination or in preparation for one, to me are more authentic, as they meet more of the criteria for authenticity. As Canavan and McCamley (2021) argue, "existential authenticity is the idea of individuals feeling free to engage with their true selves" (p. 3). It is through this engagement that students start to develop their authorial identity; where through writing they can use their authorial voice to speak to the wider world.

Cremin and Chappell (2021) systematically reviewed creative pedagogies, and they argue that encouraging autonomy and agency is a common finding of creative pedagogies research. According to Cremin and Chappell (2021), researchers observed that when practitioners "[stood] back", it "fostered autonomy by giving the children the opportunity to follow their interests" (p. 313). Consequently, students grew more independent and felt more able to write about topics that interested them,

which I argue would make their work more authentic. Similarly, MacNeil and Mak (2007) argue that for those who subscribe to a sociocultural view of texts, and believe that texts are social, then the text is then never "purely private" as it passes through not only individuals as authors but also editors, publishers, readers and other stakeholders in a text as a product (p. 36). This conceptualisation of authenticity is interesting in terms of my study, as the writers I am working with are not professional writers, and consequently, do not have contact with editors or publishers, who would be responsible for changing or editing their words. However, students can be influenced by other people; namely, their teachers and any peers who may read their work. They are routinely given feedback on their writing by their teachers, and sometimes are given peer feedback during peer assessment activities. This feedback may shape how they write when revising the task or when writing new work, and therefore, may impact the authenticity of their writing.

Identity as a writer is also important in building authorial identity. For the purposes of this study, I draw on Gee's (2000) identity theories (see chapter 2.6), about the different components that comprise authorial identity. However, Gee's (2000) theories focus on identity as an "analytical lens for education". Considering identity more generally, philosophers have sought to answer questions about the nature of identity for centuries (see, for example, classical works by Socrates, Parmenides, Epicurus).

There has been much public discourse around identity and identity politics, and the issue seems to be gaining traction as it has been used as part of an ongoing narrative about the so-called culture wars happening across Europe and in America (Anthony, 2021; Butt, 2025; Duffy and Hewlett, 2021). Bernstein (2005) defines identity politics thus:

> The term identity politics is widely used throughout the social sciences and the humanities to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, the women's movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, separatist movements in Canada and Spain, and violent ethnic and nationalist conflict in postcolonial Africa and Asia, as well as in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe. (p. 47).

This wide-reaching definition of the term goes some way in capturing the nebulous way in which it is conceptualised; there is an argument that some people involved in these culture wars do not really understand what they are fighting against (Duffy et al., 2021). Younge (2019) argues that "the more power an identity carries the less likely its carrier is to be aware of it as an identity at all." (p. 2). This could support the argument that some people on the Right seem to denounce different identities and identity politics, but do not always seem to understand what this means (Orazi, 2023). Orazi (2023) argues that:

> "Identity (politics)" tends to systematically imply an alleged alliance between "the elite" and those who wrongly, or too loudly, or too frequently, complain that their racial, sexual, gender, identity is causing injustice, while it is claimed that identity politics actually guarantees preferential treatment. It is in fact almost impossible to find out exactly who this 'elite' and their allies are, without running into other fashionable and equally vague terms such as 'woke' or 'snowflake' (p. 17).

This obfuscation of the negative actors in society creates an arguably artificial divide between different groups, which contributes to the "culture war" being discussed increasingly frequently over the past twenty-five years (Orazi, 2023, p. 8). However, for Younge (2019), identity is important and intersectional as people are multifaceted and complex. Younge (2019) writes about the way in which identities intersect:

> Since we are both many things – female, white, English, gay – and just one – ourselves – identity is in its very nature intersectional. Its intersection with class is vital to understanding how it works. To try and understand identity without understanding class would be to misunderstand both altogether. But the relationship between the two is fluid not fixed and symbiotic not subordinate. (p. 3).

Many of these different facets of identity can inform authorial identity. People write to speak to the world, or to communicate something to themselves or others. People's lived experiences are shaped by their identities, because they experience the world as their identities. This intersectionality is important because the ways in which the identities stack and interact is fluid, as Younge argues (2019, p. 3). He argues that

"we should honour self-definition not to humour the subject but because it is infinitely preferable to allowing anyone to be defined by others." (Younge, 2019, p. 9), and I argue that it is through "self-definition" that authorial identity is explored, perhaps tentatively at first but then with mounting authenticity and confidence.

In Chapter 2.5, I examined creative writing beyond school-based literacy practices. Chapter 2.5.1 expanded on multimodality through the lens of New Literacy Studies, drawing on Gee, Rowsell and Pahl, and Curwood to explore how young people engaged with multimodal texts. Chapter 2.5.2 introduced Gee's affinity identity theory, highlighting the role of physical and online affinity spaces (such as fanfiction communities) in shaping literacy practices. Finally, Chapter 2.5.3 explored the importance of authenticity in creative writing and its relevance to young writers.

2.6 Theoretical framework

My research aims to look at the connections between identity as a writer and the writing practices that students are engaging in, both within and outside of the National Curriculum. In order to do this, I used semi-structured interviews to explore the nature of what students are writing within and outside of the curriculum and how they identify as writers, alongside a series of arts-based workshops, where I wrote alongside students. In terms of my theoretical framework, I draw mainly on the ideas of Gee's (2000) identity and discourse theories and on Craft's (2001) theories of creativity. In the following chapters, first I discuss Gee's theories on identity, followed by a discussion of Craft's little c creativity, and then a short discussion of other relevant theories related to my theoretical framework including Freire (1996), Moll et al. (1992), and Bourdieu (1986).

2.6.1 Framing the theoretical perspective: Gee's identity theory

In chapter 2.5.3, I discussed identity and the wide range of ways in which this complex idea can be conceptualised. For the purpose of my theoretical framework, I have opted to use the theories of identities by Gee (2000). In Gee's 2000 paper, "Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education", he sets out a theory of

identity which forms part of my theoretical framework. Gee defines identity in a way that "draws on one consistent strand" of the literature (for example, Hacking (1983; 1986; 1994; 1995; 1998)) which diverges on the topic of identity and recognises the multiple identities that people have (Gee, 2000, p. 99) and it is for this reason that I have chosen to incorporate this theory into my theoretical framework as it is important and relevant to recognise the different identities that people, and especially teenagers within a secondary school context, have, are assigned, and reject.

Gee (2000) argues that "when any human being acts and interacts in a given context, others recognize that person as acting and interacting as a certain "kind of person" or even as several different "kinds" at once" (p. 99). There are many categories of these "kinds of people", including, for example: feminists, academics, EAL (English as an Additional Language) students, "Potterheads" or "Trekkies", and cancer survivors. These identities can intersect, as Gee (2000) argues that people "have multiple identities connected not to their 'internal states' but to their performances in society" (p. 99). Possession of these identities can affect the way their bearers are treated in society and, of course, can change from "moment to moment", in different contexts, interacting with different people, or it can be ambiguous or unstable in the first instance (Gee, 2000, p. 99). In this way, Gee (2000) defines identity as:

> Being recognized as a certain "kind of person," in a given context, is what I mean here by "identity." In this sense of the term, all people have multiple identities connected not to their "internal states" but to their performances in society. This is not to deny that each of us has what we might call a "core identity" that holds more uniformly, for ourselves and others, across contexts. (p. 99)

Gee (2000) goes on to develop his four perspectives of identity - nature identity, institutional identity, discourse identity and affinity identity – each of which impacts the way in which people are recognised as a "certain kind of person" (p. 100). Gee (2000) is clear that although these types of identities are distinct and discrete, and we can analyse interactions to see which identities are predominant in an interaction, that "it is crucial to realize that these four perspectives are not separate from each

other [...] both in theory and in practice, they interrelate in complex and important ways" (p. 101).

Nature identities (N-Identities) are a state of being, and Gee (2000) argues that in N-identities, 'the source of this state-the "power" that determines it or to which I am "subject"-is a force […] over which [individuals have] no control' (p. 101). These could be, as in Gee's example, the state of existing as an identical twin (Gee, 2000, p. 101). Another example of this type of identity could be eye colour, or another factor decided by genetics. Hicks (2002) criticises this conceptualisation of N-identity, arguing that it is over-simplistic and fails to recognise the complexity of identity. However, Gee (2000) states that this theory is not concerned with what he terms "core identity" (p. 99), and I argue that perhaps this omission of core identity is where some of the complexity is lost.

Institutional identities (I-Identities) are a type of identity where the power bestowing the identity is an institution. To adapt Gee's (2000) example into my own context, I have an I-identity as a teacher, and "the "power" that determines it or to which I am "subject" -is a set of authorities" (in my case, the Board of Governors, the Headteacher, the administration of the school and senior leadership team, and my department), and as with Gee, "the source of this power is not nature, but an institution" (Gee, 2000, p. 102). A further example of this type of identity could be a person entering a hospital, seeking treatment, who is designated the I-identity of 'patient' through this action.

Discourse identities (D-Identities) are identities related to discourses about a person, where 'the source of [the] trait [discussed] -the "power" that determines it […] is the discourse or dialogue of other people." (Gee, 2000, p. 103). For example, a person might have a D-identity as a friendly and inclusive person, because this is how other people treat them, talk about them (perhaps based on how they behave), and perceive them. They can choose to lean into that discourse, or to reject it and change their behaviour to move away from it.

Finally, Gee (2000) describes affinity identities (A-Identities), as discussed in chapter 2.5.2, through an example he gives about fans of the TV series *Star Trek,* who, in attending fan conventions, develop affinity spaces:

Being a Star Trek fan, in the sense I intend here, is composed of sets

of distinctive experiences (e.g., attending shows, meeting actors from Star

Trek at such shows, chatting on the Internet, collecting memorabilia, trading

such memorabilia, dressing like a character in Star Trek). The source of this

access - the "power" that determines it or to which the person is "subject" - is

a set of distinctive practices. In turn, the source of this power is not nature or

an institution, or even other people's discourse and dialogue alone, but an

"affinity group […] An affinity group is made up of people who may be

dispersed across a large space (may, in fact, be in different countries). They

may share little besides their interest in, say, Star Trek. What people in the

group share, and must share to constitute an affinity group, is allegiance to,

access to, and participation in specific practices that provide each of the

group's members the requisite experiences. The process through which this

power works, then, is participation or sharing. (p. 105).

I have chosen to represent this example in full for two reasons. Firstly, I have chosen
to do this because I relate to the A-identity of being a Trekkie, as a person who has
watched a lot of *Star Trek,* written fanfiction within the fandom, and attended fan
conventions. In this way, I have experienced what Gee describes above. In terms of
my study, I am interested in how these different identities are at play in my students,
how they diverge and intersect, and how far students are even aware of the different
factors that might affect their identity. I am also interested in how far identity as a
person informs identity as a *writer,* and whether or not this is a conscious process.

2.6.2 Framing the theoretical perspective: Craft's theories of creativity

As discussed in chapter 2.3, there are many different ways of conceptualising
creativity. Craft (2001) writes about little c creativity, which describes the everyday
creativity that ordinary people are capable of achieving, as opposed to big C
creativity, which are acts of extraordinary creativity. Craft (2001) defines big C, or
high, creativity as having certain intrinsic characteristics, such as "innovation/novelty,
excellence, recognition by the field within which it takes place, and a break with past
understandings or perspectives' (p. 46). I have chosen Craft's theory because her

foregrounding of achievable, everyday creativity resonates with the context of my research, especially the portion of the research into curricular creative writing. Arguably, Craft's theory of creativity is in itself an example of big C creativity, in so far as I believe it is extraordinary and "paradigm shifting", in that where other, previous research has focused mainly on this type of high creativity, Craft's (2001) theory of little c creativity recognises the ordinary and everyday forms of creativity which are prevalent in everyday life (p. 46). Craft (2001) theorises that by contrast, little c creativity is about the "resourcefulness and agency of ordinary people" (p. 49) and that "for an outcome to be judged as creative there must have been some conscious intention involved in its creation" (pp. 49-50). It is also linked to Craft's (2001) theory of possibility thinking, which she defines as 'asking, in a variety of ways, "What if?"' (p. 54). Both of these skills are incredibly useful in approaching the task of creative writing, both within and outside of the curriculum, because anecdotally, this is an effective way of helping students respond to creative writing prompts.

If 'little c creativity' focuses on the "resourcefulness and agency of ordinary people, rather than the extraordinary contributions and insights of the few" (Craft, 2001, p. 49), I am reminded of Verhoeven's question about the way in which GCSE English Language is taught: "Does the DfE intend for all 21st Century young people to write like a minority of 19th Century people?" (Verhoeven, 2022, p. 249). Here, Verhoeven examines the expectations of the exam, highlighting how little time is afforded to students in the exam for creative writing. This implies that the DfE thinks that all young people are capable of producing a work of big C creativity potential "off the cuff", without the ability to edit, rework or add to their own work. The GCSE in English Language is a 9-1 qualification: that is to say that there are no tiers to the exam, and consequently the exams need to be accessible to all students, including those who are capable of attaining a grade 1 (the lowest grade) and those who are capable of attaining a grade 9 (the highest grade). I argue, therefore, it would be more democratic to move towards a model of little c creativity, recognising every student's creative potential, for example, by allowing them to experiment with dialogue and affording them the opportunity to represent on the page different dialects and vernaculars; or by using possibility thinking to challenge student ideas with "what if?" questioning.

Inherent in both theories is a sense of connection. In Gee (2000), affinity spaces are social, characterised by participants' social practices. For Craft, the importance of creative, dialogic spaces is important in fostering an approach to everyday creativity and providing a sounding-board for possibility thinking: Chappell and Craft (2011) highlight the significance of dialogue in this way.

2.6.3 Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Funds of Knowledge and Cultural Capital

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) argues that dialogic classrooms are vital for education, societal change and freedom from oppression (1996). He criticises the prevalent "banking model of education" where:

> knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto other people, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. (Freire, 1996, p. 45).

Further to this, this ideology also strips classrooms of creativity and student voice, creating spaces where Craft's (2001) possibility thinking (p. 54) has no place due to the presumption that the students bring "nothing" to classroom spaces. Contrary to this is Freire's (1996) model of "problem-posing education", in which, through dialogue, "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach […] (becoming) jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 53). The problem-posing model of education, then, is a catalyst for creativity as the students and teacher create and consider realities, and is striving for the "emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (Freire, 1996, p. 54).

Where educators understand their students, and the funds of knowledge their students bring to dialogic classroom spaces, the classroom is richer. Moll et al. (1992) argue that funds of knowledge are the "totality of experiences, the cultural structuring of households, whether related to work or play, whether they take place individually, with peers, or under the supervision of an adult", which children can use

to help them understand the world (p. 134). This understanding that children are 'with the world', as in Freire's problem-posing model of education, is important because it recognises what students bring to a classroom, helping to facilitate the classroom as a dialogic space. The funds of knowledge students bring to the classroom can also be connected with their identities, as per Gee's (2000) identity theory, and which can act and interact with those that other students and the teacher bring to the space, leading to mutual growth. Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014) argue that there is a connection between lived experience and funds of identity (p. 70). They contend that both children's funds of knowledge and funds of identity are of great interest and importance to schools, who can use them to bridge the gap between "in-school and out-of-school cultures, practices and learning experiences" (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014, p. 75). The authors set out a number of examples of how funds of identity can be used in the classroom (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014, pp. 75-76), as well as areas of the curriculum such as the GCSE Spoken Language Endorsement, where students are permitted to speak about whatever they like.

However, in practice, certain funds of knowledge and funds of identity are prioritised over others. Bourdieu (1986), in *The Forms of Capital,* outlines the concept of capital as being more than just wealth (economic capital), but also encompassing social and cultural capital, where social capital refers to the social networks that individuals can draw on for support and opportunities (p. 21). Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises three forms of cultural capital: the embodied state, which refers to the form of cultural capital that is internalised within an individual, consisting of their skills, knowledge, behaviours and ways of thinking; the objectified state, which takes the form of objects signifying cultural good such as "pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines"; and the institutionalised state, which refers to, for example, academic qualifications bestowed by an institution which can lead to better opportunity in the labour market (p. 17). The embodied state is closely related to Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, which describes the set of dispositions, ways of thinking and behaving and tastes that individuals develop as a result of their upbringing and experiences, which can affect how they perceive the world and interact with it. There are several factors which can comprise embodied capital such as: language skills, cultural knowledge, manners, etiquette and taste (Bourdieu, 1977).

Other scholars have different views on culture: Williams (1958) argues that "culture is ordinary" (p. 92), and expanded the definition of culture to something that encompassed different, every day facets such as lived experiences, institutional experiences and traditions, as well as the more elite, high art focused pursuits that Bourdieu described. Willis (1977) argues that although the dominant culture in schools was middle-class and white, some students (including the group of working-class boys he researched) actively rejected this culture, leaning into an alternative cultural capital within their social groups, where other factors were valued. However, as it was not recognised by schools or society, this rejection of the dominant culture helped to reproduce class inequalities, as this rejection still led to social disadvantage. Hall (1997) argues that culture is not neutral; rather it is shaped by power. In the UK secondary school context, where dominant cultural norms are middle-class and white (Baker-Bell, 2020), particularly surrounding the use of language, where "Standard English" is prioritised by examination boards. Other scholars have also examined these tensions between culture, power and language, including, but not limited to Kinloch (2009), Rasool and Ahmed (2020), and Badwan (2021).

The area most relevant to my research is the embodied cultural capital of language, where students are judged on the way they use language, for example, the insistence of the use of "Standard English". Additionally, an aesthetic taste that tended toward the "refined", where students have an awareness of things such as classical music or works of literature, can help students to engage in the types of high C creativity that the curriculum foregrounds, as they are able to draw on their funds of knowledge to emulate that with which they are already familiar. This facet of the education system is part of the "oppression" that Freire (1996) writes about (pp. 24-33). This also links to Bernstein's (1964) theory of language codes, which provides a powerful lens through which to examine the assessment of creative writing in schools, particularly regarding the performance of working-class students. Bernstein (1971) identified two distinct language codes: the restricted code, more commonly used in working-class communities, and the elaborated code, which aligns more closely with the linguistic expectations of formal education, or "Standard English". Formal assessment in school often privileges students who use elaborated code, which inherently disadvantages those who communicate using restricted code.

As a result, creative potential may be overlooked in students whose linguistic style reflects their cultural background rather than a lack of ability. Students who are oppressed in some way by the system (for example, for class, socioeconomic or racial reasons) are then further disadvantaged by the examination requirements that the system imposes

2.7 Conclusion to the literature chapter

 In this chapter, I considered literacies in terms of New Literacy Studies, creativity and creative writing, considering how curriculum documents are enacted. I discussed how students engage in multimodal literacy practices within and outside of the curriculum, before concluding with my theoretical framework and a discussion of related theory.

I started this chapter by borrowing Lingard's (2018) metaphor of "mapping the gap", and I aimed to set out the key literature in such a way that the "gap" was clearly presented to the reader. Having done this, I would like to summarise how I conceptualise the gap in the literature that my research seeks to answer. The literature is clear about how New Literacy Studies understands texts as socially and culturally contextualised, and about how the creation of texts is a form of communication. There is a body of existing research about literacy practices within the curriculum, and there is a separate body of literature that sets out some of the multifaceted ways in which students engage in extracurricular multimodal literacy practices. However, there is not a body of existing research on the fusion of curricular and extracurricular literacies, or the tensions between curricular and extracurricular literacies, which I argue are evident and keenly felt by both students and teachers. My research makes an original contribution to knowledge by answering my research questions, which are situated in this metaphorical gap.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction to methodology

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the relevant literature for my study. In this chapter I will explore the methods and the methodological decisions that I have taken in this study. Wellington (2015) argues that methodology is "the activity or business of choosing, reflecting upon, evaluating and justifying the methods you use" (p. 34), and I argue that methodology plays a critical role in research, as the same question can be investigated through multiple approaches, each potentially yielding significantly different outcomes. Firstly, I will discuss my research paradigm, then consider my positionality in relation to the methodology and methods I have chosen for my study. I will revisit the research aims and questions, before moving on to discuss the access to students that I had, and the inclusion criteria for participants. I discuss my choice of semi-structured interviews and arts-based workshops, and then discuss my approach to analysis using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Next, I discuss ethical considerations I made during this study, before moving on to a discussion of issues arising during this study, strengths and limitations of my methodology and a discussion of how my work is ethnographically-oriented.

3.2 Research philosophy

From an ontological standpoint, I take an interpretivist approach, whereby I believe that reality is not fixed or objective, but socially constructed, and shaped by cultural, social and contextual factors which means that people experience reality in different ways. In terms of epistemology, I believe that knowledge is contextual, socially-situated and subjective. Rather than seeking one objective "truth", I argue that we can construct a "truth" by acknowledging multiple perspectives and realities that can co-exist.

According to Denscombe (2007), "when the social world is seen as 'socially constructed", one can move away from a positivist approach where the goal is attaining a single truth, and towards the possibility that different groups of people might "see things differently" (p. 79). This suggests that where people might

experience things differently, there are a number of alternative realities. Social constructivism is a social learning theory developed by psychologist Vygotsky (1978, p. 57), which considers the effect of social interaction on the realities experienced by people, to the extent that these interactions form the basis of a co-constructed reality. On the other hand, social interpretivism argues that to understand the human experience, we must go beyond the empirical and take into consideration thoughts, feelings, emotions and ideas when interpreting data (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022, pp. 421-2). Both social constructivism and social interpretivism share the same ontology, but have different epistemological approaches. Viewed through a social constructivist lens, this study could seek to answer how realities for my participants are constructed; whereas, viewed through a social interpretivist lens, this study could seek to answer how the realities my participants exist within are experienced by them. I believe that the social constructivist paradigm better suits my research.

3.3 The researcher's positionality in relation to the methodology and methods

It is important to consider positionality in relation to both methodology and methods. I come to this study with several, different, nuanced identities – I am simultaneously researcher, teacher and artist – which may have impacted the way I interpreted data.

As a researcher, I have particular research interests, such as literacies and creative writing, which are associated with my own practice in school. My axiology is closely tied to my interest in literacies, particularly around how barriers to literacies are created or compounded by various forms of social disadvantage, due to my strong desire to build a society that is fairer and can achieve equality. During my study, it was necessary to maintain an awareness of my own beliefs and preconceptions that I was bringing to my work.

Through the "artist" lens, when I became a teacher, I was struck by what I felt was the lack of creativity in the teaching of creative writing in secondary school contexts where I was asked to use resources that reduced the art to a perceived checklist of things to include for the sake of a mysterious examiner, an unseen figure who wielded an immense amount of power over GCSE students.

As a teacher, I work within the constraints of the curriculum and have developed a sensitivity, both to what exam boards are looking for and how students find studying

the course in general, and the creative writing component specifically. In addition to my full-time teaching role, I also tutor in English, which means that I have taught students in a range of contexts studying both of the major exam boards (Edexcel and AQA), and have been disappointed by what some students report happening in their lessons. For example, anecdotally, several students, across more than one education setting, reported being asked to memorise a piece of writing that was given to them so that they could recreate it word for word in the exam, disempowering the student to make their own creative choices. For these reasons, I found it imperative to incorporate arts-based, multimodal methodologies into my study and to create an affinity space for my participants, recognising their agency and developing authorial identities.

Acknowledging my identity as a white, middle-class, cisgender woman who was educated in a grammar school and then in three UK universities, I approach this research with both points of connection and disconnection from the participants. My cultural and social positioning affords me certain privileges that I must remain critically aware of throughout the research process. While I share racial identity and aspects of cultural background with most of the white, working-class students in this study, I recognise that my class background, educational experiences, and my experiences within the institutional structures that have supported me differ significantly from theirs. This dual position of partial insider and outsider status requires me to be reflexive about how my presence, assumptions, and interpretations influence my research. I aimed to engage with participants ethically and sensitively, remaining attentive to the dynamics of power, voice, and representation. All of these facets of my own identities inform and shape the way I approach my study, and whilst I argue that these perspectives are what make me uniquely placed to conduct this particular study, I also acknowledge that my positionality in relation to the study affected almost every aspect of my study – from what I decided to research in the first instance, to how I conducted the study.

3.4 Research aims and questions – a rationale

As discussed in Chapter 1, the key research question for my project are:

How do Year 10 students' experiences of creative writing affect their identities as 'writers'?

- **How do students perceive themselves as writers within the National Curriculum?**

- **How do students perceive themselves as writers outside of the National Curriculum?**

I explored how students' experiences of creative writing both within and outside of the English national curriculum affected their identities as writers. There were a number of factors that allowed me to narrow my choice of research questions, as set out in Chapter 1. I chose to work with Year 10 students, as they had just started their KS4 curriculum, but still retained recent experience of the KS3 curriculum in school and were not imminently about to undertake their GCSE examinations, suggesting that they would have more time available to them for social and hobby activities outside of their studies. I was particularly interested in how students' direct experiences with curricular creative writing impacted their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about themselves as "writers". Having studied a variety of research methods, I decided that perhaps the richest way and most appropriate way of ascertaining this information would be through a series of semi-structured interviews alongside a series of arts-based workshops that would allow students to experiment with creative writing and their authorial identities.

Popularised by Geertz (1973), the term "thick description" is defined as description that goes further than merely explaining what happened, rather, it considers other factors, such as the context, meaning and intentions that lie behind the action. Younas et al. (2023) argue that this must also be considered from a sociocultural perspective:

> Thick description refers to giving a thorough account of the participants' views, intents, circumstances, motives, meanings, and understandings. However, as individuals do not exist in isolation, thick description also requires accurately describing the context of the observations, including the psychological, institutional, sociological, and anthropological dimensions of the phenomenon being studied (p. 1).

As a social constructivist researcher employing a thematic analysis approach, I decided to use thick description to capture the contextual richness and situated meanings embedded in participants' words.

I collected artefacts from these sessions. Firstly, students produced a portfolio of work for them to keep at the end of the research project (see Appendix 9 for examples). This would not be analysed in any way. Secondly, students also produced pre-interview tasks which I have put in the Appendices 5-7 of this thesis. The student voice is foregrounded in my study. Taken alongside a brief critical analysis of policy documentation in the literature review (see chapter 2.4), this study offers a broad view of the creative writing curriculum in English, exploring students' beliefs, attitudes, and feelings towards creative writing, as well as their identities as "writers" and their broader creative identities, which allows me to answer the research questions.

3.5 Access to students

I had access to students through my employment at the school where the study was conducted, and institutional consent was obtained from both the Headteacher and the Chair of Governors. While students from Year 7 to Year 13 were eligible to participate, Year 10 students were selected for several reasons. Firstly, they had recent and extensive experience of creative writing across Key Stages 1 to 4, with the GCSE English Language creative writing unit taught shortly before participant recruitment, meaning the content was fresh in their minds. Secondly, Year 11 students were excluded due to the school's prioritisation of examination preparation, including compulsory after-school intervention sessions that would have made scheduling difficult.

To ensure informed consent, the study was introduced during a Year 10 assembly and subsequently explained in all Year 10 English classes, allowing the whole cohort to be reached. Interested students were given information sheets and consent forms to review with a parent or guardian. Participants who returned consent forms were then consulted individually to arrange interview and workshop times that accommodated their personal circumstances.

3.6 Methods

The methods that I have selected for this research study have been informed by a number of things, namely my research positionality, the participants, my research questions and my theoretical approach. It was important to me that student voices were heard within my project, necessitating a study that worked with participants; however, it was also important to consider the documentary evidence, such as exam board specifications, DfE guidelines, policies and documentation, and other pertinent documents, to see what the "official" word on the teaching and assessment of creative writing in schools was. Since this study afforded me the opportunity to foreground student voices, interviews were an important method employed in this study, and combined with the arts-based workshops, I empowered students to voice their views and share their experiences with me.

Each participant had three interviews, conducted before, during and after the workshops in January 2024, April 2024 and July 2024, yielding in total eighteen hours of interview data to transcribe and analyse.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interviews

Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) raise the question that to understand how people understand the world and how their experiences shape their lives and their views, "why not talk with them?" (p. 2). They assert that "the research interview is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed in the inter-action between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 2). Cohen et al. (2018) argue that "knowledge should be seen as constructed, generating data' and that consequently, 'the interview is not exclusively either subjective or objective" (p. 506). They go on to assert that the very use of interviews "marks a move away from seeing human subjects as manipulable and data as somehow external to individuals and towards regarding knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversations" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 506). Viewed like this, this method is apt for my ontology and epistemology, as discussed in chapter 3.2.

Galletta (2016) argues that

> Semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more
> theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the

> participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research. (p. 50)

For these reasons, particularly the way in which the semi-structured nature of the questions allows the researcher to engage each participant fully in the research, depending on their own individual understanding and experiences, I opted for semi-structured interviews, as opposed to sticking to a rigid set of questions I could not deviate from. I also wanted to ensure that participants had the opportunity to discuss the same topics and themes, to allow for comparison of responses, in a way which would have been much harder with unstructured interviews. In addition, having a structure to the questions allowed me as the researcher to guide the interview back to the most relevant topics to answer my research questions, and also meant I could share this looser list of questions with participants so they could consider what they might say before I started to record the interviews.

There are, however, limitations of interviews, including keeping to the point, moving beyond what young people think that the interviewer wants to hear, and participants potentially being unable to express themselves through choice of vocabulary (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 275). Although the semi-structured interviews were important in answering the research questions, I would argue that in many ways the workshops were more fundamental and meaningful for young people, as they were offered the opportunity to experiment and develop as artists in workshops, as well as develop connections with the other participants, meaning that workshops were also affinity spaces.

I followed the stages for conducting semi-structured interviews outlined by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018). The first stage involved planning the interviews by identifying the focus of each of the three interviews participants would complete. The initial interview explored students' experiences of curricular creative writing, the second focused on writer identity, and the final interview addressed everyday creativity. As the interviews were semi-structured, I prepared a set of guiding questions for each stage, recorded in a notebook and taken to the interviews. Care was taken to prioritise open-ended questions and avoid closed questioning, often using prompts such as "Tell me about a time when…" to allow participants to respond freely.

The second stage involved conducting the interviews. These took place in a quiet, pre-agreed space on the school site to ensure safeguarding, avoid lone working, and provide convenience and familiarity for participants. Interviews were audio-recorded using a Dictaphone, allowing for active listening and sustained eye contact.

Finally, the third stage was analysing the interview. Interview recordings were transcribed manually by myself and then analysed according to the thematic analysis approach set out in chapter 3.7.

3.6.2 Transcription of interviews

I manually transcribed all of the interviews, playing back the audio recordings, and thereby not relying on memory to transcribe from. I chose to transcribe using a set of pre-determined interpretations, for example, the choice to use verbatim oral transcription (written out "word by word" and "retaining frequent repetitions", as well as noting fillers such as "hmms" and "erm") (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018, p. 109) and the choice to transcribe all of the data myself, using an identical procedure. This was undeniably a time-consuming and laborious process; however, in doing this, I felt that I really understood and knew my data well and I was confident that the transcripts were reliable. This verbatim style of transcription was then changed to intelligent verbatim when presenting the data in Chapter 4 (see chapter 3.7). Furthermore, I asked students to member-check their interview transcripts at the end of the data collection phase, whereby following the transcription of data obtained from the semi-structured interviews, each participant was provided with a copy of their individual transcript for review. As described by Simpson and Quigley (2016), member-checking should be "dialogical and flexible" (p. 389). This was a key tenet I took into my research design. Participants were invited to examine their transcripts and were afforded the opportunity to amend or redact any content they deemed necessary. All participants were pleased with the accuracy of the data and no alterations were made to the transcripts. Importantly, member checking was used, not solely as a method to enhance the validity and reliability of the data, but also as an ethical practice aimed at ensuring that student participants could provide truly informed consent by having clear knowledge of the exact words and phrases attributed to them within the research. Once transcription was complete, I saved it to

my University Google Drive to ensure that it was compliant with GDPR data safety regulations.

3.6.3 Workshops

Between January 2024 and the end of July 2024, I conducted a series of arts-based workshops with the research participants. Each session was based on a single-word theme as below. I decided on a single word theme so that students would not be restricted by an overly prescriptive writing prompt and could feel free to go in whichever direction they felt like going with their writing. Each session consisted of teaching input which I led, always beginning with a discussion of the definition of the chosen word. In some cases, words had more than one definition or could be used across more than one word class. For example, the word "change" can be a noun or a verb depending on context. We then discussed a variety of different multimodal texts and how they might apply to the theme of the workshop – including extracts from novels or short stories, poems or extracts from poems, scenes from films, extracts from plays, and screen-recorded TikTok videos or Instagram reels which I had saved to show the students. I chose themes that were open to interpretation, which were dissimilar to the kind of prompts which students might receive in a GCSE examination, and which everyone was likely to find relevant.

The workshops followed the following schedule:

- Monday 22nd January – "CREATURE"
- Monday 4th March – "TIME"
- Monday 25th March – "CHANGE"
- Thursday 9th May – "PROMISE"
- Monday 10th June – "JOURNEY"
- Monday 1st July – "TRUTH"

These discussions of multiple texts per session acted as a springboard for student writing, and for my own writing, because I always took part in the writing tasks alongside the students, modelling my own writing process and sharing my own work with students in order to create a low-anxiety environment in which sharing your work was encouraged; constructive criticism was not something to be worried over; and seeking feedback from others was typical. Please see Appendix 8 for a sample of materials from the workshops.

3.6.4 Collection of artefacts

Throughout the study I have collected various artefacts, not necessarily to analyse in depth, but to enrich my findings. I have included photographs and scans of these artefacts in Appendices 5 to 7 and in Appendix 9.

I collected artefacts such as:

- a writing map, where participants were asked to draw their writing journeys before their first interview
- an identity grid, where students noted down different aspects of their identities before their second interview
- a creativity poster, where students created their own definitions of creativity
- student writing

The first three of these artefacts were collected at each interview, where I used pre-interview tasks as ice-breaker activities, helping to create a good rapport with students from the start of the study. The tasks were related to the theme of each interview, with the first being about attitudes, beliefs and experiences of creative writing in general, the second being about how they perceived their identities to impact their writing, and the third being about creativity itself. The creation of these artefacts was helpful in several ways: it helped them to collect and catalogue their thoughts about each topic before I started recording the interview; it meant that participants could refer to a visual aide memoire once the interviews started; it gave me an opportunity to sit with participants, create my own version of the task, and talk with them, creating a low anxiety environment.

The first task was to create a map of their writing journeys so far. I read about Cliff Hodge's (2010) "rivers of reading" project, where students were asked to create collages to illustrate their reading identities. These collages were thus named as the students were "asked to draw an outline of a river and plot onto it any key moments they could recall which they felt might have contributed to their development as readers" as a precursor to an interview with the researcher (Cliff Hodges, 2015, p. 57). I adapted this pedagogical approach to use as a visual representation of the participants' writing journeys, though I was less prescriptive in how I wanted them to present this information, leading to images depicting volcanoes and mountain ranges (see Appendix 5). For the second task, I gave students a simplified explanation of

Gee's (2000) theory of identity and we chatted about this for around five minutes, before I asked participants to consider their identity in different contexts and note down what each area meant to them. This task gave students the opportunity to consider a big question about their identity, and to break it down into constituent parts. The final task was to create a working definition of creativity, and were given blank A3 paper to fill as they wished. Students also brought me their work, which I copied for my records, as they wanted to keep the original documents (see Appendix 9).

3.7 Analysis of semi-structured interviews: a reflexive thematic analysis approach

I analysed my data using a reflexive thematic analysis approach, as set out by Braun and Clarke (2022). In thematic analysis, the researcher identifies themes which are used as the key elements of analysis for the study, affording researchers the opportunity to focus on how individual participants construct meaning from their experiences. As a social constructivist, I am interested in how people understand and make sense of the world, and thematic analysis allows me to examine in depth the lexical and semantic choices that participants make to express their thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that their thematic analysis approach is not tied to any one particular epistemological or ontological viewpoint, which means that it can align with the social constructivist paradigm used in this study. The type of data I collected were rich and varied, so I needed to select an approach which allowed detailed analysis whilst maintaining a sense of nuance and depth of response through thick description (see chapter 3.4). By adopting an impressionistic approach to analysis (see chapter 3.10), I acknowledged the active role I played of the researcher in co-constructing meaning with participants. Thematic analysis is well-suited to this because it encourages and recognises the researcher's interpretations as part of the meaning-making process rather than aiming for detached objectivity. Lastly, thematic analysis supports the paradigm of social constructivism as an approach which views knowledge as constructed through language and social interaction, by allowing exploration of how language and discourse shape participants' understanding of the world around them.

According to Braun and Clarke, there are four main stages of good practice in reflexive thematic analysis: transcription; coding and theme development; analysis and interpretation; and write up (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 269). In this section, I will explore what I did for each of these four categories to ensure that my study met these standards.

3.7.1 Transcription

The data was transcribed to a verbatim level of detail. I recorded interviews on a Dictaphone, and then used a word processor to manually transcribe eighteen hours of interview data. Given my background in English Language and Linguistics, I wanted to transcribe to this degree to have a fuller picture of exactly what was said by each research participant. All transcripts were then checked against the audio recording to ensure accuracy, and additionally given back to participants for member checking to ensure trustworthiness of transcription (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1804). All data was transcribed through an identical and systematic process to ensure quality and consistency of transcripts (see Appendix 10). However, for reasons of readability, I edited the transcripts to move to an intelligent verbatim style when presenting them in Chapter 4. Again, participants were given the opportunity to member-check this, which they were satisfied with.

3.7.2 Coding and theme development

Coding refers to the systematic process of labelling data items with an individual code label for each different meaning identified by the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 52). Through a long and laborious process, where I took the printed transcripts of interview data and coded it using a of colour-coding system, I ensured that the process of coding the data was "thorough, inclusive and comprehensive" and that all themes were "internally coherent, consistent and distinctive" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 269). As this is a reflexive process, I evolved the codes I had used several times, making sure that my codes were neither too broad nor too general, before moving on to theme development.

I started theme development by using my codes to generate initial themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 78), which I did manually again, using the codes I had written

out to physically cluster into themes (see Appendix 11). Once I had done this, I had six themes, however, due to the scope and scale of this thesis, these were refined into the four themes presented in Chapter 4.

3.7.3 Analysis and interpretation

I analysed the data, rather than "just summarised, described or paraphrased" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 269). As the extracts are representative of the data, the analysis matches the wider data, and "tells a convincing and well-organised story", answering the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 269). In order to situate the analysis within the context of my theoretical framework, I made sure to relate the analysis this wherever it was relevant, because although thematic analysis is flexible, it is not atheoretical (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 157). For this, I physically annotated on printed snippets of the transcripts.

3.7.4 Write up

I ensured that "the language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the ontological and epistemological positions of the analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 269). My analysis needed a lot of refinement and I had to make some difficult decisions about which data fragments to prioritise and include in the thesis, and which to omit (at least from the thesis, I aim to write a paper from some of the data I had to exclude).

3.8 Ethics

Choosing to conduct research with students in the school setting presents a particular set of ethical considerations and challenges, because working with participants under the age of 18 years old means that those participants are deemed "vulnerable participants", according the University of Sheffield's (2023) ethics policy. In addition to this, I also used the 2024 guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) to guide my ethical considerations. According to Graham and Powell (2015), there are a number of complexities involved in the positioning of children under the age of 18 in research, namely where researchers

need to make decisions early on in the research about whether they are coming to the research from a "protectionist" focus or a "participatory" focus. In a "protectionist" approach, children are vulnerable participants who require safeguarding; however, in a "participatory" approach, these children under the age of 18 have "competency, agency and ultimately the right to participate" (Graham and Powell, 2015, p. 332).

Although, as a researcher, I am aware of the need to safeguard vulnerable participants, and I am always conscious of my professional duty of care as a teacher to safeguard students who attend my school, I approached my research from a participatory approach, because I believe that students have the competency and agency involved in participating in my study, and also have the right to participate if they want to do so. For this reason, although I had to provide the parents and guardians of my participants with a consent form to sign in order to participate in this study, I also thought that it was important to go beyond the requirements of BERA (2024) and ask participants to sign their own consent form, recognising their agency and choice in this decision.

As Cohen et al. (2018) argue, there are "rarely 'black-and-white' decisions on ethical matters" (p. 111). This meant that throughout the duration of the study I needed to be fully aware of any and all ethical concerns as they arose through the research. Although I had ethical approval from the University of Sheffield, I agreed with Brooks et al.'s (2014) argument that any issues that arose ethically could not be predetermined by an Ethics Committee proposal, highlighting the necessity to be responsive and reflective to any issues that arose, as well as having an awareness that I could not forget about or discard ethical considerations as the project commenced (p. 154). Ethical concerns developed differently to what I expected throughout the course of my data collection phase and it was important to be responsive to these demands, as discussed in chapter 3.12. Graham and Powell (2015) also agree with Brooks et al's assertion, arguing that whilst researchers are expected to comply with some explicit requirements, these more general guidelines are not generally sufficient to deal with the "microethics" that arise in the course of the study (p. 331).

Before research participants can truly consent to participate in a research project, they must be fully informed about what the project entails, allowing them to make

truly voluntary choices and to give truly informed consent about taking part in the study. Cohen et al. (2018) set out a number of guidelines for this information which included:

> An explanation of what the study entails and the purposes for doing the research; a description of any potential harms or risks; a description of any potential benefits; an offer to answer any questions about the research; an explanation of the participants' right to withdraw (p. 122).

Using this information in tandem with the University of Sheffield template document for information sheets and consent forms, I created my own information sheet and consent forms (for parents/guardians, for students and for my institution) complying with these regulations (see Appendices 2-4). It was important to get this right when working with vulnerable participants, as I needed to consider how to provide information to the students in an age-appropriate way which made the information provided accessible. I decided to deliver this information in sessions of five-minutes long, where I was able to visit Year 10 English lessons taking place in the department in order to give all Year 10 students information about the study verbally. I also spoke during a Year 10 assembly and to deliver the messages to the whole year group at once, which supported by both the Headteacher and the Governors, reflects my school's commitment to my work and its alignment with whole-school literacy initiatives. Taking all of this into consideration, and having answered student questions I was satisfied that students were all able to access the information that was being provided to them and to make an informed choice about whether or not to participate.

As discussed previously in my positionality statement in Chapter 1.5, it was imperative to consider my positioning and dual identity as a teacher and researcher, especially in terms of a power differential that I held as a teacher at the school which the participants attended, and as a researcher with the power to present their voices to the research community. BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines discuss this power imbalance and advise researchers to ensure that their role as researcher is made "very explicit" (p. 13). I did this by making explicit my exclusion criteria, excluding any of my current GCSE students from being recruited to the study to mitigate any concerns from any stakeholders about students deciding to take part in the study

due to a mistaken belief that participation in the study would afford them any hidden benefit or preferential treatment to them, or their grades, in exchange for their cooperation and participation in the study. I also made the role of researcher really clear during interviews and workshops. When interviewing participants or conducting workshops, I made a point of taking off my work lanyard and asking students to address me by my first name. This verbal and visual divide between myself as the teacher, and myself as the researcher/artist served as a reminder about the discrete nature of my researcher identity, and how my status as a teacher in school was not the primary focus of the social interaction. However, calling me by my first name was something participants found hard, with some defaulting to calling me "ma'am" (the default address for female staff at our school) at all times, even though I made it clear that they did not have to. Achirri (2020) writes about the conflict between identities as teacher and as researcher, where different aspects of those identities can dominate at different times, such as in the case of her participant who found his growing researcher identity "engulfed his teacher identity" (p. 1701). Similarly, Thornton (2013) found that identities can be "threatened" or "in conflict" with each other (p. 116).

The right to withdraw from research is made clear in BERA guidelines, which state "Researchers should recognise the right of all participants to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time, and participants should be informed of this right" (2018, p. 18). All participants were aware of their right to withdraw from the research from the onset of recruitment and for the whole duration of the study after this. In fact, as discussed in more detail in chapter 3.12, one participant who had consented to the study withdrew during the first interview, testament to the fact that my withdrawal processes and ethical considerations worked. According to Bradbury (2010), reflective practice involves thoughtfully evaluating experiences to improve future action (p. 15), while reflexive practice goes further by critically examining one's own assumptions, values, and positionality within the research process (p. 20). I have chosen to engage in both to ensure that I not only learn from practice but also remain critically aware of how my identity and perspectives shape the design, interpretation and outcomes of my research.

A consideration I made ethically surrounding the use of the method of workshopping was how students might feel when being asked to share their work. Throughout the

project I endeavoured to create a low-anxiety environment so that all participants felt safe to share their writing. I sought to improve students' confidence and self-esteem through the workshops, and as Hart (1992) argues, I assert that "self-esteem is perhaps the most critical variable affecting a child's successful participation with others in a project" (p. 31). In these workshops, I wanted students to feel that they could experiment without fear of judgement, marking, or being told that they're doing something "wrong". I was much more interested in how students felt and identified in terms of their writing and their creativity more generally, as well as how participants experienced the process of becoming a writer, than any piece of writing produced to adhere to pre-defined success criteria that would be treated like a product.

One area in which I was moderately unsuccessful ethically was in the recruiting of participants that largely represented our cohort. I believe that socially disadvantaged, working class voices were somewhat lost in the recruitment process, therefore I do not believe that the students who volunteered to take part in this project are fully representative of our school cohort. However, the programme was voluntary, and although I spoke to many eligible students who had expressed an interest, none consented to take part. In spite of this, the participant group was diverse in other ways (racially and in terms of sexuality), and due to the ongoing cost of living crisis it is important to recognise that even if students do not qualify for Pupil Premium or Free School Meals, they may be struggling in other ways not formally recorded, measured or recognised in school settings.

In terms of anonymity, students chose a pseudonym that they would be referred to throughout interview transcript data. Heaton (2022) argues that the use of pseudonyms "has the advantage of allowing data to be de-identified without being de-personalized" (p. 127). In a study where it was important to me to foreground the voices of my students, this was an important consideration. Using pseudonyms meant that students had more ownership over their data, as did the process of member checking the students participated in after the interview data was transcribed. Although Heaton (2022) argues that it is usually the researchers that assign the pseudonyms to students (p. 128), I asked students to choose their own pseudonyms, in order to maximise student agency. Where students referred to their work, teachers or peers outside of the study, in a way that may have made them

identifiable, these utterances have been redacted from interview transcripts, so that if published, students are not made identifiable.

I completed my ethics application via the University of Sheffield portal and received ethical approval from the university in November 2023 (see Appendix 1). At this stage, I sought institutional consent, and started the recruitment process with students.

3.9 Issues arising during the data collection phase

Several challenges emerged during the data collection phase. Firstly, two participants withdrew from the study. The first participant arrived at the interview location (the Flexible Learning Zone, which I had selected for its informal, comfortable setting intended to put participants at ease) but became extremely anxious at the prospect of being recorded. Despite approximately 30 minutes of supportive conversation and his non-verbal indication of a desire to participate, he was ultimately unable to engage in the interview. I reminded him of his right to withdraw at any point, and we concluded the session to prioritise his well-being. The second withdrawal involved a participant who was related to another teacher at the school; she explained that her involvement had been encouraged by her relative, but she personally had no interest in creative writing. These withdrawals, while unfortunate, illustrate that the ethical protocols for voluntary participation and withdrawal were effective, and that participant well-being remained a central concern throughout the study.

Another significant issue pertained to the physical setting for the interviews. Although the Flexible Learning Zone was initially selected for its comfort, this choice proved problematic when a colleague repeatedly ignored my booking and refused to vacate the space, compromising both confidentiality and participant comfort. As a result, I conducted subsequent interviews in my own classroom, which, while quieter, was still suboptimal due to ongoing construction work in the school (as outlined in Chapter 1.5). Intermittent building noise occasionally disrupted the audio recordings, complicating the transcription process. It also undermined another reason for choosing the Flexible Learning Zone rather than a classroom: I did not want students to associate our time together with lessons.

3.10 Reflections: strengths of my methodology

My research methodology enabled me to build good relationships with all of my participants. Certainly, if I consider this research design to be ethnographically-centred, then I successfully integrated myself within the group in order to undertake my part in this ethnographic study. I engaged in practices such as sharing in the writing practice with research participants, reading my work aloud to them, sharing the things I liked and the things I did not like in my own work, modelled the process of writing, drafting, and redrafting creative writing work in a way that is not allowed for within the scope of the GCSE English Language curriculum. Kramer and Adams (2017) argue that "the ethnographer should also aim to participate in and observe *natural settings*—contexts in which group life would happen regardless of the ethnographer's presence" (p. 458). In this sense, then, my study is not a close ethnography, because I am the person facilitating the workshops and interviews, which, without me, would not run. However, other decisions I took regarding the ethnographically-oriented nature of my study were more aligned with an ethnography approach, such as the decision to employ an "impressionistic tale" approach, where "first-person voice is still used in order to cultivate an evocative and immediate account of the ethnographer's presence in the group as well as in the production of the text while not losing focus of the group's culture" (p. 460). My presence in the group was significant to this study because it helped me to develop a sense of trust with the participants, who often wanted me to read their work and to give them feedback as a artist, rather than a teacher. This approach meant that I was not a passive observer in the group, but instead an active participant, though there were factors which meant that I was not a true insider (my positionality as a teacher/researcher/artist, for example, and the power dynamic this created).

3.11 Reflections: limitations of my methodology

Every research project has its strengths and limitations. As outlined in the previous section, my methodology had many strengths; however, it also presented some limitations. These were primarily related to how the study was framed and interpreted – for example, whether it was an a/r/tography or an ethnographically-

oriented study – as well as some of the pressures of conducting semi-structured interviews with a group of Year 10 students. This section will discuss some of these limitations, what I did to mitigate these limitations, and the ways in which they may have influenced the study and its findings.

3.11.1 Ethnographically-oriented research

Originally, I had planned this study as an a/r/tographic study following reading of relevant literature in the field (Blaikie, 2020; Irwin, 2013). There are many elements of the a/r/tography approach that I think were important in the conception of this project, such as: the idea of the simultaneous identities of the artist, researcher and teacher, and where this took me before the data collection phase, into an exploration of my own artistry via my participation in the 2023 NaNoWriMo (see Chapter 1.5); the idea that the artist would make art *alongside* the participants; prioritisation of arts-based practice over products. However, when reading more about ethnography and ethnographically-orientated research, I read Kramer and Adam's (2017) definition of the approach that resonated with everything I believed in in terms of my research, reproduced below:

> Ethnography is a qualitative research method in which a researcher – an ethnographer – studies a particular social/cultural group with the aim to better understand it. Ethnography is both a process (e.g., one does ethnography) and a product (e.g., one writes an ethnography). In doing ethnography, an ethnographer actively participates in the group in order to gain an insider's perspective of the group and to have experiences similar to the group members. In writing ethnography, an ethnographer creates an account of the group based on this participation, interviews with group members, and an analysis of group documents and artefacts. (p. 458)

By this definition, then, my research could be considered ethnographic, or at least, ethnographically-orientated. Kramer and Adams (2017) argue that research is ethnographic "[where] a researcher—an ethnographer—studies a particular social/cultural group with the aim to better understand it" (p. 458). In the context of my study, I have studied a group of Year 10 students attending the secondary school at which I work, and the aim of my study is to better understand the literacy practices

of this group of people. Kramer and Adams (2017) go on to assert that "an ethnographer actively participates in the group in order to gain an insider's perspective of the group and to have experiences similar to the group members" (p. 458). As I had intended for the workshops to be a/r/tographic in nature and approached them as a teacher, a researcher and an artist, I actively participated in the group activities, and experienced the group in a similar way to other group members. Furthermore, Kramer and Adams (2017) describe that "In writing ethnography, an ethnographer creates an account of the group based on this participation, interviews with group members, and an analysis of group documents and artefacts." (p. 3). I undertook workshops, in which I actively participated, and then I took field notes to record what was discussed in the workshops immediately after the sessions. Group documents and artefacts produced were the writing portfolios created as part of the arts-based workshops and various other artefacts produced pre-interviews. Lastly, Kramer and Adams (2017) argue that "Ethnography is both a process (e.g., one does ethnography) and a product (e.g., one writes an ethnography)" (p. 458). I argue that my work is ethnographically-oriented through the process of my study, rather than a product.

3.11.2 Limitations of the workshops

In some ways the workshops were not what I envisioned, as student participants did not always want to write independently at the end of the workshops, which they ascribed to enjoying the discussion so much that they did not want to stop talking to focus on writing. As such, they were more discursive spaces, where students could discuss with their peers and I their ideas for creative writing, their thoughts about the theme of the workshop, their thoughts about experimenting in genre and anything to do with writing more generally. The bulk of the writing produced by student participants during this study, then, was completed by them at home. In some ways, I completely agree with this approach. As a writer the majority of the writing that I produce is completed in a distinct and discrete. However, this was not what I envisioned for the workshops, as I thought there would be more of an element of silent writing, so in this way it did not happen as I had imagined when I planned the sessions. I do think that the more discursive and dialogic space that the workshops became were more interesting and beneficial to the participants and for their

developing identities as "writers"; if I had insisted upon silent writing, the workshops may not have become safe, affinity spaces for participants to talk about their experiences of writing in general, and to voice any concerns or worries with an audience of people who would definitely understand. As discussed below, participants want to recreate this space after the end of the study, which shows that they appreciate the space that they have made for themselves.

3.11.3 Interviewing technique

In total, I conducted eighteen interviews with my research participants (see chapter 3.6), as well as two pilot interviews. These pilot interviews with a critical friend informed key refinements to my approach. Based on this feedback, I incorporated additional time at the beginning of each interview to build rapport with participants and provided a more comprehensive overview of the process to enhance student understanding and agency. Although all of the interviews that I conducted were extremely valuable to my research, I believe that my skill as an interviewer increased as the study progressed. In the first round of interviews when looking at the transcripts I reflected that perhaps I had spoken too much during the interviews. This can be attributed to my desire as an interviewer to build a relationship with my research participants. I argue that it is important to build a relationship quickly with participants in order that the participants feel comfortable and able to share their experiences and views that I was using as data, and this view is supported by a growing evidence base around a CHE approach to interviewing, where "**C**onnectivity, **H**umanness and **E**mpathy" are foregrounded (Brown and Danaher, 2019, p. 76, bolded in original). I wanted to make them feel at ease as quickly as possible and it is true that at the beginning perhaps the interviews felt more conversational rather than traditionally semi structured. I think that the age of the participant is a factor in this situation. My participants were 14 to 15 years old and found themselves in a novel situation, i.e. being interviewed for a doctoral study about their literacies and identities in relation to creative writing. They are unaccustomed to being recorded for research purposes, and although they might be used to recording themselves for Instagram or TikTok purposes, in these scenarios they are in control of the recording device. They might feel awkward given the power differential due to my status as an artist, teacher and researcher, and being aware of this, I wanted to ensure that they

felt comfortable to share with me whatever they wanted as part of this study. I would therefore argue that the relationship building that took place with my research participants is a strength of my study.

3.12 Conclusions

In this chapter, I explored my research philosophy, which outlined the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning my study. After this, I discussed my positionality, reflecting on how facets of my identity and my role as a teacher-researcher influenced the selection and application of methodology and methods. The rationale for the research aims and questions was then discussed, leading to an explanation of how I had access to student participants. The data collection phase was detailed next, beginning with the use of semi-structured interviews, the process of transcribing these interviews, the implementation of arts-based workshops, and the collection of artefacts. Subsequently, I outlined how I utilised a thematic analysis approach, and then addressed the ethical considerations that guided the research. I also identified several issues that arose during the data collection phase, reflected on the strengths and limitations of my chosen methodology, and considered the study through an ethnographic lens. In Chapter 4, I present my analysis and discussion of data.

Chapter 4: Analysis and discussion

4.1 Introduction to the analysis chapter

In this chapter, I present my analysis of the data using a thematic analysis approach to semi-structured interview data. In order to conceptualise how the analysis of my data relates to my theoretical framework, I have produced the following diagram, which provides a visual representation of the links between my research and the theory that underpins my findings. This bow tie shape illustrates where the two paradigms of curricular and extracurricular writing meet, and also considers creativity and identity as distinct characteristics of creative writing.

Figure 5, below, is a visual representation of my theoretical framework

Focus of analysis in respect of theoretical framework

Craft – everyday, little-c creativity

Craft – high creativity

Extracurricular writing

Intersection of creativity and identity within the curriculum and outside the curriculum

Gee – identity theory, in particular affinity identity and nature identity

Gee – identity theory, in particular discourse identity and institutional identity

Focus of research questions

Curricular writing

In Table 1, below, I introduce the participants from this study.

Pseudonym	Context
Willow	Willow is a Year 10 student with a strong passion for creative writing. She previously attended a creative writing club I ran. She is a prolific reader, which has contributed to the breadth and depth of her creative expression.
Kiko	Kiko is a Year 10 student who was not known to me prior to the study. She primarily identifies as a poet and demonstrates a particular interest in digital forms of poetry, such as Instapoetry or spoken word poetry on TikTok. She engages regularly with YouTube "creepypasta" content and online gaming communities.
Iggy	Iggy is a Year 10 student whom I met for the first time through this study. He demonstrates a strong interest in politics, which informs his creative work, much of which carries a political dimension. He particularly enjoys crafting dystopian narratives, often drawing inspiration from both video games and real-world events.
Rose	Rose is a student I taught in Year 9. She is conscientious and self-identifies as a perfectionist. Alongside her academic commitments, she is an active participant in sport, particularly netball. However, she has found the transition from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4 challenging, especially in balancing her academic responsibilities with her hobbies. In terms of literary interests, she enjoys reading widely and writing fanfiction.
Mai	Mai is a student I taught in Year 9 who consistently demonstrated imagination and thoughtfulness in her written and classroom work. She has a particular interest in the genres of horror and drama, and she displays a notable strength in characterisation, often creating nuanced and compelling figures in her writing.

Elizabeth	Elizabeth was not known to me prior to the study. She has two principal passions: writing and STEM subjects, which she occasionally integrates through the creation of science fiction. She also engages with fanfiction communities and is highly imaginative, often generating numerous ideas.

4.2 Thematic analysis of interview data – approach

My approach to thematic analysis started by listening to the recordings of my semi-structured interviews, immersing myself in the data. I spent a month transcribing my data using a verbatim approach, then printed it and reread it, transformed into a different text, before summarising and highlighting to identify initial codes, which were then refined and streamlined to the four themes I present in this chapter.

In Table 2, below, I set out the four final themes I decided on, their sub-themes, and a sample of the codes that I used.

Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative codes
Theme 1: Writing in the GCSE English Language curriculum	- Pressures related to the exam - Mental health related to examinations	68 codes, including: confidence affected by negative feedback; aiming for perfection for yourself and the examiner; tensions between what students want to write and what they are told to write; time pressures of balancing the curriculum and writing; academic validation as related to confidence and authorial identity; constant "threat" of the examiner; perfectionism and academic validation; prescribed paths to success; curricular writing mindset; not wanting to commit ideas to paper.
Theme 2: The influences of identity on extracurricular creative writing	- Student identity and academic validation - Cultural identity - Gender identity and sexuality	42 codes, including: Grandparents are influential; using creative writing to challenge the things you can't challenge verbally; gender stereotypes and sisterhood; bisexuality and identity; Chinese heritage and writing

		identity; misogyny and social media; sexism in GCSE set texts; racism in primary school; belonging in British culture; not wanting to share writing with others; reading to understand other people's experiences.
Theme 3: Literacies and multimodalities	- Reading - Multimodal literacies - Fanfiction, fandom and affinity spaces	35 codes, including: Reading as a gateway to writing; choosing topics and writing to impart a message; bilingual identity as a reader and a writer; using technology to assist with the writing process; inspired to write through video games; remembering writing differently after using different media; online discourse as creative writing; going "off grid"; queer relationships in fanfiction; fanfiction as a community.
Theme 4: Creativity and writing	- Curricular writing - Writing outside of the curriculum	63 codes, including: the idea of something being missing from curricular creative writing; process or product; building and

	- The nature of creativity itself	making as creativity; tensions between wanting to express yourself authentically and for the exam; humans as inherently creative beings; on being scientific and creative simultaneously; first memories of extracurricular creative writing; on developing an authentic authorial voice; poetry as catharsis; dreaming and day-dreaming as creative writing inspiration.

Initially, I had too many themes and sub-themes, so as explained in the following sections, I had to prioritise the themes and sub-themes that resonated with the majority of the participants, merging some of the initial themes in order to present as rich and full a picture as possible in the following analysis. The data generated from the interviews was extensive: the transcripts are 144,000 words long and contain a multitude of rich material about different aspects of creative writing and authorial identity. Through transcription and the familiarisation process, I immersed myself in the data, before starting the coding, whereby I was able to systematically reflect on and label interesting parts of the data, which I clustered into themes. However, due to the scope and scale of the thesis it was not possible to explore all of these interesting avenues, and I have prioritised material which answers my research questions. I hope to publish papers exploring this additional data following the completion of my doctorate. Although the data were transcribed using a verbatim method and subsequently coded from these transcripts, the participants' statements presented in the following subchapters have been rendered using intelligent verbatim to enhance clarity and coherence. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018),

"interview quotes should preferably be loyal to the habitual language of an interviewee" (p. 154), because using verbatim quotations may indeed be considered unethical, where it could make participants seem incoherent due to the inherent differences between spoken and written language. I have used **bold** text to highlight participants' emphasis on particular words or phrases, as per the original verbatim transcription. I used member checking with participants to ensure that they were happy with how I had presented their voices.

Over the following sections, I explore each of the four themes in turn, identifying within each subchapter key discussion points, in which I will consider my own interpretations, the literature and my research questions. I will then consider the gap between my theoretical framework and the real life experiences of my participants, and discuss how the theory relates to what participants explored during interviews.

4.3 Theme 1: Writing in the GCSE English Language curriculum

The first theme I will explore is the curriculum, particularly the GCSE English Language curriculum, and its impact on student identity, authorial identity, and mental health. This theme emerged as a shared concern among all participants, serving as a common starting point due to the homogenous content taught across the English department. While some participants identified positive aspects related to the curriculum, particularly in relation to the Spoken Language Endorsement (the part of the GCSE English Language qualification where students are able to select their own topics to write and present a speech on - see chapter 2.6), which allowed them autonomy in selecting speech topics, the curriculum was also frequently linked to anxiety, diminished confidence and concerns about assessment. In my analysis of Theme 1, I prioritised the sub-themes which resonated with most participants, which are as follows:

- Pressures related to the examinations
- Mental health related to examinations

4.3.1 Pressures related to the examinations

Students mentioned anxiety caused by the nature of the qualification, especially around time management, time pressures within the examination itself, writing

something that might appeal to an examiner, and how the qualification affected their mental health and wellbeing. Several students discussed the effect that time spent on the curriculum had on both their curricular and extracurricular writing.

Rose talked about balancing the pressures of the curriculum with her hobbies, stating:

> I see it as pressure with obviously trying to fit in time for sports and creative writing and all of the other stuff I've got to do.

The noun "pressure" seems to be antithetical with the leisure activities being described. Rose sees creative writing and sports as activities that she chooses to do, but perhaps as a kind of vocational activity ("got to do"). Contrastingly, in our third interview, Rose talked about having to take a six-week hiatus from writing due to the time pressures of school, arguing that this was "because I had to focus on a lot more just because I was starting my GCSE subjects and it was a whole new thing for me". Willow agreed with this position, mentioning a difference that she had noticed within herself as she progressed through school, resulting in her feeling less creative. She reported that:

> Since I've started secondary school and gone into Year Eight plus, I've stopped writing so much because it's become less fun. Because we're being told to do it in school, it's kind of become less of a creative, leisure time [activity] […] it's taken away my imagination and creativity […] I don't like that school's kind of taken away what was such a big part of me, so I'm trying to get it back.

Both Willow and Rose express a sense of frustration that they feel less able to engage in extracurricular creative writing due to the pressures of the Key Stage 4 curriculum. Rose's choice to take an extended break from her hobby to ensure that she made a good start to her GCSE qualifications shows her commitment to her studies coming at the expense of her giving up her hobby. This theme is echoed by Willow, for whom this seems to be a phenomenon which has increased over time. Willow speaks of what school has "taken away" from her; namely her "creativity" and "imagination", but concludes hopefully with her desire to regain both aspects of herself. This suggests that creative writing is an important part of who Willow is, or wants to be, and she feels the loss of her enjoyment in creativity keenly. This feeling

about her own creativity and creative writing is a factor which shapes her authorial identity.

Students reported that time management during assessment was a source of stress, reporting that they felt they were not given enough time to write in the exam. Roome and Soan (2019) also found that students "commonly reported" time pressures as a cause of exam stress (p. 300). According to Flitcroft et al. (2017), one potential way of preparing students to minimise the effects of stress related to time pressures is to prepare students for assessment conditions earlier, arguing "a discussion of examination preparation to start in Year 7 […] rather than experience a pressuring step change in messages in Year 10" could be beneficial (p. 13). However, this approach can also be problematic, as this narrows the curriculum at an earlier age, and does not give students the space and time for creative experimentation they are afforded in the KS3 curriculum (see chapter 2.3).

Iggy expressed frustration with the creative writing section of the exam, saying:

> We're being given a set time limit to do something that would - if we were actually in the real world - take ages. You know, people spend years and years doing things like books and paintings, and then we're expected to just write something or make something in such a short time span and it just feels like it's not really real or actually what it would be like.

This raises a key issue – namely that of whether it is the product (for example, a completed short story) or the process (of becoming a writer) - which is valued by schools. This quotation suggests that Iggy feels the focus of the education system is the product, but should be the process, in order to better mirror "reality". Other students were also frustrated by the time pressures imposed on them by the creative writing curriculum. Elizabeth spoke about the initial stress caused by committing to a writing idea quickly, without the opportunity to fully plan and plot her story.

> They give you a task, and you have no idea but there's no room for "but I could do this instead" and "I've got ideas for this"

This links to Craft's (2001) "possibility thinking" as discussed in chapter 2.5.2. One way in which Elizabeth feels that curricular writing is not allowing her to be fully creative is through this time pressure, as it does not give her time to fully think

through different possibilities, which she finds stressful. Stress was also related to the concept of the examiner. This person – unknown to the student – is responsible for marking students' examination scripts, and therefore plays a large role in deciding the grade the student will be given in their qualification. The idea of this person can cause stress, especially in terms of marking a subjective question such as the imaginative writing part of the exam.

Iggy spoke about the concept of the examiner, saying:

> it's weird because you don't **know** them, but you know there is going to be a person who is going to be looking at your work, I don't know how I feel about it, it's just a detachment.

For Iggy, the idea of an unknown audience was odd, possibly due to the power dynamic inherent in the relationship between student and examiner. However, Rose spoke about keeping the examiner in mind during exams, saying that when she knows she is writing for the examiner:

> then I try to make it interesting for the examiner so they like it because obviously they read loads of different creative writing tasks and I don't want them to be bored of mine. In a way, I'm also trying to think about how other candidates would think and then try to add unexpected things to mine if that makes sense […] just because sometimes examiners prefer elements of someone else's story but if I add a bit of everybody's in there then there's something for everyone.

This attempt to please everyone – including, importantly, this faceless examiner – undermines Rose's authorial voice, and affects the authenticity of her work. With no way of knowing what "her" examiner will like or dislike, this broad-spectrum approach could dilute what is uniquely "Rose" about her work. Willow also felt that trying to please the examiner sometimes led to a lack of authenticity in her creative writing, arguing that "a serious person won't like a word like saying the F word or something […] [dialogue] needs some authenticity sometimes". Taboo lexis, such as swearing, can be validly used in creative writing, but not for the purposes of the GCSE English Language exam, where it would go against the guidelines for the use of "Standard English". This is similar to the use of dialect being represented in dialogue within creative writing. As Verhoeven (2022) argues, "popular language ideology, such as

notions about how regional/social variations of English being "incorrect" is pervasive, perhaps because it is seen as "common sense" (p. 246).

Willow, Iggy and Rose share a sense of unease about trying to predict what the examiner would want, and therefore, reward marks for. This unpredictability impacted how students conceptualised the examiner. Mai said that she imagined:

> an old lady with a monocle, she's just sat there, bent over, reading it, doing little ticks and writing stuff in the margin, and she has her own office in the exam board.

Similarly, Willow said:

> I never think of them like an actual normal person […] I got told that examiners are just teachers, I thought they were really important people in **really crisp suits** who are just kind of back there and just sitting on wing-backed chairs and just marking exams… but they're not, they're just normal people.

These comments show not only the imagination of the participants but also how these faceless entities who are the examiners have a mystique about them. Usually, work is marked by the students' own teachers and because students have a relationship with their English teachers, they can choose to write what they think will please them. Both students imagined the examiners as powerful, imagining each examiner to have their own office at the examination board, or to be wearing items of clothing that connote power, highlighting how students conceptualise this power imbalance.

Iggy commented on the difficulties he saw in the process of examiners marking creative writing:

> I think with creative writing it can be quite subjective… the idea of getting a mark for creating something, as well as in art or music, is… I feel like it's hard to grade something based on perspective.

This links to the discussion of assessment in Art and Music in chapter 2.3.1, and suggests a sense of disempowerment which is echoed by the other participants,

including Kiko who expressed her displeasure about this aspect of the GCSE Curriculum, arguing:

> I think it's a bit silly to have a set structure of things you get marks for in creative writing, when creative writing isn't really something that can just be straightforward.

Iggy mentioned the joy of the Spoken Language Endorsement part of the GCSE English Language qualification:

> we were given the just basic task, like a skeleton, and we had to go off to find the information ourselves, put it all together ourselves, decide how to structure it ourselves, which means we had to be creative thinking how to do that and create something.

The freedom of this task particularly appealed to Iggy as it meant he "had to be creative" in terms of the topic that he chose and how he presented the information he chose to speak about. Osborn (2013) argues that teachers can "resist" curriculum pressures and changes, and teachers have always been able to protect their "values, imagination and engagement with pupils, despite the National Curriculum", retaining the ability to "resist pressures to become technicians carrying out the dictates of others" (p. 110). The Spoken Language Endorsement is an excellent opportunity in the curriculum for teachers to enact this form of resistance.

4.3.2 Mental health as related to GCSE examinations

Mental health and exam stress are deeply related issues in young people's lives (Smith et al., 2021). Willow was clear about the effects she perceives that school has on her mental health:

> I don't like how pressurized it is - it **is** stressful - and how it's kind of taken away a little bit of me as well at the same time in general. I mean, I used to enjoy school last year - in Year 9 it was really fun […] but since we've gone into GCSEs, I hate school now, I'm very scared for Year 11 though, because all the pressure that's been put on us, I'm scared of **losing part myself in Year 11** because I don't have room to do hobbies and stuff.

Whilst Willow "used to enjoy school", she now feels a sense of loss in which school has taken part of her identity away, and is scared that it will continue to do so, due to exam pressures and home learning requirements consuming a considerable amount of her time, leaving her none to pursue hobbies and interests which make her feel happy and fulfilled. As a student who is used to doing very well in all her subjects, this pride in her achievements is now being experienced by Willow as pressure and stress to remain at the top, and any failure to do so results in her feeling like she is not doing as well as before. This is supported by Brown and Woods' (2022) argument that a number of young people reported that they "did not enjoy school during their GCSE years" due to a range of curriculum-related reasons such as: the consequences of a lack of achievement; the need to manage simultaneous deadlines as well as wider commitments; potential negative judgment from themselves and others; and feeling that things were spirally out of their control (p. 67). Elwood (2012) also supports this view, asserting that there were "clear tensions as students experience the reality of the qualification" (p. 508), where perhaps the most intense and difficult part of the course is where it culminates in terminal examinations, which could be why Willow is scared of her loss of identity in Year 11. Elwood (2012) borrows powerful words from her participants, explaining that:

> Participants suggested that [examinations] were one of the most 'daunting' things they had to do in school. It was also suggested that examinations 'take over your life' and that 'doing well' was constantly 'hammered' into students. (p. 504).

These findings are consistent with the experiences reported to me by my participants, and suggest that the stress felt by students undertaking GCSE qualifications can impact their identity, and therefore the development of their academic and authorial identities.

Another factor impacting mental health was the COVID-19 pandemic. Kiko talked about how her mental health suffered during this period:

> I was in Year 6 when we went into lockdown until Year 7 and it **ruined** my social ability. During Covid I wouldn't engage much on Teams, I'd do the work as much as I could, but I wouldn't talk to anyone and I barely checked in with

anyone I'd just stay in my room really, and ever since that my mental health
was just all over the place.

This is not an experience that Kiko was alone in, with many students experiencing mental health difficulties as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lots of students globally suffered detrimental effects which impacted their mental health and socialisation skills (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022, pp. 1025-1026).

Mental health struggles have also been a defining part of Willow's life and her authorial identity. Her feelings and experiences with mental health explicitly informed and affected her writing, and helped her to process some of her feelings. Willow is clear about her desire to be "really open" in talking about and writing about her experiences with anxiety:

> I know anxiety is a huge part of me - it's got better but it's still really bad. I
> have no embarrassment talking about my anxiety or past depressions
> and stuff like that and I like to be really open about talking about it and about
> helping people who are going through similar stuff. It really makes me happy
> when I can help people who are going through something similar to what I
> was going through.

By writing about her experiences, Willow can help others going through the same issues she experienced, which motivates her to write. Willow feels "no embarrassment" in talking about her mental health and this kind of honesty is refreshing, and adds a layer of authenticity to her writing, as she is writing about her own lived experiences. Denscombe (2000) argues that though "it actually might be tempting to be dismissive about the amount of stress that is actually experienced by young people […] It is clear that young people experience stress as real and significant." (p. 370). For me, this is the key argument on the topic. Though this was written over two decades ago, and since this was published understanding and awareness about mental health in general has dramatically improved, there are still a significant number of adults who do not understand the crucial point that the exam stress experienced by young people is "real". Denscombe (2000) found that in many cases, the role of teacher was generally seen to be that of "stress amplifier", due to teachers repeating what they perceive as key messages about the importance of exams (p. 365). There is more recognition in the 2020s of the mental health crisis

affecting UK (and international) adolescents. Gunnell et al. (2018), writing in the *British Medical Journal*, describe how the adolescents affected:

> grew up in the age of social media, the great recession (2008), increases in family breakdown, growth of international terrorism, and, in the UK, student debt and predicted gaps in prosperity between them and their parents. Academic pressures at school cause stress, and the UK government has focused on testing in recent years (p. 1).

These, amongst others, are a multitude of reasons that students might be experiencing poor mental health, and understanding and empathy are key tools for educators in this climate. Student wellbeing is an important and relevant discourse in our post-pandemic world (Stiebahl and Lally, 2024), and was a key focus of Theme 1, as was student discussion of the pressures of the curriculum, which can also affect wellbeing.

4.4 Theme 2: Identity

For this theme, I identified a number of different subthemes, which were on wide-ranging interests and identities. Due to the scope and scale of the doctoral thesis, I have chosen only those most pertinent to students' authorial identity, which are as follows:

- Student identity and academic validation
- Cultural identity
- Gender identity and sexuality

4.4.1 Student identity and academic validation

Student identity and what it means to be a "good student" were two central points around which students situated their identity, linking to Gee's (2000) institutional identity theory (see chapter 2.6). Willow spoke of the labels she had been given which helped to form her educational identity: "When I was labelled as a smart, gifted and talented student, then I was more motivated to work harder in school". This is an example of Gee's (2000) discourse identity at play, as the label "gifted and talented"

arose from discourse surrounding Willow's academic ability, which is an identity which she chose to lean into. For Iggy, however:

> education is a means to an end really, I think **learning** separate from education is fun - it's fun to learn how the world works and what's going on around you - but when it's put in the context of education, it quite often just becomes stuff that you just don't want to engage with.

Iggy's sense of frustration with the education system, as opposed to learning itself, is apparent. For him, lots of the curriculum seems divorced from his reality, to the extent that it has become "stuff that you just don't want to engage with", and therefore his engagement with the education system has become something he does in order to live up to his educational potential and reach his goals. In particular, Iggy resents the use of mark schemes, because:

> I think a lot of the time how I feel is that school is really breaking down the activity, rather than trying to build from it because mark schemes, they're teaching you that in life you need to do something in a specific way in order to get validation from others, needing them to say, yeah that's how you do it, that's the right way, **rather than letting you choose your own path to success.**

This view is supported by Goodacre (2023), who argues that "making good progress in GCSE English Language seems to depend less on students' ability to articulate an original and personal response to a text, and more on their capacity to meet the narrow expectations of a mark scheme" (p. 10). For Iggy, choice is important, and is something he feels is being taken from him, as he is guided to do and think things in a prescribed way. As Barrance and Elwood (2018), Mozaffari (2013) and Morris and Sharplin (2013) argue, an alternative method of assessment for creative writing could be beneficial, as discussed in chapter 2.3.1. As a writer, Iggy speaks of having a "dual identity":

> I have a bit of a dual identity. In school I am conscious of marks for my writing rather than just writing for the sake of writing, so it's got less personality to it because it's focused on these goals I have to hit, [where at home it's] probably less, concise because it's no longer looking for someone to approve of it, rather it's just flowing out.

Iggy wants to be seen as a good student and cares deeply about his grades, but simultaneously recognises that this reduces the quality of and "personality" of his writing, which is linked to his authorial identity and his ability to authentically express himself. When his writing is extracurricular, it needs no external validation and it can "[flow] out".

In terms of educational identity, Willow spoke about her dwindling confidence in this area:

> I have been always labelled as the talented, really smart student, but I've been struggling in lessons and I've not been doing as good as I want to and I think I've just become really academically just burnt out. I feel like I'm disappointing teachers and past teachers that thought I'd do really well, I do feel like I'm gonna disappoint parents even though I've had the conversation that's saying as long as I'm trying my best, that's all they can ask for - but I do feel like I'm just not good enough.

Although Willow has "always been labelled as the talented really smart student", with the onset of GCSE study, she noticed a change in the difficulty of lessons ("I've been struggling in lessons"), something she attributes to academic burn out. She also feels a guilt that she is disappointing her "teachers and past teachers". This describes a sense of tension she is experiencing between the label she was assigned (her I-identity – "gifted and talented student") and how she actually feels about herself. For Willow, the application of this label leads to stress (see chapter 4.3.2) and a worry that she is disappointing those who have offered her academic validation previously. Rose describes how she identifies as a "perfectionist", saying: "I feel like I've become more of a perfectionist than before and my books are neater than they ever were". Willow and Rose both describe how perfectionism and the pressure to meet high expectations impact their academic experience, highlighting how internalised labels (however well-intentioned) and perfectionist tendencies can lead to emotional strain and stress, especially during GCSE study.

When the focus is on gaining marks, students can feel the need to aim for perfection, though Rose describes this perfectionism manifesting as extra care taken over presentation of her work. Similarly, Elizabeth writes about the way in which she is

expected to write within the curriculum, where the focus is on gaining marks in the exam:

> They want your work to fit within their parameters. [...] Teachers talk about it like it's **just** creative writing, where they're just like 'oh the module is small and you won't see this again before your GCSEs' and so the writing side is just cast aside - just put in the corner and then - let's go onto **essays!** It's worth 40 marks per writing question and it's like oh my God that's a **lot of marks,** can we please think about it a little more? Because if you just barely know how to do it you'll only get 10 marks out of 40 and that would be **so many marks GONE.**

The use of the pronouns "your" and "their" presents a distance between teachers, examiners and students. This idea of students' creative writing having to "fit within their parameters" links to Goodacre's paper, which narrates an example from his own teaching practice, where students wrote their own poetry. Students had lots of questions about how he, as their teacher, wanted them to write. As Goodacre (2022) asserts, "the nature of such questions perhaps indicates what some of them have come to understand by writing poetry: a formulaic and formal procedure" (p. 120). The constant reminders and referrals back to the Assessment Objectives at GCSE can be a helpful reminder of what examiners are able to award marks for, but equally, they can reinforce a system that devalues students' intrinsic power as storytellers. As Goodacre (2022) argues "Students need to be taken seriously as storytellers" (p. 122). This mindset shift from educators would be transformative and empowering for the students; but currently there is very little room for any deviation from the "state-enforced script" (Goodacre, 2022, p. 122), towards anything more meaningful. As VanDeWeghe (2007) argues, "When teachers disenfranchise appropriate novel ideas or otherwise disapprove of ideas because they are not mainstream, they send messages to students that say creativity is not valued here" (p. 93). This unfortunately happens in GCSE English classrooms, not because of a lack of creativity in teachers, but due to the pressures placed on the curriculum. According to McCallum (2018), who researched teacher perceptions of creativity within the curriculum, teachers believe that "creativity gets squeezed out" of the curriculum (p. 100) by an expanded curriculum and prescriptive exam requirements. However, this phenomenon was observed prior to the 2015 exam reforms, and is not

new, with the NACCCE report (1999), *All Our Futures,* finding that in an analysis of 1000 lessons, there was little creativity required from students, with this attributed to being "partly the fault of an overloaded curriculum which leaves little time for creative thought" (p. 93). This links to Mai, for whom identifying as a good student is easier when she is actually physically present in school. She says:

> In school I have a lot more of a mindset to actually get on and do it, and thinking back to when we were doing creative writing in class, in lessons I actually would be motivated to write and to do it more, whereas at home I have to really be inspired to write about something. If I was at home there are more options of things to do so it's harder to persuade myself to do it, whereas in school I can either write or I can get a detention so…

Thinking specifically about creative writing, Mai is more motivated to write in school and therefore more likely to write in school, due to her student identity and wanting to remain a "good" student ("I can either write or I can get a detention so…"). This trailing sentence indicates that this is not much of a choice for Mai, and possibly also that she finds the implied threat of a sanction or consequence motivating. At home, Mai also enjoys creative writing; however, without a consequence for the non-completion of writing, she more frequently chooses to pursue alternate passions.

Students also discussed the impact of feedback on their authorial identity development as a factor that has the potential to change their attitudes and beliefs about their own writing. Willow is aware that her relationship with negative feedback is not always beneficial:

> I went through a phase of [thinking] maybe I'm not that good at writing, maybe I should just stop [...] but then if it's a good review then it just motivates me to write tonight because I feel like an author […] I have a mindset where one negative comment can define me as a person and define everything I do.

This idea is echoed by Kiko, who talked about the impact of negative creative writing feedback:

> I think in school, and in assessments, I'm always just looking out for approval in what I've done, and so getting my tests back is always the best and the worst thing ever, but I'm not perfect at everything and I'll get things back with

feedback on it of things to improve, and I always take it in the **worst way possible,** and I know it's obviously not the teacher's fault and they're helping me to improve, but I do take it as a personal attack.

Both Kiko and Willow internalise their negative feedback and allow this to negatively impact their authorial identities. For both students, feedback on writing was motivating only when positive: when it was negative, it felt "like a personal attack" and made Willow consider giving up. It can feel uncomfortable to be open and dialogic about your own writing, and because writing *is* inherently personal, it can be hard not to find feedback demotivating, as these participants did. However, in an education system where workload pressures are a large concern (Johnson and Coleman, 2025, pp. 80-83), it could be challenging to implement a systemic change to assessment feedback for creative writing without adding to teacher workload. Elizabeth also finds academic validation to be a motivating force in her student identity, speaking of relying on academic validation "very much":

> I wasn't very good at the comprehension and I wasn't getting the scores I wanted and I remember I got that 46 out of 50 on a comprehension test and I was **oh my God yeah yes yeah** and I still remember it clearly, I remember how it felt, even like today when I get a bad grade, it's not like I don't even pass I **do** pass but it's not a **good enough** pass and I'm just like dammit […] I want to beat my previous best score, other people are other people.

Elizabeth can still clearly remember the feeling of success after improving her SATS comprehension score. The memory of the questions on the test might have faded, but her pride at her "46 out of 50" is evident in that she still recalls the specific mark alongside the positive feelings this mark induced. In addition to this, Elizabeth is constantly in competition with herself, aiming to beat her own previous scores ("I want to beat my previous best score, other people are other people"). This is significant because it shows Elizabeth's agency and her positive, intrinsic attitude towards her own progress.

Mai is proud of her student identity and is validated in this by having been in top sets throughout her secondary school career:

I'm - it's just gonna sound like I'm bragging - so for my entire time in school I've always been all three top sets. I never expect to get the best grades and I never have got the best grade. I always get a very middle and like close to the bottom of the class.

However, despite being proud of this she downplays her achievements ("I'm gonna sound like I'm bragging"/ "I never expect to get the best grade"). Mai speaks of the scrutiny that being at the top of the class can bring:

There's a class where I'm - as soon as it got said that I got the highest grades in the class, all of the popular kids turned around and said my name and everyone was looking at me.

She does not wish to bring attention to herself, as when this has happened previously she felt "everyone was looking at me", which she did not enjoy. As VanDeWeghe (2007) argues, "performance goal messages have the potential to thwart student creativity and effort […] e.g. This is good writing because it's graded A" (p. 92). Students in classes where this is a norm are more likely to have negative associations with creative writing.

However, Elizabeth sometimes feels limited by the curriculum, especially as she is passionate about many different subjects, arguing:

it's like you've got so many ideas. It actually takes a lot - it's difficult to get ideas and if we could take more than three A Levels - because I've already got my plan set out for what I want to do, it's just completely different to English and creative writing […] [Science and creative writing are] so **completely different** but I still **love** both of them.

Elizabeth laments the fact that there is no official route at A-Level to study creative writing, which is a subject she "loves". Elizabeth is faced with decisions to make about her future that potentially can't encapsulate all of her passions ("[Science and creative writing are] so **completely different** but I still **love** both of them").This phenomenon is described by Verhoeven (2022), who argues that GCSE English Language "reinforces the familiar, pernicious idea that good writing is inherently literary" (p. 249), which, coupled with the "repetitive, narrow focus of GCSE English Language means significantly fewer students are taking up English at A-Level" (p.

244). Anecdotally, this is a trend I have also observed, having gone from A-Level class sizes of around seven students, to class sizes of two students, which seems to be a national decline (Roberts, 2024). This focus on STEM subjects, and in particular the perceived value of these subjects in terms of employability, may lead students who strongly identify with being "academic" to prioritise STEM pathways over subjects like English. This choice can be influenced by prevailing stereotypes that portray English degrees as less rigorous or less economically valuable.

4.4.2 Cultural identity

I asked all my participants about how their cultural identity impacted their authorial identity and many did not feel that they had a cultural identity. The following analysis, therefore, is largely taken from Kiko's and Elizabeth's interviews, who spoke about how their cultural and linguistic heritages impacted their identities as writers. Kiko talks about how being half Chinese impacts her cultural identity:

> I am half Chinese and I get involved with the traditions and the beliefs where I can with my mum who isn't Chinese, but I visit my grandparents and I feel like I could spend more time and be more involved in my traditions and culture […] obviously there's the Chinese New Year I'll go to the festivals and parades which are held in London, I have unfortunately gained superstitions as well yeah, I think the number 4 is really unlucky, it's so similar to the word for death in Chinese, the symbol and the pronunciation of it, so in Chinese the words are written and can sound exactly the same except for a pitch.

Culture has had a big impact on Kiko's identity. She is proud of her heritage and speaks enthusiastically of the ways in which she celebrates her culture. Her Chinese grandparents are a key link to her culture, and when she talks of her culture, she speaks of what she has "gained", even when these are seemingly negative attributes, such as her superstitions, which she succinctly explains the origins of, showing her linguistic knowledge in the process. She also speaks of the importance of family in terms of her culture – whether that is through her grandparents or her "mum who isn't Chinese" but still takes part in and encourages her engagement in Chinese traditions and beliefs. As set out in chapter 2.5, Younge (2019) argues that self-identification is vital, arguing that "We should honour self-definition not to

humour the subject but because it is infinitely preferable to allowing anyone to be defined by others." (p. 9). Kiko's cultural heritage is significant to her, and therefore to her authorial identity. She explicitly explains how her racial and cultural identity directly leads into her authorial identity, and how seemingly innocuous writing prompts given to her in school can be interpreted differently to how the teacher may have imagined, depending on student experiences. This links to the research of Lewis Ellison et al, (2020), who argue that Black girls were marginalised in and out of school environments, and recommend that educators "make classrooms more culturally and individually responsive and sustaining, places where they provide culturally diverse students with the tools needed to better understand their identities and foster their own agency along multiple axes of identity." (p. 32). Kiko explains, of her own experiences as a person of colour in school:

> When I write about experiences – I've definitely had different experiences from other people. So if I was asked to write an experience about a time when I was like, I don't know, on a bus I think… I remember as a kid I would deal with racism towards me and, I think I was with my grandfather. And obviously that means I might write about that, when other people might just write about getting the bus.

This could lead, as Kiko asserts, to a different kind of experience on a bus, and her writing therefore might be more likely to have a politically motivated focus which would highlight systemic injustices. This is less likely to be found in most of her peers' work, as they have not experienced the racism that Kiko has, and are more likely to "just write about getting the bus". It is also notable that the example that Kiko uses was a writing prompt set on a bus, where buses have historically been sites of racial exclusion and activism, such as the 1960s Montgomery Bus Boycott in the US and the Bristol Bus Boycott in the UK (Mansour, 2014). Kiko uses these experiences to further her writing. This links to Lewis Ellison et al.'s (2020) research with African-American high school girls, which found that their participants' use of journalling enacted complex, intersectional identities associated with their literacy practices (p. 29).

Relearning and regaining fluency in Cantonese is important for Kiko in terms of her cultural and linguistic heritage:

one issue is that there's a language barrier, because obviously I spoke fluent Cantonese up until I was 6 and I had to move to the Czech Republic for some of mum's work opportunities, and obviously I couldn't see [my grandparents] or speak to them or see them much and when I moved back they didn't bring up learning Cantonese again. I still know and understand quite a lot of it. I'm not too good on speaking or writing, but, you know, I'm getting somewhere, I'm relearning it to the best of my abilities. But other than that I think they've definitely tried a lot to communicate with me the best they can or spend time with me.

Kiko clearly appreciates the effort that her grandparents have made to teach her not only a heritage language – Cantonese – but also the effort they have made to see and spend time with her. Relearning Cantonese is something that Kiko instigated as her grandparents "didn't bring up learning Cantonese again" after she had moved away. This highlights how developing her language skills is a self-motivated decision, something that Kiko wanted, rather than a choice someone else made for her.

For Kiko, seeing people of colour represented in the literature, poetry and media she consumes is really important. She explains "I've got books of poetry, and I think most of them are [written by] women of colour, which is great.". This contrasts with the authors and poets that Kiko studied as part of her GCSE English Literature qualification, where at our school the only women and people of colour pupils study are found in the poetry anthology. It also links to other examples of the representation of girls and women of East Asian heritage, such as Cho Chang from the Harry Potter series, discussed below, who are often written by white authors, with Kiko arguing "I always found it found it funny that Cho Chang was called Cho Chang because that's two last names". Kiko was clearly frustrated with the representation of Chinese girls and women in popular media, referencing the *Harry Potter* character. Even the nomenclature used by the author of the series showed perhaps a lack of research into cultural naming conventions, given that the name is a confused mix of two surnames, from Chinese or possibly Korean etymology (Lowe, 2023). The author has in recent years faced scrutiny for several of her non-white characters due to their names having racist connotations (Lowe, 2023). This said,

the character is still a pervasive example of representation in media. Criticising the lack of depth of Chinese characters in the media, Kiko continued:

> I find it very constant in media where Chinese Asian people are very much just used to be put into stories and then objectified, Cho Chang is just there to be smart and date guys […] I find that there are two distinctive ways, two main ways Chinese females will be - either highly sexualised and put out there, but in a childlike way, or just like smart and nerdy - there's no in between.

This statement highlights Kiko's frustration at the stereotyping of Chinese girls and women, and a rejection of those stereotypes.

Kiko reports feeling annoyed by the way she was treated by her primary school after living abroad in the Czech Republic:

> I'd moved out of England before primary to the Czech Republic and then moved back in Year 1, and this is one really specific thing I can remember. They did not think I could speak, read or write English at all for some reason, even though I was completely fluent in English, they put me in a Phonics class with the Reception children. I remember my teacher's reaction when we did our first spelling test. She was very shocked that I could **actually** write in English. They never asked. I could speak English perfectly fine but they just – put – me in Phonics. My primary school was a bit odd. It was a very small, village primary school – they had a lot of assumptions. I remember they assumed quite a lot actually because they put me in Phonics, obviously, because I had lived in the Czech Republic for a bit […] but they called [my mum] and was like 'was she born in China?'. They very much assumed that I was not good at English and could not speak English for the whole year.

These kinds of events are memorable and have certainly impacted the way in which Kiko perceives the world, which has affected her writing. Her cultural and linguistic heritage has helped to shape her identity, and she actively seeks representation in the media. She has also experienced prejudice and racism, in a way that the other participants did not share with me, which clearly impacts the choice of topics she likes to write about.

Elizabeth also has a distinct linguistic identity. She says:

> so when I was younger I mostly only spoke Spanish, but then things like going to school meant I had to speak English, so now my Spanish is not as good as my English. At home or with my grandparents and family I speak Spanish, but it makes it easier especially at school with other languages, even though I did take Spanish for GCSE, it's just something not to worry about.

For Elizabeth, Spanish is used to speak to her family, but since starting secondary school, it is also something that is used for study. However, she has noticed some incongruence between the Spanish spoken at school and at home:

> [it's] a bit [too easy], yes, they just use different words, so they're asking "what's the word for this?" and I've never heard it in my entire life, and they sometimes use different words and I'm like, why would you use that **very** regional word?

Elizabeth effectively describes two different forms of Spanish: the "official" form taught in UK schools and the "unofficial" Spanish she speaks with her family. She attributes this to regional differences, arguing that these differences can be explained by differences in dialect, but in the moment still questions why a certain word would be used. This idea of two versions of Spanish is mirrored by the two Englishes that students are expected to navigate: using "Standard English" and non-Standard English (see chapter 2.4). Goodacre (2023) argues that "under the guise of rigour and equality, GCSE English is now exclusively assessed through terminal public exams" (p. 9), where there is an emphasis on pupils using Standard English. This, he argues, means that "a clear advantage is handed to those who use Standard English in their daily lives" (Goodacre, 2023, p. 5), which in practice refers to the English middle classes. Cultural identity plays a crucial role in shaping authorial identity, as it influences how individuals perceive and navigate the world. This links to Wheeler and Lindblom's (2005) work on code-switching in the teaching of English, as Elizabeth (as well as all of the other participants, to lesser or greater extents) is here having to navigate "language appropriate to the time, place, audience and communicative purpose" (p. 110). This happens both through the way they are treated by others and through the diverse linguistic and experiential

resources they bring to their writing. This interplay informs the development of their authorial identity.

4.4.3 Gender identity and sexuality

Iggy spoke about how he "didn't define" himself by his gender:

> I don't really hold my gender very highly - not as in not in terms of that I'm ashamed of it and not as though I exclusively think of myself as you know I'm a man. More that I don't really care about it you know […] yeah, I don't think it really defines me.

Whilst he explained that he did not "care" about his gender, Iggy at various points throughout our interviews recognised his privilege as a white, male student, and also spoke about using his platform to champion those who may be oppressed. Iggy talks about the experience of being a teenage boy and hearing a number of sexist and homophobic comments that make him feel uncomfortable, even if he is not always confident to challenge his friends:

> unfortunately it happens quite a lot. You get a lot of the boys saying very homophobic and sexist things. In that situation I make sure not to make them think that's okay. I don't always admittedly, you know, call it out and say, you know, that's not right […] but I always make sure that I, you know, don't laugh at stuff like that. I always give them the right message through body language and stuff - so that you know this is uncomfortable.

This kind of discourse, particularly surrounding rape culture, is discussed by Whitehead (2024), who argues that young people are starting to reject these dominant discourses in schools, and move away from structures that uphold the traditional gender binaries. Similarly, Kiko talked about how she conformed to some gender stereotypes, but that the way she chose to do this was mainly for herself:

> I usually conform to the usual stereotypes, not **all** of them but I think at least close to the stereotypes for females, so I very much like doing make-up and hair and pretty dresses and everything when I was younger I **resented** the

idea of anything feminine, I don't know it was like a little protest or something but I think that now I've kind of gotten used to it

Although she talks about the resentment she felt towards "anything feminine" when she was younger, which she sees now as a kind of "little protest" against society, now Kiko enjoys expressing herself through make-up, clothes and hair, explaining that she finds the process of skincare relaxing. Similarly, Mai describes her gender identity thus:

I am a girl but I do enjoy expressing myself in ways people might not see as typical femininity, not as in I'm a tomboy or anything but sometimes I just won't wanna be very girly, I'm feeling should be a bit more… like today I feel a bit more neutral.

This is a similar idea to the idea of Kiko's "little protest", where Mai wanted to "prove a point" to herself and go up against stereotypes, which she sees as "awful":

you're going to go up against stereotypes even though stereotypes are awful but if you then go against this kind of proving the point I don't know who I'm proving a point to but maybe I'm proving a point to myself.

She foregrounds her enjoyment of "expressing [her]self in ways people might not see as a typical femininity". This is something which I feel influences Mai's authorial identity, as it affects the content and genre of the work she usually chooses to create. Hines (2018) argues that "as awareness of the complexity of gender increases, the notion of gender as fluid has become more prevalent" (p. 62) These expressions of gender described by Kiko and Mai could show the neutral distance that some people have as society in general has an increased awareness of gender and gender performativity. This could be linked to misogyny that girls and women experience. Kiko expresses her frustration at sexism she has experienced:

I feel it is engrained into society sometimes that, oh it really frustrates me because there will be people who are sexist and who aren't aware that they're sexist and I'll tell them you know you shouldn't say that and they'll be like 'really? I didn't know that'.

This frustration is keenly felt by Kiko because the people making the sexist comments claim to be unaware of their own sexism. What is clear is that Kiko feels confident to challenge sexism and to educate those around her (verbally and through her writing) on why such comments are unacceptable, but she feels a sense of exasperation because sexism is "around in culture and engrained to the point where other people do it without thinking". This kind of sexist ideology informs Kiko's poetry, and this experience, whilst negative, has inspired her creatively and become an important part of her authorial identity.

Kiko makes explicitly clear that gender, and her experiences with sexism, are a significant influence on her writing here:

> in terms of my writing, I think it does count as poetry and I write that sort of stuff and I find I gravitate more to writing things about my experiences especially to do with gender and stuff because it's one of the things I find easiest to talk about it, because there's so much with it that's wrong in society.

She wants to write about these themes to counter a wrong she sees in society, even within the English classroom at school:

> I've felt [systemic sexism], in year 9 when we did *Of Mice And Men*, me and one of my other friends, we decided to write an essay on the objectification of Curley's wife, it's stupid, I'm not saying she was a good person but she wasn't even given a **name,** just **nothing,** and she was completely objectified until she died.

This links to the work of the charity End Sexism in School, who argue that there is a large-scale problem with misogyny in the texts chosen for English Literature at KS3 and KS4. Fenn (2022) supports Kiko's views on Curley's wife, arguing:

> It is concerning that a novel depicting a woman in such a misogynistic way is the most popular text at KS3, being taught to pupils at an age when the majority are unlikely to have the intellectual or emotional maturity to understand and critique this misogyny. Why is this novel still featuring so heavily on KS3 curricula when it offers such a problematic view of male and female relationships? Its short length, familiarity amongst teachers and the ease of access to teaching resources probably play a considerable role,

rather than a genuine belief in its appropriateness for the age groups at which it is being taught. (p. 8)

Whilst I enjoy reading and teaching *Of Mice and Men*, this is a novel that I have asked to change from our curriculum, not only due to the misogynistic representation of Curley's wife, but also the racial themes, arguing that there are diverse texts that are better suited to the curriculum. However, the text remains on the curriculum in our school, and in many others across the UK.

Willow also spoke of gender stereotyping that she had experienced:

> people stereotyping you, thinking that you can't do certain things because you're a girl, obviously walking down the road, I've had an old man just stare at me across the street while I was just walking in a jumper before.

These negative experiences have impacted her authorial identity and inform her choice of content in her creative work. Being stereotyped, underestimated and told she is unable to do things because of her gender is certainly an unpleasant experience. In contrast, Willow goes on to talk about the positive relationships between girls and women, speaking of how she feels that girlhood is a collaborative and supportive state:

> I really like that girls usually just have each other's back, like if we saw a girl who was being targeted by an old man or something, obviously we've got help her. I don't know if this is getting too graphic, but if a girl had leaked on her period or something, then we'd go up to her, even if she was a complete stranger.

This is an example of what Gee (2000) might term a discourse-identity – Willow views this aspect of girlhood positively and aspires to be someone who helps other girls and women in this way, as shown through the use of the first-person plural pronoun "we" ("we've got to help her" and "we'd go up to her"). It is clear that Willow sees herself within this collective.

Several other participants also spoke about their sexuality, with one participant discussing in detail how "questioning" their sexuality had impacted their identity:

I've thought about for a couple of years, and I'm just questioning, basically it doesn't matter I'll just like who I like and I don't need a label to like them […] it was just like when you get the questions - what's your sexuality? - and you just **shrug** and they go, 'well, what is it? And I don't know - OK - I don't know - or you have to sit there and explain, 'well, I just like who I like', and then they give you a weird look or something. I've gone from like bisexual to pansexual then omnisexual to like- I **don't know** - it's been a whole ride*.*

This participant has clearly spent time considering their identity in this area and has changed the label they have used to explain their sexuality to others multiple times. This identity is complicated by the participant's parents' disapproval:

[my parents] are very against all that they said some stuff like this time when we were just sitting there and saw something about someone being gay or something on the TV, and I'm sitting there whilst they say stuff and I'm like ugh I'm sitting here listening to that and I like [people of the same gender]. Oh my god. I could not tell them, my friends all know and that's all okay - but no, not family.

The need to conceal aspects of one's identity such as sexuality or gender can significantly shape authorial identity. As highlighted in Theme 4 (see chapter 4.6.1), participants expressed a desire to share their writing with family members; however, when they do not feel safe or comfortable being open about their identities, this can restrict the content they produce. For example, they may avoid writing openly about LGBTQ+ experiences, thereby limiting authentic self-expression in their creative work. This duality of identity is a reality faced by many non-straight people. Rickard (2014) talks about the way in which she faced heteronormative barriers as a teacher at a school she worked at years ago, and wrote an interesting autoethnographic piece where she responded to the situation retrospectively, given what she has learnt and experienced since then. The barriers faced by teachers are likely to be similar to the barriers faced by students, though not identical. She wrote:

Context determined the imagined response of my colleagues. Compassionate and undoubtedly "tolerant" though they may have been, many heterosexual teachers and school principals were simply ignorant of the experiences of

their lesbian and gay colleagues and the multifarious ways even ordinary conversation constrained and silenced us, and by all accounts, still do. (Rickard, 2014, p. 355).

If staff do not feel comfortable in school to be visibly non-heterosexual, for whatever reason, then it is reasonable to expect that students in the same institution will also not feel comfortable to be "out", which adds an extra dimension of secrecy to an already complex identity.

4.5 Theme 3: Literacies and multimodality

The importance of multiple literacies to participants was another key theme in the literature. For this theme, I identified a number of subthemes, some of which I have been unable to include here due to the scope and scale of this thesis. I prioritised the sub-themes which resonated with most participants, which are as follows:

- Reading
- Multimodal literacies
- Fanfiction and fandom

4.5.1 Reading

Lots of the participants identified reading as something that was really important in their development of their own literacies and in establishing their own authorial identities. This stance on the importance of reading is supported by a plethora of literature; one that I think is pivotal to draw on is Freire's (1983) paper "The Importance of the Act of Reading", where Freire reflects on his own reading journey, writing "from adolescence, from young manhood, [towards] a critical understanding of the act of reading took shape in me" (p. 5). "From adolescence", then, readers are building a kind of reading identity; how they read and understand the world. Reading, for many of my participants, was transformational. Leahy et al. (2014) also state that "Reading literature and understanding it is part of being a writer" (p. 16). Personally, this has always been true for me: a love for reading informs my love for writing, and vice versa. For Iggy, the reading he engages in often inspires or informs his own writing:

the last thing I wrote was the beginning of my own dystopian novel which I never picked up again, I forgot about it I guess. I had just read *1984* so it's kind of using that as a template and going off of that, you know, totalitarianism – or that kind of tangent.

This kind of writing activity, where students use examples from the literary canon (such as *1984*) to inform their own writing, is similar to one way that has been observed of teaching creative writing at GCSE, that is, the belief that teaching creative writing can be done by exposure to the literary canon alone. Iggy, in particular, favours dystopian novels because:

I'd say it gives you more perspective a lot of the time. I think dystopia is a great one for perspective, because it takes the smaller injustices that we see and then it amplifies them, and then you can, as you read it, connect this great big version of it to the smaller version in our world, so you can have a new perspective in. It opens your eyes a lot more. With Classics I think looking back in time it actually you see how we're all human. You know, you're from a different century to me but we still have a shared experience at times as well? […] Hmm, I think it links into history doesn't it? Learning about history - you know, imperialism and colonialism, how there's so much poverty around the world, police brutality, systemic injustices, there's people that have to suffer every day. It's just it's not right you know […] well when I am writing something with a message rather than just a story of some random thing for a test […] usually, as I was writing about yesterday, it's like societal issues and stuff like that, because I think that does resonate with me.

Iggy's reading has clearly influenced his world view and beliefs, and he credits reading with giving him a "new perspective". This reading identity, where Iggy reads to receive a "message" or to learn something about a "shared experience", translates to Iggy's writing identity too, where he writes about "societal issues". In this way, Iggy wants his reader to interpret his message, which comes from his own value system.

For Kiko, her love of reading developed over time, when one book changed her perspective on reading:

I used to **hate** reading. With a passion! And eventually I read **one** book and I can't remember what it was called but it was about… I think it was probably

just this really stupid little romcom I read when I was younger. I had a more advanced reading level and I was reading it when I was like, what? 10? 11? But I read it and I was like, this is actually okay. I don't mind reading this. I'll read another one I guess. But then, with things like school, Noughts and Crosses, I absolutely **loved**. To the point where I went out and bought **all** of the books.

The powerful verb "hate", and the addition of the minor sentence "with a passion!", show how strongly negative Kiko initially felt about reading. This information surprised me as Kiko revealed this after speaking at length about her love of stories and storytelling. The contrast between her feelings in the distant past and her feelings now is stark: it is interesting too that it took her exposure to *Noughts and Crosses*, a book written by a woman of colour, at school to change her perspective on reading. This would have happened in Year 9, which is the last opportunity Kiko would have had in statutory education at our school to be exposed to a text written by a woman of colour outside of the poetry anthology. As a person of colour, representation is important to Kiko, as discussed in chapter 4.4.2.

On the other hand, for Willow, books are, and always have been, an important part of her life and her identity:

I have these huge book shelves in my room, just covered with decorations and stuff as well. I have all sorts of genres - I have a dog breed book for some reason, next to a space book, next to romance, next to Harry Potter, and then it goes to Gothic fiction […] my whole life has always revolved around books and reading. When I was in Year Seven, I was reading Little Women and classic Victorian books. I [don't know whether] that's normal or not but it was to me.

This eclecticism is one of the things that Willow enjoys about reading, and in the interviews she spoke about all of the books she had read with equal enthusiasm. Again, as an able reader, Willow was able to access books which might have been designed for people older than her chronological age. It is clear to me that Willow has a fully-formed reading identity.

Kiko also mentioned the judgement that some people receive for being honest in school about their passion for reading:

> I hate the whole idea of making fun of people for something that they enjoy. It's just like **why?** Unless it's like **hurting someone I** don't see why people shouldn't – I don't get it when people make fun of people who like **read?** It's like **what?**

This is clearly an issue that Kiko has witnessed in school, and something that she doesn't understand the logic behind ("It's like **what**?"). This sentiment is shared by Elizabeth, who argues:

> well, a **lot** of people especially people in my year at school are like what **why** would I read outside, or worse **I've never read a book before** like that's something to be proud of, and it's just like well what do you think about when you're sat in your room if not oh that was a really cool story oh and this happened in it - do you just **sit there,** it's just like what?

There seems to be some sort of status, perhaps linked to saving face in school, attached to being vocal about disliking reading, which Elizabeth also sees as an illogical boast. For her, not reading or engaging with stories and storytelling is the choice that she thinks needs scrutiny, as she questions "well what do you think about when you're sat in your room if not - do you just **sit there?".**

4.5.2 Multimodal literacies

Lots of participants spoke of using technology to assist them with their day-to-day writing, citing this as the main way they engaged with writing outside of school. Several students mentioned using either the Notes app, or Google Docs as a medium for their writing.

Kiko described how she started to use the Notes app on her phone during the COVID-19 lockdown:

> [My writing]'ll either be in my Notes or I'll be on my laptop and I'll use Google Docs. When we were in lockdown and on Teams, I used to use the little notebook thingy on that.

Perhaps, for Kiko, like other students globally, this habit started as a distraction from the realities of lockdown (Stoecklin et al., 2021, p. 52; Mesce et al., 2022, p. 6).

Willow experienced a similar scenario during the lockdown, when she also started using electronic media, describing how:

> In lockdown I'd go on my iPad. I made my mum download Google Docs so I could write stories on there and I'd design book covers and the characters and personalities and things and I'd draw pictures, usually.

Although Willow was using Google Docs rather than the Notes app, and an iPad rather than a smartphone, the idea is similar, though Willow took it a step further with the design of "book covers". None of the participants mentioned using any kind of digital storytelling technology, though Rong and Noor (2019) argue that we currently have greater affordances from technology than ever before, but "despite all of the benefits, schools have yet to give their full attention to use of digital storytelling" (p. 118). In 2013, Craft identified that digitisation and marketisation were changing "critical dimensions of childhood and education" (p. 127). Craft (2013) argues for "active engagement by teachers and schools", but this area remains relatively unexplored in 2025, where students are expected to complete pen and paper examinations and assessments (Busby, 2023). This does not mirror the extracurricular experiences of students.

Whereas Kiko and Willow have amassed digital anthologies of their works since lockdown, Elizabeth, however, has only committed some of her ideas to the Notes app:

> I always want to [write]. I've got all the ideas, I just never write them. I never just sit down - yeah, there might be [writing] in a Notes App on one of my devices **somewhere maybe.** But it's just like the ideas never leave the brain otherwise.

The non-committal use of "somewhere maybe" suggests that Elizabeth is engaging in writing in this media in a different way, choosing to record only story ideas rather than full stories themselves.

For Mai, writing using technology can be helpful after a long "day with five writing-heavy […] lessons". However, it isn't something that she thinks is necessarily the best choice of medium: she asserts that "when it's on a screen then it's not as real to me". This, she argues, affects her ability to remember her stories, and claims to be

able to recall stories she wrote by hand in primary school better than those she has typed.

For Rose, the medium she chooses to use varies depending on how she feels at the time:

> I don't normally go for pen and paper **at first** because obviously if I make mistakes in that I have to cross out but then I'll get annoyed and then after restart the whole thing, so typically I'd start writing it either with pencil or type it out and then once I've done that and I know it's okay, I normally would copy that down with pen.

For Rose, this could be a result of her fear of making mistakes and the perfectionism she described in chapter 4.4.1. Interestingly, though, when Rose has chosen to type a story, she "typically" would copy out the typed story on paper with a pen.

Mai spoke about using Pinterest as a tool to find inspiration for her creativity:

> I was scrolling through Pinterest because I knew that a new chapter had dropped of this comic I like, and I was scrolling through Pinterest because there was a bunch of new fanart and I saw a new style and I was like **oh that's quite cute,** because I don't really have an art style because I'm not that good at art, so I tried drawing it and I was like oh that's actually really good, I liked it so I pinned it on my wall and then drew like five more, because I was like hmm oh well this style works and it doesn't feel forced.

Mai engages with online comics, and has also experimented with making her own. This is a similar experience to Willow, who described using TikTok to find inspiration for her writing outside of school:

> I don't know how to say this without sounding like I'm 8 years old or childish - but if I'm scrolling through TikTok or something, and I see a video there - there are videos of these people that film these really cool rock pools and stuff, usually in Cornwall, and it reminds me of mermaids, and I'm like, I really want to write about being a mermaid.

This example highlights Willow's creativity – the video had nothing to do with mermaids, but the setting of a Cornish rock pool alone was enough to inspire her.

Conklin (2021) describes a similar platform, Instagram, as a "cabinet of curiosities" (p. 166), and set students a multimodal writing challenge using Instagram, where students chose posts as writing prompts and used random images and ideas to inspire their writing.

Kiko also describes engaging with TikTok, but in a different way:

> I'll be scrolling on TikTok and a poet reading out their poem will come up and that's one of the first times I'd listened to poetry properly and I don't know – I just **like** poetry, I prefer spoken word poetry over just reading it.

Using this online space to engage with poetry was instrumental in the formation of Kiko's authorial identity, especially in the development of her identity as a poet. Seeing diverse representation of people engaging in poetry was important for Kiko ("most of them are women of colour which is great"). Almond (2021) spoke of her own teaching practice of teaching poetry at GCSE, where she found that students held a lot of misconceptions about what poetry was. An exposure to this in lessons could inspire students to investigate poetry further in their own time; in this study, Almond showed students the spoken word poetry of Kae Tempest – there is a parallel here between Almond's study and Kiko's experiences watching diverse spoken word poetry on TikTok. An affordance of TikTok is that anyone with an account can upload their content and tag it to be found by other users; in this way, it is an excellent medium for sharing poetry because it is not gatekept in the way that the publishing industry often is, due to copyright issues, though during the COVID-19 lockdown some authors gave permission to allow people to share their work on social media.

Another common area in terms of multimodality that the participants engaged in was video games, and many participants spoke of how playing video games inspired them to write. Kiko described how she was inspired by streamers to the extent that she adapted the narrative to write her own story:

> I think I accidentally take a lot of inspiration from things I've already seen. I remember one of my things as a story, I was watching - I think it was lockdown, I was into Minecraft. I was a **huge** Minecraft fan. I would watch streamers and the Dream SMP, like, a roleplaying server, and then I just took that story and wrote it as a story, that was one of the first stories I actually

wrote. And I don't know – it's really bad – but I don't think I've ever come up with an original story idea.

Again, this development of her authorial identity happened during lockdown, and although she mainly writes poetry, inspiration for this short story came directly from the game ("I took that story and wrote it"). This idea of originality and of creative genius links to Craft's (2001) high-C creativity, and to the idea of Romantic creative genius (Macfarlane, 2007). As Fry's protagonist asserts in his novel, *The Liar*:

> An original idea. That can't be too hard. The library must be full of them. (Fry, 1991, p. 54).

In contrast to this, postmodernism values the remixing of texts and intertextuality (see chapter 2.2), which is key in the spheres of fandom and fanfiction, discussed below.

4.5.3 Fanfiction and fandom

Lots of the participants spoke about how their engagement with fandom and fanfiction was an important part of their engagement with multimodal literacies. Mai describes her enjoyment in engaging in fanfiction:

> writing fanfiction, I think the most I've ever written was 4,000 words of an angsty, of an angst fic of an original character […] it's good for character building as well and knowing how like characters like work together […] it's a bit easier as well because you can just like the characters already have a baseline but you can interpret it, because especially in shows you don't see every single moment of that character's life so you can be like, okay, that's between the episodes of this, I think **this** happens.

For Mai, engaging in fanfiction is a hobby where she is able to focus on characterisation and her own interpretations of characters. This builds on her authorial identity, because it means she can play with a pre-established world and figure out "how characters work together". This is similar to Kiko's experiences, for whom engaging with fanfiction is something which has been a part of her authorial identity since primary school:

when I was younger I was a bit of an odd kid and I wrote fanfiction, and I recently found the said fanfiction I wrote when I was what, ten? I decided, you know what, I'm bored and I'm rewriting this, so that was an interesting thing. As a kid I was very much into horror creepypasta stuff, so it's kind of just about that, I looked back at it and I was like **what is this?** It doesn't make any sense whatsoever, but then I feel like it's just triggered this thing because that has then made me want to do my speech on the impact of internet horror on vulnerable children.

In this extract from the transcripts, Kiko talks about the intersections between her curricular and extracurricular writing – her involvement in the Creepypasta fandom and experimentation in the horror genre as a result of this have directly influenced her choice of topic for the Spoken Language Endorsement section of her GCSE English Language. Jenkins et al. (2016) discuss some of the challenges involved in moving towards a curriculum, and indeed a society, that increases the multimodal, participatory approach towards these kinds of literacies. One reason that the curriculum cannot keep up with these literacies is technological, but another reason is social. As Jenkins et al. (2016) argue, "This new culture is porous, meaning that media move from one community to another, often bringing into contact people who have no history of interacting with each other […] there are often serious conflicts that further marginalize some people while increasing the visibility enjoyed by more dominant groups" (p. 17). This "serious conflict" (Jenkins et al., 2016, p. 17) is a risk factor that would need to be taken into account by educators in terms of safeguarding, and is another barrier to more multimodal literacies becoming commonplace in school contexts. Kiko talks about "falling down this rabbit hole" when looking at her old writing, which I think is a sensation familiar to a lot of writers, and could also refer to the single-mindedness experienced by people who engage in fandom. In addition to this, Kiko adds:

I don't think it's very normal for a child who is seven to be into [Creepypasta] but whatever, I found myself into it very much [...] because by then I had registered like oh other kids don't go into this stuff so maybe I don't **talk about it** with them, but I started **writing about it and** I think the fan fiction of whatever it was I wrote, it was a way of being like oh **there's other people**

> **who also like this stuff** and it kinda helped me to express like my interests and so on, without feeling like I was being judged.

Here, Creepypasta refers to a distinct genre of digital storytelling which plays on narrative practices of Web 2.0 chain emails as well as pre-digital, folkloric narrative traditions such as urban legends or ghost stories (Balanzategui, 2019, p. 187). This directly relates to Gee's (2000) work on affinity spaces as the online community that Kiko joined offered her a place where there were finally "other people who also like this stuff", where she could engage in the fandom with no fear of judgement. This was important to her, because as a child she had already "registered" that her peers did not share her interests. This safe space that the fandom offered Kiko was important in helping her to "express" herself, thus contributing to her authorial identity. However, the idea of judgement she describes here, is something which she feels strongly about, as Kiko goes on to talk about how society can look down on fandom and fanfiction because of who partakes in it:

> because I think we stereotype a lot of fanfiction writers who are mostly **young** females, and because of that the art of fanfiction is always looked down upon I think, if we even take fanfiction away from this and think about sports for a second, have you heard about how American football fans have been hating on Taylor Swift because she shows up to the matches because of her boyfriend? I've looked into it and thought about it, and it's like everyone **hates** on people who like Taylor Swift **so much** mostly just because they're young and female, but if you do the same let's say about a football fan here they don't get judged, they can just get on with what they want.

Kiko explains here how people judge or ascribe value to different types of affinity groups – because a group of people filling a stadium to watch football or to attend a Taylor Swift concert are both types of affinity group, united by a common purpose – and how some groups are negatively perceived over others, which, she thinks is due to stereotypes that exist in society about who writes fanfiction ("**young** females"). This is an idea supported by Jenkins (2013), who argues that "sports fans (who are mostly male and who attach great significance to "real" events rather than fictions) enjoy very different status than media fans (who are mostly female and who attach great interest in debased forms of fiction)" (p. 16). Often, young females are unable

to exert any control over the narratives in their favourite fandoms, and writing fanfiction can therefore be a way of regaining agency. Jenkins (2013) argues that although fandom spaces can be largely deemed to be female, "even where the male-centered stories are freely chosen and preferred by women, as certainly appears to be the case within fandom, they must nevertheless be reworked to provide a closer fit to these women's desires […] they can be made into women's narratives." (p. 115). However, Scodari (2003) refutes this, arguing that texts that scholars like Jenkins might perceive to be passive and uncritical, in fact "can be counter-hegemonic if, for instance, it encompasses enthusiasm for a greater diversity of representations of female characters rather than perceiving such characters as threats." (p. 125). I believe that Kiko's vehement rejection here of the stereotypes is counter-hegemonic.

There are a number of papers on slash fanfiction that I draw on here, especially as it relates to Sedgwick's (2003) reparative reading theory (p. 149). Slash fanfiction is queer, as Dhaenens et al. (2008) explain:

> The first slash writers based their stories on Kirk and Spock, Star Trek's main characters, placing an italicised punctuation mark between the two names to indicate the attraction between these two protagonists […] slash is a reaction against the normative construction of male sexuality on screen and against pre-determined stereotypes of gender and sexuality. (p. 343)

Floegel (2020) studied the motivations of slash fanfiction writers. One of Floegel's (2020) participants, Lydia, explains: "Fiction can play a really valuable role in helping people in the queer community sort out what resonates with them" (p. 791). Another of Floegel's (2020) participants, Sandra, describes: "It's one of the biggest parts of slash fanfiction, the biggest benefits, is it takes characters or media pieces that may not have the representation yet and it gives fans creative control over that content" (p. 790).

Sedgwick (1993) argues that a number of factors in society can make queer people feel shame, because of heteronormativity surrounding them in society, arguing that "shame, as opposed to guilt, is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what one is" (p. 12). I argue that this is especially true in young people, who are figuring out their sexuality and possibly experiencing mixed messages from

friends, family and society on what it means to be queer (for example, this links back to chapter 4.4.3 and the participant who could be "out" to their friends, but would have to listen to family members' queerphobic comments, all whilst knowing that they identified in a way that wasn't straight – creating a sense of, if not shame, then certainly confusion.) Sedgwick's (2003) reparative reading then is a way of speaking to this shame in order to find a sense of comfort. Sedgwick (2003) writes:

> The desire of a reparative impulse on the other hand, is additive and accretive. Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self. (p. 149)

In this way, slash fanfiction can be conceptualised as a means for exploring sexuality in a (physically and emotionally) safe way, which can effectively nurture and comfort the queer individual by creating a queer space in which "inadequate and inimical" aspects of heteronormative culture are controlled by them as writers (see chapter 2.5.2).

In her own words, Rose described how "through all of lockdown I did go through a phase where I did write a lot of fanfiction". She describes her *Harry Potter* fanfiction thus:

> I would I typically go for the ones that the author has written about but if I see some sort of like romantic chemistry between a character and I'm reading or watching the film I'm like they'd be good together […] like it's unpopular but like Harry and Hermione […] and yeah, it's definitely another popular one that most people would be like why would you even think that? But my other ship is Draco and Harry, because I'm more into enemies to lovers types of story, they're like my favourite because the tension, like the sexual tension just builds up.

Rose reports enjoying fanfiction with both heterosexual and queer pairings, explaining that other factors (such as sexual tension and romantic chemistry) are more appealing in terms of her choice than the representation of queer identities. In contrast, Elizabeth describes her interactions with fanfiction as sometimes an outlet for frustrations within the fandom, especially with regards to queer representation:

A story that is kind of similar that comes to mind is that I had a kind of big interest in *Monster High*, beforehand when it first came out a lot of the characters were supposed to be gay or lesbian and all that - but it got cut. You could tell there's a lot of people who saw the characters who didn't know but they called it, like that character is a lesbian, they headcanoned it. And I was like, yeah, she was supposed to be and everybody was like **that makes sense!** I've seen this happen with a lot of things actually, I just feel like **why are they so afraid?** Like, come on, actually make it interesting!

Her frustration here at how the LGBTQ+ storylines were cut is palpable, and which she justifies by linking to how other fans felt at the time ("everybody was like that makes sense"). The sense of fear too, ("**why are they so afraid**") is interesting – Elizabeth here picks up on the disparity between the original intentions of the authors to make characters queer, and the representation fans actually got when the show was produced, which Elizabeth told me differed between the marketing of the show and the show itself. Austin (2016) writes about this, describing the ways in which fans interact with the *Monster High* fandom to queer it, perhaps in a similar way to Sedgwick's (2003) reparative reading theory. Perhaps this reluctance was due to market forces, with producers being afraid to include queer characters due to potential backlash from certain sectors of society, in a time when profit is prioritised over art.

Elizabeth engages in fandom by reading fan theories:

that's just reminded me of this one anime I watched, it's a detective anime, but it's now the other way, there's no more episodes of the actual anime and the manga is coming out every month. **Oh my God I need more information**, and I just start reading theorist upon theorist coming up with ideas, [saying things like] oh this guy is going to die because of this this and this, and I'm left like '**Oh my God that makes so much sense!**' But no, it's just a bunch of theories with me sat there like oh that makes sense, or like these two characters have chemistry I never thought about it this way but **yes they do** mostly I read about it online but I do talk to other people about it.

The repetition of "Oh my God" suggests Elizabeth's sense of excitement as she engages in online fandom spaces, and talks to her friends about fandoms they share in real life; however, when it comes to writing her own fanfiction, Elizabeth is more hesitant:

> yeah, I mean, I've thought about [writing fanfiction] and I've searched it up, because it's this one ship, I don't want to say too much about it but it's so extremely popular that most of the fandom ships them together, most people genuinely believe it's canon and hinted, so plainly hinted, and there **are so many fanfics** that my idea has probably been written at least five times.

Again, this idea about originality – or lack thereof – is interesting, especially in the context of fanfiction, where work is necessarily intertextual (Leavenworth, 2015, p. 42). Perhaps, then, there are other reasons why Elizabeth is hesitant to commit to writing down her fanfiction ideas, or even to tell me the name of the ship she likes ("I don't want to say too much"). This could relate to earlier ideas about perfectionism (see chapter 4.4.1) – once realised, an idea may or may not live up to reality. However, in my view, fanfiction is often a safe space for experimentation within nurturing affinity spaces (see chapter 2.5.2). In this section, I have discussed how literacies and multimodality impacts the authorial identity of participants, including discussion of reading habits, multimodal literacy practices, and engagement in fandom, and have shown that these kinds of literacy practices are widespread amongst the participants outside of the school, allowing them to harness creativity and experiment in multimodal ways.

4.6 Theme 4: Creativity and writing

For this theme, I identified a number of various subthemes, largely about students' experiences in other parts of the National Curriculum and the lack of creativity contained within them, some of which I have been unable to include here due to the scope and scale of this thesis. I prioritised the sub-themes which resonated with most participants, which are as follows:

- Curricular writing
- Writing outside of the curriculum
- The nature of creativity itself

4.6.1 Curricular writing

Discussion on creativity in writing started with a discussion of curricular writing, as this was a shared starting point for all participants. Mai explored how developing her writing skills helped her to also develop her authorial voice more generally:

> I enjoy writing a lot, because I'm not very good at talking to people, but I can **write** […] and [writing] gives me that. I'm able to write whatever I want most of the time […] **but** I'm not very confident in it so, especially when I was younger, I'd write something and I remember one of the first stories I wrote, I didn't really like it because I couldn't think of an ending […] I didn't really know how to end the story but I didn't want to wait until I could think of one because I really wanted to show it to my parents and when I **did,** even though I didn't like it, they said they were really **proud** of it and said it was really good, and then they put it up on like the fridge and it made me a lot more confident in my writing, so I started writing more.

This early praise ("then they put it up on the fridge") built Mai's confidence and inspired her to write more. This implies a correlation between the praise and validation that Mai was receiving from an early stage and how this could help her to change her opinion of her own work. This physical prominence given to her work in a shared living space sent a signal to Mai that her work was important and worthy of being shown and seen. This sentiment about the transformative power of validation on early work is also shown by Rose, who said:

> obviously my spelling wasn't the best, but I was really proud of it so the first thing I did was I showed it to my teacher and she read it. She was like 'this is really good, I'm really proud of this', so it made me feel like a lot better about that my writing […] and she told me to put in my bag so I did, and as soon as I like got to my Mum at the gate I was like "Mum, I wrote a story today" and I pulled it out of my bag and showed it to her and honestly I think I saw the biggest smile I've ever seen on her face. She was so happy and she loved it.

Rose valued the memory of how trusted adults reacted to her writing. Clearly, both of these examples are very positive reactions and this is a happy memory. However,

Rose started with a caveat ("obviously my spelling wasn't the best"). Spelling, punctuation and grammar are terms which for Rose, are synonymous with successful creative writing, from this early experience onwards. Perhaps this is due to the emphasis that the curriculum, exam boards and therefore also teachers place on this strand of writing, but for me it is significant that this is how Rose chose to start her memory of early childhood writing. Verhoeven (2022) argues that in the reformed GCSE English Language qualification "Standard English is considered essential and is often reduced to its most visible or recognisable features: spelling, punctuation and grammar (in the prescriptivist sense)" (p. 248). This is also discussed by Crowley (1987) who argues that there is no such thing as an official definition of "Standard English" as discussed in chapter 2.3.1. This is something that has followed Rose into secondary school, with her saying:

> I feel like if I am writing something for myself and not an examiner, then I will be able to express myself properly, and I don't have to worry about the use of Standard English, if I'm writing for myself I can use the words I want to, including swearing, even though I probably shouldn't.

This shows that Rose is still prioritising the use of Standard English, including the use of conventional spelling, punctuation and grammar in her work; and although she relishes the idea of using the words she wants to, "including swearing", even this is qualified by a statement immediately after ("even though I probably shouldn't"). This negation of the modal verb shows that she has internalised the "rules" of creative writing and feels that she should use them to some extent.

As in Theme 1, many of the students mentioned the timings of the exam. For Kiko, this is one of the biggest challenges of curricular writing:

> when I'm writing I spend **days** figuring out how I want things to go and, I'm a perfectionist, so in that 45 minutes I'll keep looking at it and constantly rereading it like, and knowing that I don't like it, but I have to keep writing it because I know I don't have enough time […] when I reread things that I've written in assessments or in exams I reread them and wish I'd taken them in different ways that honestly I liked more, but I'm always so stressed about

trying to get it finished in time that I didn't try to go in any further with it [...] it makes me write things that I've just never thought about before, like I never thought I'd write about. But it makes me write about really **boring** things actually [...] I find that if I'm doing the style that I write in in school at home then I will spend **weeks** developing the separate kind of slightly different world, and I'll get to develop every single character who is in it in separate ways, and then I'll write the main story, but in the 45 minutes I don't have **any time to do that**, and reading it back, because I'm so used to having that extra time, I feel like it's really **hollow.**

For Kiko, the difference between curricular and extracurricular writing is the depth she is able to go into, in terms of world-building, setting and characterisation. The time afforded to her at home ("weeks") is ample for the conscious crafting of her fictional worlds, whereas in curricular writing, the starkness of the 45-minute time limit means that her idea, and ultimately her story, is necessarily less developed. Kiko admits that curricular writing does expand her writing repertoire, ("it makes me write things I've never thought about before"), but that perhaps she did not consider these ideas as she finds them uninteresting. Kiko speaks of the negative emotions associated with curricular creative writing, in particular, feeling stressed and pressured to write something in the time constraints, which she is able to do but sees as "boring" and "hollow" pieces of writing, despite the fact that she receives positive feedback from teachers. These negatively-shaded adjectives, particularly "hollow", imply a lack of depth in the writing Kiko does in school, which is markedly different from the style she writes in at home. Kiko attributes this difference, at least in part, to time, discussing the development of worlds and characters. Equally, for Elizabeth, the time pressure is the main constraint of curricular writing:

it's just a bit more simple as a story, what I write in the exam, whereas [at home] I go **way more in depth** with deeper **plots** and all that, when it's just a story for me because I understand it and I don't need to explain it to anyone else [...] I mean, while I'm writing it for an exam the whole time I think of it from like the other person's perspective but when I'm writing it for myself it's just how I want it to be, whilst when I'm writing for my GCSEs it always comes back to well what would **they** like for me to write, not what would be best for

me. If I get a good idea and it's fine but it's still quite time bound which just makes it stressful, knowing that I've got to form an entire idea in such little amount of time, but equally knowing that it's not going to be at its best in such little time.

For Elizabeth too, the time constraint is the biggest stressor in curricular writing, but in addition to this, the loss of depth in her narratives is also a concern, meaning she cannot "go way more in depth" or develop the "deeper plots" which characterise her story-writing technique outside of school. Again, as in chapter 4.3.1, the idea of writing for the examiner is foregrounded, when Elizabeth argues that "when I'm writing for my GCSEs it always comes back to well what would **they** like for me to write not what would be best for me". Mai echoes Elizabeth's sentiment on this topic and argues that curricular writing is about conforming to an external checklist, explaining "we did creative writing for just a little bit to like, practise, techniques and stuff again and like different ways of writing a story". Writing in this way, in little chunks, where using particular literary techniques in creative writing is the lesson aim, must be quite frustrating for students like Mai, who are used to creating much larger-scale narratives and have already experimented with using the things sometimes prescribed to students, which may or may not be relevant to the piece of writing they wish to create.

Iggy summarises how he feels about creativity in curricular writing and within the education system more generally:

> I'd say school has **killed** all of the creative spark that a lot of people, including myself, **had**, it kind of chips away at you and whittles you down to just 'this is how you do it', it takes away the **fun from being creative**, which **is** fun, if you go into a Reception class they're just all loving it and you know, throwing paint at each other (.) and I think that's probably reduced my enjoyment of writing and how I feel about writing has probably changed because of that, into more of a **task** rather than an activity to enjoy, and outside of school, kind of connected to that, I feel kind of detached from writing and creativity which means that it reinforces that feeling from school of writing being a task just for education and just to **get stuff done.**

The type of creativity that Iggy mentions in his Reception class analogy highlights the fun, transgressive and socioculturally bound nature of the creativity found there, where connection and playfulness between students is at the forefront, and the focus is non-productive because the process of making art is more important to the development of the child than the product. This is what Iggy seems to long for in his curricular writing – a chance to embrace the mess and chaos of the creative process. The powerful verb "killed" and the metaphor of creativity being a tangible chunk, ready to be moulded and honed, being "chipped away" at or "whittled down", show his frustration at the way in which he is being told to write within the education system. His emphasis on the way that creativity should be ("which **is** fun") and his colourful analogy of the Reception class is starkly juxtaposed with his view of the secondary education system, which he sees as an endless list of tasks to be completed. In his view, the way he has been forced to engage in creative writing through school has negatively impacted his own enjoyment from his hobby, causing him to feel "detached from writing and creativity", which he says "reinforces" how he feels about writing, even outside of the curriculum. This, from a talented student who is one of the school's highest attaining pupils and who has actively chosen to participate in this research because of his enjoyment of creative writing in general, is damning – if he is feeling like this, then I would argue that students who do not share Iggy's passion for writing to begin with must experience this "detachment from writing and creativity" to an even greater extent. Iggy continues his critique of the education system, arguing:

> I think that it sometimes just feels like you're being **chipped away at** because you're being forced into this **uniformity** rather than being expressive on your own, and well, I wouldn't like the rest of my life to be like that, like I am in school, where I'm just coming in every day doing what I'm told to do, doing it like I'm told to do it, and doing that for the next five decades of my life, I'd hate that […] like to think that I won't be like that and that I will achieve something with my life, I want to be a politician, I know I am set on that, and I want to make change.

The idea of being "chipped away at" implies a sense of damage being done to an individual, an incremental damage over years within the education system. The verb "forced" also has violent connotations, and supports Iggy's earlier points about how the education system moves away from transgressive, playful and child-led activities into "uniformity". Iggy recognises the need for change and is hopeful that he and others like him will be able to instigate this change. Iggy is hopeful that he will find a career path which will allow him to maintain a sense of integrity and his core identity, in which he will not feel "chipped away at".

4.6.2 Writing outside of the curriculum

Unlike in curricular writing, where students are fed a prescribed diet of curriculum, there is great variation in the type of writing students engaged in outside of the curriculum, possibly because this is led by the students themselves. For Kiko and Mai, writing outside of the curriculum means getting to experiment with other genres, such as poetry. Kiko says:

> I like poetry most because when I write it I can just put words on paper and hope for the best. I just **vomit out** words onto the paper and I can just write. Because with writing stories and that you have to follow somewhat of a format for it. But with poetry I feel like I can just write, like, lines and then fill the gaps in.

This sense of freedom distinguishes writing poetry from the writing that she is doing in school, where she feels mandated to follow a "format", and she feels that she can be more experimental and just 'hope for the best'. As the writing is not being assessed and she knows that she is her main audience, Kiko is able to come back to her poetry when she chooses to, in order to "fill the gaps in". The metaphor "vomit out" suggests a sense of catharsis in Kiko's poetry writing. The words, or perhaps the feelings that these words describe, are in some way toxic, and by expelling them onto the paper, Kiko has been able to purge herself of them, with a somewhat detoxifying effect. It could also suggest the suddenness in the expulsion of these ideas.

For Mai, her curricular study of poetry in GCSE English Literature inspired her to start writing her own poetry. She says:

> I got really into poetry, I mean we were doing poetry in school anyway so I guess it was inspired by the curriculum, but I quite liked it so I went home and experimented with poetry outside of it as well, and I wrote a poem about an insect.

This was interesting, particularly as Mai had indicated in an earlier interview that she found poetry hard to get on with:

> [with] a poem it hasn't got enough description because, there might be like short stanzas, so short stories even though they are little in the little amount that they are, they have to have a lot of information so I think it is all about the like, **visual** side of it in reading and writing, you don't get that in a poem.

Perhaps it was the freedom in being able to experiment with poetry outside of the curriculum which helped Mai's confidence in this experimentation. There is no requirement for students to write poetry within the KS4 curriculum, and therefore no association with the use of any kind of mark scheme that may be carried with students out of school. In fact, a number of poems within the GCSE English Literature poetry anthologies utilise non-Standard English, so this could implicitly suggest to students that deviating from assessment objectives is acceptable when experimenting with poetry. This links to a study carried out by Hall and Thompson (2017) in which they worked with artists to study their pedagogies when teaching school students arts subjects. In their concluding remarks, they write:

> What struck us as we were analysing our data was the extent to which the artists, who were not tied to curriculum frameworks and mandated approaches in the same way that teachers are, were free to view education holistically, to focus on purpose, values and impact that went well beyond passing exams, and doing well in tests. (Hall and Thompson, 2017, p. 72).

This is a sense of freedom - freedom from the confines of the curriculum and expectations of an employer who might have "mandated approaches" that need to be adhered to. This sense of freedom in writing poetry was another code that I identified in the interviews. Kiko spoke about how writing outside of the curriculum was freer because she did not have to worry about it being shown to outside agencies:

> **Outside** is freer, 100% outside, because I also find that there are certain topics that can't be talked about in school without people talking to me asking like are you [okay], because I know once I wrote a poem and I accidentally left it in my English book and then that led to me being reported - well, not reported, but being taken to the Safeguarding lady. I find that in school maybe I shouldn't delve into the deeper topics, because honestly I can't be bothered to go through all that again, and then I end up writing about those topics at home instead, not that there's anything wrong with doing that in school.

Kiko understands the rationale and duty of care that her teachers have for her and why she was "reported" after writing a poem about her mental health, and has experience of going through these channels and being referred to counselling. However, at the same time, she recognises how this knowledge can impact her authenticity as a writer, if she is constantly self-censoring in school. Outside of school, therefore, where she can write about anything she wants to, including those "certain topics that can't be talked about in school", she can be authentic and she therefore chooses to write about these topics at home. This links to Wood's (2016) study that found that "the optimum conditions for creative writing" were a combination of school and independent work (p. 146). Kiko takes aspects of creative writing that she has deliberately practised in school, and can apply them to her writing at home, which may be about another topic. Rose also mentioned the arts-based workshops we did together as a place where she enjoyed writing outside of the curriculum. She says:

> it was probably one of the pieces that I wrote for the workshops, it was the first one we wrote about the creature, I felt **really proud of that** because like could I use more detail but I kind of brought more emotion in because I've

actually had that happen to me, and I just felt really proud of it, because obviously like I've improved my vocabulary over the years and my writing has improved a lot so I'm just really proud of that one.

Rose felt pride in her work, as she was able to bring in "more emotion" and use an event that she has "actually had happen to" her to create an authentic narrative. However, I also notice that she again highlights how she has "improved [her] vocabulary over the years". This is something on which much importance is placed in curricular writing, but I have not provided students with such direct success criteria (such as comments like "use ambitious vocabulary", which are explicitly linked to mark schemes) during the workshops. It is also possible that Rose is telling me something that she thinks I want to hear. As Leahy et al. (2014) argue, "More so than other disciplines, however, creative writing must contend with questions of validity and scholarship" (p. 19). Perhaps Rose has internalised teachers' insistence on using mark schemes in an attempt to make the assessment of creative writing seem more valid.

A lot of the writing that Iggy describes engaging in outside of school could be termed creative non-fiction, as he uses online spaces to explore creative political writing. He says:

> Most of it is just about my personal politics, I guess, and educating other people and being educated by others […] I use Reddit occasionally (.) because I do think it is a good way to talk to people and I think Discord is probably the best for actual conversations because on Reddit it's hard to get a full conversation going. I tend to actually use Discord most when I'm actually talking to people. The majority of the writing I do is going to be conversational or informational so I guess that is how that affects me being a writer in my eyes because I don't really write fiction […] [rhetoric and persuasion] definitely is important. Unfortunately a lot of people are quite closed-minded especially in political circles. I find that people don't want to change their mind… myself included! People can be quite hostile. Especially when the conversations are between people who are ideologically opposed because if it's somebody that you're talking to that refutes your view then you don't want to listen to what

they're gonna say because you think they're completely wrong – including myself – they're the **enemy.**

Reddit and Discord are examples of media used by Iggy to engage in political discourse online. Arifianto and Izzudin (2021) argue that the rise of these digital platforms for learning and discourse could be associated with the pandemic, as it "completely changed almost all educational institutions globally, from face-to-face classrooms into virtual spaces" (p. 179). However, I argue that the pre-pandemic world was already post digital, though the pandemic likely accelerated its development as people found innovative ways to stay connected. Discussion and discourse are important to Iggy and it made sense for him to try to find an online platform to continue his conversations after pandemic restrictions ended. According to Arifianto and Izzudin (2021), "Discord […] is simply a platform comprising of text, voice and video features" (p. 180), and their study showed that Discord, whilst originally intended to be a platform for gamers, "was accepted by students as an alternative learning media" (p. 191). Iggy also reports to have used Reddit, a social media platform, as a means for political discourse. As Tannenbaum (2018) asserts, "the foundational premise of Reddit is relatively simple […] users 'up-vote' or 'down-vote' stories […] in this sense the site allows users to voice their opinions" (p. 167). In this way, it can be argued that Reddit is a democratic space, adding an interesting dynamic to a political discussion. Tannenbaum (2018) contends that Reddit users demonstrate an exceptional level of engagement with contemporary issues and events (p. 170).

Students draw inspiration not only from personal experiences, current affairs and media but also from physical environments, which can evoke emotions, memories, and sensory details that enrich their writing. These locations serve as powerful creative stimuli, such as for Willow, who describes how a change in physical location can bring inspiration:

> We were in the Isle of Wight and we were in this really old castle from like the Tudor times and there was an old king who was very inbred it said, and I was looking around there was like old pieces of his daughters hair, and a courtyard where people would die, and I was literally thinking in my head this is really cool, I want to write [her] […] when we got back into the place where we were

staying in the evening I just wrote

This example clearly shows how Willow conceptualises the world around her, turning experiences she is having in her everyday life into writing inspiration. This links to Goodacre (2022), who writes vividly about his students' use of their own lived experiences in their creative writing in his paper "Hearts, Minds and 'My Hands': Narrating the Literary Sociability of a Creative Writing Lesson" (pp. 118-122). However, for Elizabeth, reading, particularly reading within the fantasy and science-fiction genres, has been the biggest influence on her writing:

> I remember [a story] of a little girl who had what she thought were three imaginary friends when she was younger: a pixie, a hobgoblin, and an elf. But they weren't imaginary and when she gets older she meets them again and then she gets dragged into this fairy war. I've read so many books like that, that just I love that kind of story like fairies and all that folklore […] when it's in my brain, because it's not the fact that I don't like development, they are developed fully it's like a whole book in my brain, like it is a story, a complete story, it's just never written.

Sometimes, the scope of the stories that Elizabeth conceptualises are so nebulous that they are "never written". Lamott (2020) argues that this phenomenon of being hesitant to get started is common, describing a writer struggling to get started for similar reasons to those stated by Elizabeth thus:

> You are desperate to communicate, to edify or entertain, to preserve moments of grace or joy or transcendence, to make real or imagined events come alive. But you cannot will this to happen. It is a matter of persistence and faith and hard work. (p. 18)

In a later chapter, Lamott (2020) argues against perfectionism, urging writers to "Go ahead and make big scrawls and mistakes. [...] Perfectionism is a mean, frozen form of idealism, while messes are the artist's true friend" (Lamott, 2020, p. 27). Nonetheless, this trap of plotting perfectionism and over-careful planning ensnares many writers, regardless of how experienced they are. For Elizabeth, writing is an exploration of who she is:

[The characters in my writing] are just similar to me but not me. They're just **better me**. It's just stuff I've done, and about stuff I don't do, and it's a way of trying out **different ways of being.**

This is a familiar sentiment for many writers, where "writing what you know" is popular advice offered to would-be authors. Certainly, many of my own characters have similar traits and tendencies to me; not to the point of being autobiographical, but there is an appeal of using a character like an avatar with whom writers can explore their own reactions to different circumstances, which I argue supports Craft's (2001) idea of possibility thinking.

4.6.3 The nature of creativity itself

I came to the research with some preconceptions about what students thought about the nature of being an author and being creative: I thought that they would perhaps not identify as being an author because they didn't meet a set of criteria needed to do so; this, after all, is what I had believed previously. I thought that students might not see writing as art. On both counts, I was wrong. Students did not believe that being a writer was bound in the noun: they saw being a writer as something that was bound in the verb, with Elizabeth arguing that:

[A writer is] just someone who writes down their ideas. It doesn't matter whether it's published or not published, or if it's just something in some random notebook, but if they do it then, yeah, **everyone** can be a writer.

Students also mentioned that identifying as a writer was about the enjoyment derived from writing, with Willow summarising that:

honestly I think a writer isn't like a published author or a well-known writer I think a writer's anyone who can pick up a pen or type something and have the creativity and the imagination and the kind of like storyline to piece things together and whoever can create their own piece of writing

I was pleased to be wrong in my misconceptions, which meant that my research was able to develop and look in more depth into the nature of creativity itself. Stone and Hess (2020) found that when surveyed about their perceptions of the nature of creativity, students were likely to agree with two contradicting statements: "people are born creative" and "people can learn to be creative" (p. 372). This highlights the 'multifaceted' aspect of creativity, where multiple truths can exist simultaneously (Stone and Hess, 2020, p. 372). When asked to define creativity, students came up with a variety of definitions that included a vast spectrum of different ideas and activities. Iggy defined creativity thus:

> [Creativity is] innovation, speaking, planning, leadership, art, music, philosophy and science - it's all stuff that takes creativity to be harnessed [...] Planning you have to be able to come up with stuff to form a concise plan, innovation obviously is creative, philosophy, well you've got to have something creative in your head to figure out that stuff, absolutely, and science I was thinking that you need to be creative because in order to discover something you need to first hypothesise and all of that you need to really think about it and come up with ideas.

Iggy's ideas all related back to the creativity needed to problem solve, rather than to create works of art. This links back to Craft's (2001) little c creativity versus high C creativity (see chapter 2.3).

Willow talked about what she liked about her own creativity and spoke in some detail about her own creative process and how she generates ideas for new stories:

> It doesn't take me that long to think of the story, it reminds me of a receipt and tills in supermarkets. I type in the price, press the button and the story comes out. That's what it reminds me of because I get all the information in and then a storyline comes out, and then I just keep thinking of the storyline and then I add little bits in and it just creates a whole story.

The imagery used here by Willow of the till in a supermarket illustrates her creative process well, where her brain is represented by the computer in the till, taking

inspiration from everyday stimuli around her, and giving out storylines so she can create interesting narratives. Elizabeth sees creativity as problem solving, and sometimes uses her creative writing as creative thinking. She talks about using her characters as an avatar for herself:

> it's like exploring what would I do in this situation so I just send my character off to do it and then after I'll realise, hmm **that's what I'd do,** I've imagined a couple of scenarios and they've like, happened because I don't always just daydream about fantasy sometimes I can be like hmmm what would happen if **this** happened and then it happens and I'm like oh great I know what to do now yeah, I've already worked it out […] It's mostly just arguments OK just like with my parents or it's something silly like that and it's just like I think to myself what would happen if this happened **or what about this,** and then when it's happened I've already considered it and I know how it's going to end so…

Elizabeth again demonstrates Craft's (2001) "possibility thinking" in her "what if" and "what about" statements. As a writer, I find this relatable, and a useful technique for writing dialogue, having imaginary arguments with other 'characters' and exploring the different tangential pathways that each line or argument could open up.

Elizabeth also argues that there is difference between the type of creativity that "everyone" possesses, and the type of creativity that "a creative", like an author might have:

> I feel like they take advantage of all the things like humans naturally do like creativity and take advantage of that and use it, whereas not as many everyday people do, they just like to sit back and then be like yeah this was the dream I had last night. Whereas a **writer** would be different, oh that dream I had last night, oh that's so cool let me write it down […] well, I do a lot of daydreaming at different times throughout the day, a lot of daydreaming in class if I'm sat there and I've finished the work I just switch to daydreaming immediately or like I'm bored in the lesson and I switch to daydreaming

immediately, I don't know if it affects the people, the people around me but the way I go throughout my day is affected

This links to Robinson (2006), who argues that schools crush creativity out of children, stating that "we don't grow into creativity, we grow out of it – or rather we get educated out of it". Here, Elizabeth foregrounds the distinction between the general population and "a **writer**" and how engaging with dreams and daydreaming can impact how the writer views their world ("I don't know if it affects the people around me but the way I go throughout my day is affected"). This implies that daydreaming, whilst not a phenomenon experienced only by writers, is viewed differently by writers, with both dreams and daydreams being able to influence story ideas. Again, this is something that I personally relate to, having used ideas from dreams in my writing on more than one occasion. This relates to Freud's (1908) essay, "Creative Writers and Daydreaming", where Freud asserts that, similar to childhood play and adult daydreaming, creative writing is a form of wish or fantasy fulfilment, in which the creative writer wishes to escape an unsatisfactory reality. Townsend (2021) argues that whilst Freud's paper is concerned with the motivations and the "why" of the creative process, her revisiting of Freud's theory focus on the "how" of the creative process (p. 681). This interest in the process, rather than the product, is linked to how Elizabeth conceptualises her authorial identity – for her, it is the process of daydreaming that is linked to her authorial identity, not the things that she writes.

Lots of students also spoke about how they harness their emotions to fuel creativity. Iggy argues that emotion adds depth and meaning to creative writing:

> I think painting is a good analogy for this, it doesn't matter what the artist makes because you can make like a good painting, a great-looking painting, even, but it has no meaning behind it, so it doesn't mean anything. But then you can make a pretty bad looking painting, but it's got all of this emotion in it […] [Picasso's] paintings aren't exactly beautiful works of art, but they have meaning behind them and emotion and a story between them, which makes them valuable […] I'd say when it comes to writing it's kind of the same thing but it's about how a writer needs to put their own emotion and all of that into it

because you know, a massive book full of nothing has not got as much worth as well as a tiny book full of everything.

This idea of emotion being linked to literary merit and artistic value is interesting. I think it is clear that Iggy has a developed sense of the aesthetic, that goes beyond beauty. For Iggy, the "meaning behind" is the important and "valuable" aspect of literature. Perhaps this is because by emoting in this way, authors are expressing some kind of truth which means that the fiction, whilst contrived, is more authentic. However, this is just one view of this issue; through a modernist or postmodernist lens, these ideas of universality and authenticity are not typically seen in this way.

Rose argues that for her, writing is one of the best ways in which she can express emotion:

I sometimes write them just to get stuff that's been stressful, [to get it] off of my chest, because I feel like if I don't tell someone or write it then it's just weighing me down a lot more. As soon as I write it out, it just feels a lot better. Even if I'm not really telling anyone, in a way writing it **is** telling someone, [even] when I'm not showing anyone.

There is evidence that reading and creative writing can be therapeutic. Pandey (2019) writes about a case study where students were asked to use writing to process having survived an earthquake in Gorkha, Nepal – and how the children used this exercise to create rich texts that allowed them to express their feelings (p. 14). Similarly, following a large-scale National Literacy Trust survey, Bonafede et al. (2024), found that "many children and young people described a poetic practice that is deeply personal in nature and identified poetry as a medium to become aware of one's interior life, process and better understand emotional thoughts and experiences" (p. 11). This links to Rose's assertion that her writing identity is motivated by a desire to express herself – it is through her writing habit that she is able to "get stuff […] off [her] chest".

Elizabeth's ideas embody Craft's (2001) "what if" thinking:

I'm a very **what if this happens** kind of person, what if is like half of all my thoughts, and that's also along with my daydreaming like when I've got a full story sometimes I go back and I think **well what if this happened at the beginning** and it would be completely different and I will start all over again and I do that multiple times until I have a new idea, a completely fresh idea and then I do a whole different story.

This links directly to Craft's (2001) theory of 'what if' thinking. Elizabeth is describing an example of everyday, little c creativity here (Craft, 2001). This is significant because outside of school, Elizabeth is afforded the opportunity to explore these lines of thought, in a way in which she may not be able to as part of the curriculum, as students have strict time constraints in the examination, which are often replicated in lessons. The arts-based workshops I ran as part of this study afforded students the opportunity to engage in this "what-if" thinking process, and, if they chose to, also to narrate and share this process with the other participants. These spaces became affinity spaces and student engagement within these physical affinity spaces was very important to my study. Similarly, Evans (2009) discusses the powerful benefits that her arts-based creative writing workshops offered to her participants in her study, which also took place in a socially-deprived area (p. 200). There was no other similar extracurricular offer available to students in my setting.

In the last interview Mai said:

it's definitely made me think a lot more, because I don't really talk about myself, I don't really like to, so this has made me like talking about myself a bit more […] and the sessions, the workshops with the other girls, have been amazing, I'm friends with [Kiko] now, like before I would sometimes talk to her a bit but I'm like **properly** friends with her now.

Kiko also told me about the workshops in our last interview:

[The workshops], yes, I **loved them,** I'm sorry, they're like my favourite thing in the world! I struggled to write quite a bit **during them** but the discussion gave me a lot of ideas and I could write those down and then focus on the

writing writing at home, but I also I love that I got to know the people there, who were also there to write about things, and I just really liked it […] I've spoken to a couple of the others and we **all agree,** we don't really want it to end, not only does it give us the writing aspect but it's also a way to connect us as a group, because now we've got a group chat and everything it's great, [before] I was closer with [Willow] and [Rose] but now I'm **really close** with quite a few of them so that's really nice.

On a personal note, I am delighted that students were able to develop these affinity spaces and personal relationships with other people. This developing closeness between participants was evident throughout the workshops: students started their own WhatsApp group so that they could discuss the sessions and writing, which turned into something that belonged to them (I know the group exists but have never seen it), and was quite separate from the research. I am pleased that these friendships are now part of the legacy of my research. As Gee (2018) argues, "teachers must learn to curate the spaces available on the internet and help students find ones that will serve their needs" (p. 12), as by embracing these kinds of affinity spaces within the curriculum, teachers can harness the passionate communities that affinity spaces offer writers, and use this to promote writing for pleasure within the classroom as well as outside of it.

4.7 Bridging the gap between theory and experience: a discussion of how my findings interrelate

In this section, I analyse my findings through the lens of my theoretical framework, specifically looking at how first Gee's (2000), and then Craft's (2001), theories can shape how authorial identity is constructed.

4.7.1 Gee's theory of identity as an analytic lens for research in education

Throughout the data, students are seen to identify in multiple ways and to inhabit multiple identities. Gee's theory shaped my theoretical framework, as I thought that this theory would help me to answer the research question, especially in terms of the development of students' authorial identity. Gee (2000) argues that students have different types of identities at play – their nature identities (N-identities), affinity

identities (A-identities), institutional identities (I-identities) and discourse identities (D-identities), as discussed in chapter 2.6. As Gee (2000) states, "when any human being acts and interacts in a given context, others recognise that person as acting and interacting as a certain 'kind of person' or even as several different 'kinds' at once" (p. 99).I was drawn to this theory because it allowed me to examine the relationship between authorial identity and other facets of student identity, as well as how these shifting, developing identities could change in different contexts. Whilst Gee (2000) acknowledges that people also have a "core identity", this is not the focus of the theory as it is used in my theoretical framework: I am interested primarily in student identity as it pertains to students' authorial identity.

There was discussion of student N-identities in chapter 4.4, when aspects such as race, cultural heritage and gender were discussed, and how these aspects affected authorial identity. I analysed I-identities in chapter 4,4, in terms of student identity, and this was linked to D-identity where the discussion of the pressures associated with being a 'good student' were discussed. D-identities were also discussed in terms of identifying as, for example, "a reader" or "a perfectionist". Again, these aspects of identity were useful in conceptualising the formation of authorial identity. A-identities were central to this study, and discussion of these centred around fandom and fanfiction in chapter 4.5, as well as the participants' engagement with the study itself, creating as it did an affinity group of its own in chapter 4.6. Here, the free choice my participants made when consenting to the study was vital: as Gee (2000) asserts,

> It would seem that an affinity group is something that one must actively choose to join. While I could force someone to engage in specific practices, I really cannot coerce anyone into seeing the particular experiences connected to those practices as constitutive (in part) of the "kind of" person they are. (p. 106).

The choice of my participants to engage as fully as they did with my research is central to the creation of the affinity group.

4.7.2 Craft's theory of creativity

High, or Big C, creativity, is the type of creativity that Craft (2001) defines as "the extraordinary creativity of the genius, in any particular field such as science, art, dance, mathematics, etc", which have in common "certain characteristics, such as innovation/novelty, excellence, recognition by the field within which it takes place" (p. 46). This type of creativity is the type that is essentially state-sanctioned, as it is prized and valued by the existing National Curriculum documentation and associated exam board materials (see chapter 2.4). English Literature was clearly prioritised by Gove (2014), the architect of the policy, who claimed to want "every child to be able to go to a state school which excels, which nurtures their talents, which introduces them to the best that has been thought and written". A result of this is that students are continually shown examples from the literary canon, and because of the way that the exam board specifications have become *de facto* curriculum, usually these examples of literary canon are from 19th century texts. Conversely, though, this focus on the literary canon and high creativity means exposure to non-Standard English through that literature; students are asked to both emulate the literary canon and also to write in strictly technically accurate ways, even though, as Crowley (1987) argues, there is no formal or standardised "Standard English". Students have internalised these messages from curriculum makers, as seen in the way they adapt their work for examiners (chapter 4.3), and the way in which Rose spoke about her spelling (chapter 4.6). little c creativity, then, is defined as the "resourcefulness and agency of ordinary people, rather than the extraordinary contributions and insights of the few" (Craft, 2001, p. 49). It is characterised by "possibility thinking", where people ask "what if…?" (Craft, 2001, p. 54). Discussion of many aspects of little c creativity is seen throughout this chapter, but most frequently in chapter 4.5 and 4.6: from Elizabeth's explicit use of "what if" questions and the role they play in the formation of both her story ideas and her authorial identity – she calls her possibility thinking "daydreaming" and is clear about the affordances and constraints it offers her authorial identity – to Willow's discussion of how she uses online platforms like TikTok as well as real life stimuli to inspire her creative writing. The participants also demonstrate their little c creativity in the way that they use technology to solve problems and to make writing more accessible.

4.8 Conclusion to the analysis and discussion chapter

In this chapter, I have set out how my theoretical framework informed how I approached the analysis of my data. I have explicitly explained my approach to thematic analysis of the data. After this, I analysed each theme in turn. Both Gee (2000) and Craft's (2001) theories have been instrumental in how I understood the formation of authorial identity, especially as it relates to the formation of a creative, artistic identity like authorial identity. Participants explored how aspects of their identities and their experiences helped to form their attitudes, beliefs and values relating to creative writing. In the next chapter, I answer my research questions, identify my original contribution to knowledge and set out recommendations for policy and practice arising from my research.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I introduced the thesis, outlining the research context, focus, and the aims and questions guiding the study. I situated the research within a contemporary educational context, focusing particularly on creative writing in the English curriculum. I also discussed my positionality, explaining how this informed the study. I concluded the chapter by explaining the significance of my work and provided an overview of the thesis structure.

In Chapter 2, I reviewed key literature relevant to the study, beginning with an introduction to New Literacy Studies and theories of creativity. This chapter explored the place of creative writing within the National Curriculum, and examines how creative writing is practiced outside of the education system, including through multimodality and fanfiction. I addressed authorial identity and authenticity, and concluded the chapter by presenting the theoretical framework underpinning the study.

In Chapter 3, I outlined the research design, including the ontological and epistemological viewpoints underpinning the research. This chapter explained the methods chosen as well as why they were selected, discussing semi-structured interviews, workshops and collection of artefacts. It also set out a rationale for, and approach to, the use of thematic analysis, before addressing ethical considerations and reflecting on both the strengths and limitations of the chosen methods.

In Chapter 4, I presented a thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data, structured around four main themes: writing in the curriculum, identity, literacies and multimodality, and creativity. This chapter explored students' experiences in the context of the existing literature. A final discussion in this chapter integrated findings with theoretical perspectives, particularly those of Gee and Craft.

This chapter, divided into subsections, draws together the various aspects of my doctoral research, in order to answer my research questions and reach some overall conclusions. I start by considering the research questions, looking in particular at how students' experiences inside the National Curriculum and outside of it inform and affect their developing authorial identity. I will consider potential

recommendations for policy and practice, before discussing how my doctoral research has made an original contribution to research, and evaluating the contribution my theoretical framework makes to the field. I will consider the strengths and limitations of my study, reflecting on how I might conduct the research differently if I were to do it again. I will reflect on my written evidence submission to the DfE's consultation on the National Curriculum, situating this contribution within the broader implications of the recent change in government and the DfE's Interim Report (2025). Finally, I will discuss recommendations for future research, a plan for potential dissemination, and an evaluation of my research journey over the course of my doctoral research.

5.2 Addressing the research questions

My research has focused on different aspects of authorial identity in Year 10 students in an English state secondary school. I aimed to investigate how students' experiences of creative writing affected their authorial identities and how students perceived their authorial identity within and outside of the National Curriculum.

Here, I address each research question in turn. My main research question was:

> **How do Year 10 students' experiences of creative writing affect their identities as 'writers'?**

To fully answer this question, I decided to break the question down into two sections: experiences within the National Curriculum (chapter 5.2.1) and outside of it (chapter 5.2.2).

5.2.1 Experiences inside the national curriculum

Students' academic identities are tied to their authorial identities. Generally, all of my participants cared about being (and being seen as) "a good student". They enjoyed receiving praise for their writing. Many students' first experiences and memories of creative writing were centred around examples from primary school, where their teachers (and later, parents) praised them and gave them a sense of academic validation. This is linked to Gee's (2000) ideas about I-identities and D-identities – the participants were assigned a "student" institutional identity by joining the school,

and "earned" a D-identity of being a 'good student' through their attitude to learning, conduct in class and attainment. This importance placed on academic validation was a common theme in the study, whilst it was generally framed as a positive thing, it also sometimes impacted confidence. This focus on the acquisition of praise affected what students were willing to commit to paper and share for marking. This sense of being judged, and the anxiety that arose from the fear of being judged negatively, meant that students were less likely to want to take risks in their writing in school, or to push the boundaries of their creativity, lest this not obtain praise.

Students reported being able to exert a degree of control over this, especially when work was being marked by their class teachers, whose reaction they felt they could anticipate, and would modify their writing to meet these (sometimes unspoken) expectations. Further anxiety arose when it came to the idea of public examinations, due to the concept of the anonymous examiner, which added an unknowable element to the mix. Though most of the students were aware of mark schemes that the examiner would use (certainly by interview 3, when they had progressed through more of the GCSE course), they were not confident that they could write something that the examiner would like, in the time given to them. Students told me that their teachers (in all subjects) often mentioned the concept of the examiner which added to the sense of anxiety for some students. Others imagined what the examiner was like in comical ways and spoke of how they thought these stereotypical examiners might approach their job. However, what was foregrounded was the sense of anxiety that they would not be able to give examiners what they were looking for, which would lead to a bad grade in their GCSE exam, which would affect their confidence and academic identity, ultimately having a detrimental effect on their authorial identity.

The factors above contribute to what students perceive as a lack of creativity in the curriculum in general, not just in subject English. They felt that there were specific ways in which they had to answer a question, or the answer would be wrong, or at least not effective at gaining them marks. This links to my analysis of relevant policy in chapter 2.4, which found that creativity was not foregrounded in the subject English National Curriculum and in fact the terms "creative" or "creativity" were not used in the subject English section whatsoever. Certainly, high-C creativity was being foregrounded here, with students being expected to emulate the examples of

"great literature" from the literary canon that they had been exposed to over their study of English. The emphasis from the policy document about the focus on accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar and vocabulary choice was felt by students, particularly by Rose, who told me that she felt proud of her writing because she had used "good vocabulary". This was at odds with the other things she expressed to me about the nature of her own creativity, but was perhaps something which she had internalised as being important for creative writing. Iggy's quotation, "sometimes it just feels like you're being chipped away at because you're being forced into this uniformity rather than being expressive on your own" succinctly summarises how many students felt that their curricular writing was inauthentic as a result of the prescriptions and proscriptions placed on it, and the emphasis on factors, such as technical accuracy, which whilst they recognised as important, didn't feel reflected their own sense of creativity or authorial identity. This answers the research question by showing that students' authorial identities were shaped by both their experiences within and beyond the national curriculum.

5.2.2 Experiences outside the national curriculum

However, outside of the curriculum, there was a different sense of authorial identity that students experienced. These were often linked to various aspects of their identities – often Gee's (2000) N-identities or D-identities – such as cultural identity, gender identity, sexuality, or identity related to friends and family. Students were inspired by these various aspects of who they were and their lived experiences in their writing. For example, students who had experienced racism were inspired to write about racism, and for many students their experiences related to gender were relevant to their writing, citing the impact of their gender on how audiences perceived their work (for example, how fanfiction is perceived and stereotyped as a female pursuit) and how their experiences directly related to their choice of writing topics.

Lots of students also were engaged in fanfiction and fandoms, being a member of online fandom communities. This links directly to Gee's (2000) A-identities through the use of online and physical affinity spaces, and several participants had plans to engage further in this through attendance at conventions for their fandoms, and through expressive dress and cosplaying. Physical affinity spaces were also

important during this study, largely through student attendance at the arts-based workshops. These workshops became a physical affinity space where we could all (myself included in this ethnographically-oriented research) share a love for writing. There was only one participant who did not regularly attend the sessions: this was Iggy, who could only attend two out of the six sessions, but still wanted to be involved in the interviews and wrote at home. The participants that did attend the workshops reported that they loved the sessions and found them to be a highlight of participation in the research.

In addition to this, students had various ideas about the nature of creativity itself, with all participants defining it in such a way that agreed with Craft's theory of little c creativity, foregrounding an approach centred on problem solving and what-if question posing, reporting creativity in not just writing, but also in nearly every other aspect of life, from DIY to creative dress and make-up to engagement in political discourse.

Students also spoke about accessing and engaging with other types of multimodal literacies. Many reported using video games to create or control a narrative; using TikTok; using Reddit and Discord; engaging with content creators on YouTube; engaging in fandom online. Students often used a mode other than pen and paper to do their creative writing, with some favouring Google Docs and others preferring to use the Notes app on their phone. These students' experiences of engaging with digital media link to Colvert's (2020) work on ludic authorship, which highlights the evolving nature of play in the media age and the pressing need to bridge the gap between students' in-school and out-of-school literacy practices (see chapter 2.5.1).This also links to Rowsell (2025), who argues that "one's sense of belonging is just as crucial in postdigital cultures and spaces because people will generally keep going back to places that accept and reflect them, where they can find themselves aesthetically, consciously and sensorially" (p. 33). This links to Gee's (2000; 2018) ideas about affinity spaces, specifically, online affinity spaces. I argue that my participants find themselves "aesthetically, consciously and sensorially" (Rowsell, 2025, p. 33) in the spaces they described. For example, Iggy's use of Reddit and Discord is an example of conscious belonging, whereas Mai's use of Pinterest is

aesthetic belonging, and perhaps Willow's use of TikTok to search for rock pools as inspiration for her stories is sensorial, due to the audiovisual nature of the platform.

5.2.3 How are students' authorial identities shaped by their experiences of creative writing inside and outside of the English National Curriculum?

My research has found that students' experiences inside and outside of the classroom affect their authorial identities in a number of ways. Students bring to the classroom multiple and simultaneous identities, in accordance with Gee's (2000) theory of identity (including their N-identity, I-identity, A-identity and D-identity) as well as their own experiences, memories and interests. These identities can stack and combine to create complex authorial identities. I argue that there are in fact multiple authorial identities that each individual student has, and that students "code-switch" (see chapter 2.4) between different authorial identities depending on what they are writing. This was shown by the way in which students felt a lack of authenticity in some curricular work, which arose from a sense of feeling that their own voice was lost in favour of prioritising work that they thought that examiners would credit. Being able to switch between styles in this way meant that students received academic validation for their curricular writing, which they enjoyed. However, alongside this came the feeling of being judged for their writing, by their teachers and by their peers, coupled with the feeling of threat from the exam, and how this related to their marks and grades, which was not a factor experienced outside of school, where they were the main driver of their own work.

Although students largely preferred the sense of agency their extracurricular authorial identity offered and felt that their extracurricular writing was generally more authentic, it was evident that some students were hesitant about sharing their writing with their friends or family outside of their affinity spaces. They did not always see themselves as writers with valid voices who deserved to be heard, and many were reluctant to share work in case the other party didn't enjoy or "get" the work and the ideas it contained. Perhaps this fear of negative feedback and the associated need for academic or writing validation comes from the curriculum. Therefore, creating a workshop space like the one in this study I felt went some way towards changing this

reluctance. As part of this group, students formed a WhatsApp group, initially created to share dates of next meetings and so on, which evolved into a space where they could discuss writing, and eventually became a friendship group. The creation of this affinity space for my participants is one of the most joyful parts of my doctoral study. I hope that they will continue the WhatsApp group as a space for sharing writing, and their friendships, for many years to come. Gee (2018) asserts that "Teaching and learning are not confined to one site or person; they are distributed across many locations, people and practices" (p. 11), and I believe that my research supports this view.

In addition to the use of WhatsApp, students use other online and multimodal platforms to write, plan and share their work in a way not recognised in school. These include, but are not limited to: Reddit, Discord, YouTube, AO3, TikTok and Instagram. Some students shared with me the works they had written with pen and paper in workshops to use as the artefacts in Appendix 9, but others also sent me digital examples. Students also spoke about being interested in using TikTok, for example, to create videos containing their spoken word poetry, but ultimately not doing it because that would mean sharing it with other people, which they did not want to do. It is important to note, however, that students were engaging with these multimodal literacies, and I think will eventually become participants in them. Fanfiction was another area similar to this, where students do engage in the writing of fanfiction, but do not always share it on fanfiction sites, such as AO3, because like Elizabeth, they don't want to put their writing "out there". This is interesting, as the sharing of this work is done via a fan account, where there is no compulsion to publish anything under your real name.

In summary, this research found that students navigate multiple, shifting authorial identities shaped by their curricular and extracurricular experiences, often balancing a desire for authenticity with the pressures of academic validation, and while they engage meaningfully with multimodal and affinity-space-based writing platforms, their reluctance to share publicly reflects deeper issues of confidence, how they are perceived by others and fear of judgment, which could be rooted in school-based writing cultures.

5.3 Recommendations for policy and practice

While this research is a small-scale qualitative study and therefore not fully generalisable, the insights it offers are nonetheless valuable and hold relevance for wider policy and practice. Based on these findings, I make the following key recommendations. I recommend that there is a review of the policy prioritising the preferential status of "Standard English" within the creative writing section of the exam. This study echoes and aligns with the arguments put forward by Cushing (2020), VanDeWeghe (2007), and Drummond (2018) in advocating for a critical review of the curriculum's prioritisation of "Standard English" (see chapter 2.3.1). This skill is being tested at various other places in the English curriculum, for example in the transactional writing section, where the use of formal English is often much more appropriate, and in the Spoken Language Endorsement, where spoken Standard English is assessed. Removing this requirement for the use of Standard English could add to the authenticity of the works that students produce, and could increase enjoyment and writing for pleasure. In addition to this, I propose that there would be great benefit to students if discourse opened between politicians, educationalists, exam boards and artists, relating to the way that creative writing is assessed at GCSE, to bring this more in line with how others arts-based subjects are assessed, and the potential of resurrecting an A-Level or equivalent qualification in Creative Writing.

In terms of practice, I recommend that educators and institutions allow students the freedom to creatively experiment with non-Standard English in the classroom, especially in terms of the dialogue that students write. Additionally, I would recommend allowing students to experiment with multimodal media in the classroom. Many students are engaging with these multiple literacies outside of the classroom, and harnessing them within the curriculum could strengthen both kinds of practice.

5.4 Original contribution to knowledge

My work offers a contemporary analysis of how Year 10 students experience creative writing, both inside and outside of the curriculum, coupled with an analysis of policy documentation from the Department for Education and exam board releases. I worked with six students on this study, who were all based at the same

comprehensive secondary school, over a period of seven months from January to July 2024, facilitating arts-based workshops and being allowed a deep insight into my participants' lives. This research uncovers some areas where tensions arise in the enactment of creative writing policy in schools, highlights in detail how students are engaging with various multimodal platforms for creative writing purposes and stresses how important creative writing is for students in both curricular and extracurricular aspects of their lives.

This research is unique and an original contribution to knowledge because it draws together curricular and extracurricular writing, using a theoretical framework synthesised from Gee and Craft as a lens through which to view this issue. I argue that the creation of my theoretical framework, drawing on Gee and Craft, is a valuable addition to the field. Though Taylor (2020; 2021) draws on Gee and Craft, to my knowledge, this is the first project to build a critical framework for analysing creative writing. It could be used by other researchers interested in the intersections of policy, creativity and identity in any arts-based subjects, or indeed in any subject.

The development of this theoretical framework arose from my consideration of my own positionality and ontological standpoints as a social constructivist, who believes strongly in the existence of multiple truths and experiences. As a secondary English teacher who came to teaching after having attained a Master's degree in creative writing, and having written several novels, I was surprised to find that a gulf exists between what I considered good practice in the art form and discipline of creative writing, what policy was dictating, and what was actually happening in the secondary school classroom. In this way, the tensions between curricular and extracurricular writing became clear, as students were asked to write in ways they often found inauthentic for the sake of "what the examiner wants" in terms of the use of "Standard English", as described by my participants. This links to Marton and Saljo's (1976) work, which argues that students become strategic about their learning, figuring out how to succeed in examinations, but do not necessarily produce work that would be considered "good" by other criteria (see chapter 2.4). The creation of this theoretical framework, then, which focuses on the areas of tension (i.e. the type of creativity being requested from students – Craft's (2001) high C or little c – and the foregrounding of agency and authenticity through the lens of Gee's (2000) identity theory) allows researchers to focus on these intersections. It would be useful

in further studies into creative writing, wherever policy documents govern what is being experienced by students, as well as in other creative, arts-based subjects at any stage of education.

A gap emerged between participants' accounts in interviews and workshops and what could be fully accommodated within the existing theoretical framework. While the scope and scale of this doctoral project, as agreed with school leadership and governors, necessarily limited the extent to which certain areas could be explored, these constraints also shaped the nature of the study. Access to students was granted largely because of the project's close alignment with the curriculum; it is likely that a study framed purely as arts-based, without a clear curricular connection, would not have been approved. Throughout the data, participants frequently articulated aspects of their developing authorial identities that did not align fully with either Craft's or Gee's theoretical models. Rather than representing a weakness, this misalignment constitutes a key contribution to knowledge, as it highlights the limitations of existing theory and pushes its boundaries in light of empirical evidence.

5.5 Strengths and limitations

This section includes a discussion of what I consider the strengths of my study to be, alongside a discussion of some of the limitations of my research, with a reflection on how I might approach the study differently if I were to repeat this research.

5.5.1 Strengths of my study

My study draws together the policies set out by the Department for Education and the lived experiences of students having the policies enacted on them, through use of a systematic methodology of semi-structured interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. In this way, it champions the voices of those with less power due to their student status and identity. Larger scale studies have been done previously that utilise more quantitative or mixed methods methodologies such as surveys or questionnaires, to find out what kinds of literacy practices students are engaging in (Best, 2023; Bonafede et al., 2023; Clark and Picton, 2023; Cole, 2022; Gilbert et al., 2018; Morrisroe, 2014; Picton and Clark, 2022), but this study foregrounds my participants as individuals and experts on themselves, their identities and their

experiences within the education system and outside of it, adding to a body of literature and contributing to the field by amplifying the voices of participants and foregrounding their experiences with both curricular and extracurricular writing. I was able to do this due to the nature of my positionality as a teacher, researcher and artist. Although at times these simultaneous identities were hard to reconcile with each other, they helped to foster positive relationships with my participants. In many ways, I occupied an insider position. I shared institutional knowledge, interests, and cultural reference points with the students, all of which helped to build rapport. However, as I was not a student myself, my position cannot be described as that of a complete insider. Instead, I moved along the insider-outsider continuum, occupying a fluid and dynamic space I made for myself (Bukamal, 2022; Mason-Bish, 2019).

I was able to develop a good working relationship with participants. We spent six hours as a group for the arts-based workshops, an additional two hours we spent together at break times celebrating our group at the end of each half term, and then the three hours I spent on a one-to-one basis with each participant. This does not factor in the time spent informally chatting to participants, who having regular access to me around school, often caught me in my classroom or around school to talk about writing. I believe that my relationships with participants allowed me to experience the writing workshops alongside them, making my work ethnographically-oriented, where relationships were an important aspect of the study. This idea is supported by Pinnegar and Quiles-Fernández (2018), who argue that relationships with participants influenced their research, asserting that "the quality and depth of relationships mattered in relationship to the quality and depth of our research" (p. 285).

5.5.2 Limitations of my study

This is a small-scale study considering data from six students in one state secondary school. The size of the sample, though within the scope and scale of a doctoral study, means that it is not possible to generalise from the data. The students who participated in my study were exclusively high-attaining 'top set' students, only one of whom was eligible for Pupil Premium. I tried hard at the recruitment stage to target a wider range and variety of students, but I did not have any other uptake. Perhaps this is due to the methodology that I chose, using an arts-based workshop to engage

students in creative writing. Students who do not enjoy creative writing are unlikely to volunteer to give up their time to do extracurricular writing. Further research could examine these tensions using an altered methodology, perhaps solely through the use of interviews or focus groups to obtain the views of a sample of students which more accurately represents the makeup of a "typical" UK classroom in terms of inclusion and diversity. In the eighteen hours of interviews I undertook, I collected a lot of data, which equated to around 144,000 words once transcribed. I conformed here to Wellington's (2015) description of researchers who have a tendency "to over-collect and under-analyse" (p. 133). Although I did thoroughly analyse the distilled elements of the themes I generated from the data, and in this way feel that I was able to do justice to my participants and their voice, it is true that much of the original data is not analysed in this thesis due to the scope and scale of my research. However, this also presents a potential opportunity to publish from my thesis.

5.6 Developments in the education field after the general election in 2024

My research context is situated at the very end of fourteen years of Conservative Party leadership in the UK. However, in July 2024 the Labour Party came to power. It is too early (in October 2025) to predict how the educational landscape might change as a result, and there has as yet been no change to policy that might have affected my research or findings. However, on 25th September 2024, the Department for Education under the new leadership announced a consultation of "young people, parents, employers and education staff, leaders, and experts" as part of the new governments' independent review into the curriculum and assessment systems in the UK (DfE, 2024). This research comes at an opportune time to input into such a review. I submitted feedback to the DfE as part of this consultation. It is possible that changes will be implemented as a result of this review, and although an Interim Report of findings and a writing framework document have been published (Department for Education, 2025a; 2025c), educators are still awaiting a subject by subject review of the National Curriculum, and secondary school specific guidance.

5.7 Recommendations for future research

I suggest three recommendations for future research arising from this study.

Firstly, I recommend inclusion of a wider and more inclusive range of students, including those with special educational needs, those in care, and those from a wider range of class and socio-economic backgrounds. As identified in my limitations, I think that utilising arts-based workshops – whilst the focus of this study – may have unintentionally excluded students who did not identify as "writers". There is further work to be done in how all students perceive themselves as writers within the curriculum, because all students *are* writers within the curriculum. However, additional efforts would be needed to encourage participation from students who do not currently see themselves as writers, helping them to recognise the value and relevance of contributing to such a study.

Secondly, I think there is opportunity for further study pursuing a theme which I could not explore fully within the scope and scale of this doctoral research, concerning student engagement in lesser known multimodal platforms, for example, picking up a thread from Iggy's interviews about the political discourses that he engages in on online forums such as TikTok, Reddit and Discord. In addition to this, another aspect I was unable to explore fully was how students used both traditional fanfiction sharing platforms like AO3 and fanfiction.net, but also used video games for the creation of fan narratives in game, as discussed by Kiko and Elizabeth. This research would contribute to the existing literature on young people's engagement with fanfiction, a prominent aspect of 21st century writing which offers rich, meaningful spaces for young authors to experiment with writing, and therefore warrants greater scholarly attention.

Finally, this research has explored student perceptions and experiences of creative writing inside and outside of the curriculum. I approached the research with my three identities of artist, teacher and researcher; each distinct identity complimentary yet competing with the others for attention and space to exist. There must be other practitioners who inhabit this position in secondary education. A further study could explore attitudes and perceptions of the issue from an artist-teacher or artist-researcher-teacher perspective, returning perhaps to the original a/r/tography approach that I had planned to do, which might work better in a study which is not confined by the limitations of a doctoral thesis.

5.8 Dissemination

I have presented this work at four conferences (in Paris at the European Association of Creative Writing Programs' International Pedagogical Conference in May 2025, in London at the Great Writing International Creative Writing conference in July 2025, at the University of Sussex for the BERA Conference in September 2025, and at the online National Association of Writers in Education Conference in November 2025) and aim to publish some of the findings, particularly around students' feelings and experience of the creative writing found in the National Curriculum, and around student engagement in fandom and fanfiction in developing authorial identity. I have written a book chapter on fanfiction as reparative writing, developed from ideas from this these which is currently under review for publication (Davis-Wright, 2025).

I also met with academics at the National Literacy Trust to discuss future collaboration. I hope this will give me a platform for research dissemination to community stakeholders. In addition to this, and on a local level, as part of my role I have created an English and Literacy Network, which brings together primary and secondary teachers in the local area and I intend to share my findings with them. Additionally, I presented the work to my Headteacher, the Governors, and the wider school community in the school in which I undertook the research.

5.9 Research journey

Throughout the process of my doctorate, I have kept a journal, which when read in its entirety clearly delineates my line of thinking and how this has developed and changed over time (see Appendix 13). It charts the course of my emotions as I traversed a cliff-edge of anxiety and self-doubt when things were not progressing as I wanted, and records a sense of euphoria as the aspects of the thesis started to fall into place.

I have changed and developed irrevocably as a result of my doctoral research. I have gained skills in the planning, management and write up of research. I have learnt how best to approach data collection, what 'counts' as data, and how to interact with participants to put them at ease, recognising their needs through the process. I have immersed myself in ideas, reading and research. I have developed my sense of criticality in a way that sometimes felt uncomfortable, especially in terms

of my engagement with policy. My understanding of my epistemology, positionality and ontology has helped me to know myself and what I bring to the research. Moving towards "doctorateness" is moving through a liminal space, and I have enjoyed the process of "becoming". I have started to let go of perfectionism, but once again, this is a process.

My research has informed my practice as a teacher and as a researcher. It has afforded me opportunities and allowed me entry into spaces full of like-minded people, which has been invaluable. I have presented my study on a local level at whole staff and departmental meetings and training sessions; to my Headteacher and the Governors; and at conferences.

Most importantly, though, it has changed the way I educate. My classroom is a more dialogic and democratic space as a result of my studies and in my view, that can only benefit the students I serve. This research has deepened my commitment to helping students see themselves as authors. I want students to trust in their creativity, to question the limits of assessment criteria and to find their voice in writing that matters to them, not just writing that meets a mark scheme. I want students to develop and navigate their authorial identities and to believe that they are authors. As a result of this study, I am more inspired than ever to help every student to believe that their ideas have value, that creativity is worth nurturing, and that "good" writing is not only what the curriculum measures, but what they feel compelled to create.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Ethics Approval Letter

Katherine Davis-Wright
Registration number: 210121931
School of Education
Programme: Doctorate in Education (EdD)

Dear Katherine

PROJECT TITLE: How do Year 10 students' experiences of creative writing affect their identities as 'writers'?
APPLICATION: Reference Number 056705

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 22/11/2023 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

- University research ethics application form 056705 (form submission date: 20/11/2023); (expected project end date: 01/09/2026).
- Participant information sheet 1128826 version 2 (17/11/2023).
- Participant information sheet 1130310 version 1 (17/11/2023).
- Participant consent form 1128827 version 1 (24/10/2023).
- Participant consent form 1128828 version 1 (24/10/2023).
- Participant consent form 1128829 version 1 (24/10/2023).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

James Bradbury
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

- The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/research-services/ethics-integrity/policy
- The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf
- The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.
- The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.
- The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

Appendix 2 – Example of project information sheet

The University Of Sheffield.

What makes a writer? Research Project: Information Sheet

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for considering participating in my research project.

The project

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether to or not to participate, it is important for you fully understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss with others (such as your adults at home). Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you would like to take part. Thank you for reading this.

The project aims to find out what Year 10 students experiences, attitudes and beliefs towards creative writing are. Now that you are in Year 10, I know that you have had experience in creative writing at primary school, and then at secondary school, most recently this year when you started the GCSE creative writing unit in September. I want to find out what you think about these experiences, and also what your experience of creative writing is like outside of lessons. The project will run from January 2024 to July 2024. It is part of the work I need complete to achieve my Doctorate in Education at the University of Sheffield.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to take part in this project because either:

- you have volunteered to take part because you are interested
  or
- your teacher told me that you enjoy creative writing.

I am hoping to recruit between 5 and 10 students to this project.

Deciding whether to take part in the project

It is completely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form, indicating that you give your consent to take part.
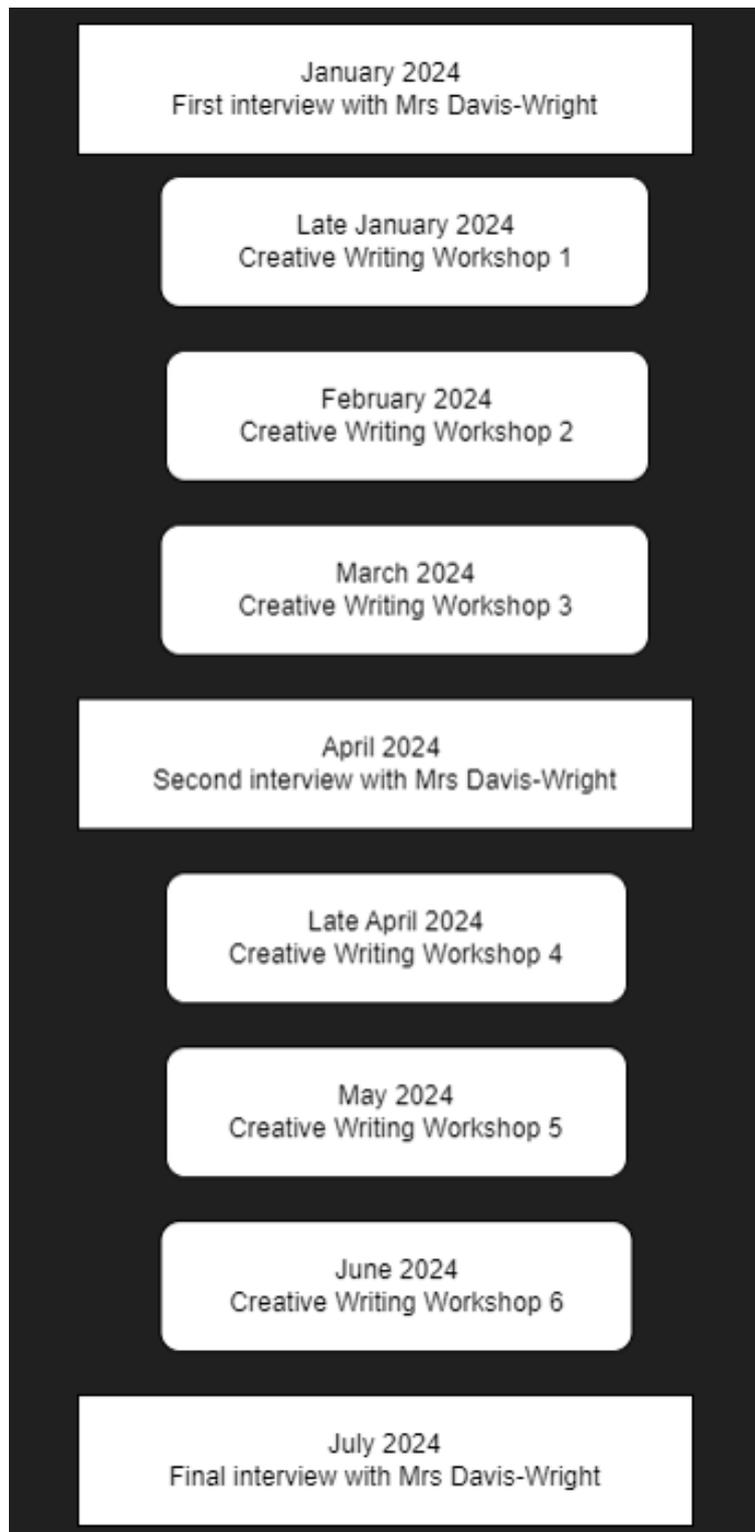
If you do decide to take part and then change your mind, you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences to you and without having to give a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please email kedavis2@sheffield.ac.uk.

What it will involve

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in three interviews with me in which I will ask you questions about your experiences with creative writing and what you believe about what it means to be a writer and who counts as being 'a writer'.

You will also be asked to attend and engage with six after-school creative writing workshops, where will we look at short extracts from novels, poems, films, plays and creative TikTok videos, before embarking on our own creative writing.

Project timeline is picture below:

January 2024
First interview with Mrs Davis-Wright

Late January 2024
Creative Writing Workshop 1

February 2024
Creative Writing Workshop 2

March 2024
Creative Writing Workshop 3

April 2024
Second interview with Mrs Davis-Wright

Late April 2024
Creative Writing Workshop 4

May 2024
Creative Writing Workshop 5

June 2024
Creative Writing Workshop 6

July 2024
Final interview with Mrs Davis-Wright

Advantages and disadvantages of taking part

I do not expect there to be any possible disadvantages to taking part in this study, but if you do decide to participate, please ensure that your participation does not prevent you from keeping on top of completing your Home Learning.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those students participating in the project, I hope that you will enjoy taking part in the workshops. You may find a new hobby in creative writing and thinking about creative writing over two terms may also serve as a good revision tool for the creative writing you will do in your GCSE exam.

Keeping your information safe

Throughout the course of this project, we will collect data about you. This will be taken from the things that you say in the interviews and workshops. I will be audio-recording what you say and sometimes making notes about things that you might say and do in the workshops or interviews that I consider to be important to the research. Audio files will be deleted once transcription and data analysis has taken place and all other personal data such as emails will be deleted after submission of the doctoral thesis (no later that September 2027). Transcripts of audio files will be deleted 3 years after completion of the project.

The data collected will be stored in accordance with University data security policies and any identifiable personal data will only be accessed by myself and my supervisors. Anonymised data – such as audio recordings – may be accessed and processed by transcription services, but will not contain any identifiable personal data.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. It is possible that we will produce an anthology of work taken from the creative writing portfolios you create, but you will be able to decide what is included and omitted from your work, and whether you would like to see your name in print. In this case, anything you say in an interview that might make you identifiable from your work will be redacted so your identity remains confidential. If you agree to us sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by making it available in a university data archive) then your personal details will not be included.

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that 'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest' (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

If you have complaints or concerns

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education.

It you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact Dr Ryan Bramley, r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk, or alternatively, Dr Aneesh Barai, a.barai@sheffield.ac.uk, in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the School of Education Professor Rebecca Lawthom: r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk, The School of Education, The University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project's Designated Safeguarding Contact [Dr Ryan Bramley, r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk, or alternatively, Dr Aneesh Barai, a.barai@sheffield.ac.uk]. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this Contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of the School of Education Professor Rebecca Lawthom: r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk, The School of Education, The University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW and/or the University's Research Ethics & Integrity Manager (Lindsay Unwin; l.v.unwin@sheffield.ac.uk).

Further information

If you need any further information, please speak to me, Mrs Davis-Wright. You can contact me in school by seeing me in J5, or by emailing kedavis2@sheffield.ac.uk.

If you wish to participate, please let me know so we can arrange for you to sign the consent forms (if you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of the information sheet and be asked to sign two consent forms – one to keep and one to be kept by me as part of the research data).

Appendix 3 – Example of blank parent and participant consent forms

What makes a writer? Research project consent form - Participant

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 08/01/2024 and the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include taking part in six after school creative writing workshops and being interviewed.	☐	☐
I understand that I will be audio recorded during interviews and workshops.	☐	☐
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.	☐	☐
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no negative consequences if I choose to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I give permission for the answers I give in the interviews and the work I produce in my writing portfolio provide to be deposited in ORDA (the research archive that the University of Sheffield uses) so it can be used for future research and learning	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

Name of Researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

Katherine Davis-Wright

Project contact details for further information:
In the event of a complaint, please contact me, the researcher Katherine Davis-Wright, at kedavis2@sheffield.ac.uk. If I am unable to assist then my supervisors can be contacted: Dr Ryan Bramley can be contacted on **01142 228103** or at r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk and Dr Aneesh Barai can be contacted on 0**1142 228167 or at** a.barai@sheffield.ac.uk**.**A person outside the project who can be contacted in the event of a complaint is the Head of the School of Education, Professor Rebecca Lawthom, who can be contacted by emailing r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk, The School of Education, The University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW.

Two copies of this consent form will be signed: 1 paper copy for the participant, 1 copy for the research data.

What makes a writer? Research project consent form - Parent/Guardian

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
My child and I have read and understood the project information sheet dated 08/01/2024 and the project has been fully explained. (If you will answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)	☐	☐
My child and I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	☐	☐
I agree for my child to take part in the project. I understand that my child taking part in the project will include taking part in six after school creative writing workshops and being interviewed.	☐	☐
I understand that my child will be audio recorded during interviews and workshops.	☐	☐
I understand that by my child choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.	☐	☐
I understand that my child's taking part is voluntary and that my child can withdraw from the study at any time; my child does not have to give any reasons for why they no longer want to take part and there will be no negative consequences if the choice is made to withdraw.	☐	☐
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my child's personal details will not be revealed to people outside the project.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that my child's words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that my child will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my child's data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.	☐	☐
I give permission for the answers my child gives in the interviews and the work my child produces in their writing portfolio provide to be deposited in ORDA (the research archive that the University of Sheffield uses) so it can be used for future research and learning	☐	☐
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright my child holds in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.	☐	☐

Name of participant [printed]   Signature   Date

Name of Researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

Katherine Davis-Wright

Project contact details for further information:
In the event of a complaint, please contact me, the researcher Katherine Davis-Wright, at kedavis2@sheffield.ac.uk. If I am unable to assist then my supervisors can be contacted: Dr Ryan Bramley can be contacted on 0**1142 228103** or at r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk and Dr Aneesh Barai can be contacted on 0**1142**

228167 or at a.barai@sheffield.ac.uk..A person outside the project who can be contacted in the event of a complaint is the Head of the School of Education, Professor Rebecca Lawthom, who can be contacted by emailing r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk, The School of Education, The University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW.

Two copies of this consent form will be signed: 1 paper copy for the participant, 1 copy for the research data.

Appendix 4 – Example of blank institutional consent form

Institutional Consent Form

To the senior member of staff whose approval is sought

Doctoral students (henceforth, "researcher") at the University of Sheffield, School of Education are required to complete research-based thesis as part of their academic studies. Approval of a thesis topic has been obtained from the supervising university tutor in advance of seeking permission to carry out the research. If the researcher wishes to collect data from or about human participants, then agreement must also be obtained from an appropriate member of staff at each institution (e.g. non-profit organisation, school, childcare provider) involved in the study.

The research, which may involve surveys, interviews or documentary analysis must conform to the conditions under which it received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield, School of Education along with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Participation in each element of the research study must be voluntary, and participants must be able to withdraw their consent freely without disadvantage. In the case of research activities with pupils or other vulnerable individuals, the teacher or other member of staff responsible for the participants may also be asked to witness the process of obtaining informed consent.

The only non-participant who will know the identity of those involved in the work will be the researcher themselves. All personal information will remain confidential and the anonymity of all participants will be maintained in all assessed coursework. The retention of information and data will also be subject to strict time limits and regulation of disposal (see the project information sheet for details). The school will be named in the research – as the researcher is working in her own context, it would be easy for a reader to identify the name of the school by extension.

If there is concern at this stage about any aspect of the work it should be addressed to the concerned, to the supervising university tutor (details below), or directly to The University of Sheffield, School of Education: education@sheffield.ac.uk

Research study title: How do Year 10 students' experiences of creative writing affect their identities as 'writers'?

University supervisors (name and email):

Dr Aneesh Barai, a.barai@sheffield.ac.uk

Dr Ryan Bramley, r.bramley@sheffield.ac.uk

	Please tick the appropriate boxes ☑	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet or the project has been fully explained to me.		☐	☐
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		☐	☐
I give my permission for this student research project to be undertaken in my institution, and confirm that I hold the requisite authority to give such permission.		☐	☐
In-line with the policies and expectations of my institution, and after reviewing the project information documents**, the student-researcher will be required to obtain permission from parents/carers** before undertaking their research study.		☐	☐

Name of person giving permission[printed]   Role/position   Signature   Date

Name of student-researcher [printed]   Signature   Date

This document is to be retained by the researcher until completion of their programme of study.

Appendix 5 – Artefacts from the first interview

Your writing isn't as well received as you think it should be. You are prouder of it.

But rain makes flowers grow!

Brighter side of writing.
- I always feel a sense of freedom writing fiction. I can turn myself and the world into how I see it instead of facing things head on sometimes.

Lucky break! Great, well told story

I'm not always proud of successful in my writing. I remember the first story I wrote, I couldn't think of an ending, so I left it open. I didn't like it, but I showed my parents and they said it was nice.

For one of my mid-year 6 tests, we were asked to create a piece of writing with a picture refference which helped me realise I found it easier writing with pictures to use for ideas.

The first time I wrote a short creative writing story was in reception because it was raining during break ever since then I've loved reading/ writing creative writing work.

Now, one of my favourite exams we have in English is creative writing because it lets me open my mind and use my imagination a lot easier.

Appendix 6 – Artefacts from the second interview

Over to you…

Make some notes about how you identify – we will talk about these identities in the interview.

Cultural	I am white British, or just as I know my family is entirely white British and white. My ancestors from the 1700s were Swiss.
Gender	I am a male who uses he/him pronouns.
Sexuality	I was assigned male at birth.
Political	I am a socialist and believe in the prospect of a united and free human race.
Religious	I was raised a Christian (Protestant) but have chosen to be an atheist.
Class	I am by material means middle-class but my family struggles for money.
Family	I have both of my parents as well as a brother and sister.
Medical	
Educational	I am a student and plan to remain so for quite a while.
Personal	I believe I am intelligent and charismatic but sometimes lack confidence.
Professional	I worked in a facility for 2 days. Never again.
Hobbies	I go to the gym, cycle and jog, and talk to people online.
Interests	I am fascinated in history, politics, and enjoy media analysis but don't take media.
Miscellaneous	I have 2 (very old) dogs.

Make some notes about how you identify – we will talk about these identities in the interview.

Cultural	
Gender	I'm a female & use she/they pronouns
Political	
Religious	I'm a hellenist — I believe in Ancient Greek Gods
Class	
Family	I've lived with my parents for my whole life but spend most of my time at my grandparent's house due to my parents always working.
Medical	I get migraines migraines, I was born with thrombocytopenia & went to hospital 2-3 times a week for the first 2 years of my life
Educational	
Personal	I think I am a good friend, who's always there to help and support friends in a time they need it most.
Professional	
Hobbies	I play netball, have been for 8 years. I love going on walks & listening to music. I play the keyboard, & want to learn drums & electric guitar.
Interests	I've always been interested in astronomy, Greek mythology, and crystals. I've also always been interested in the paranormal
Miscellaneous	I'm a cat & dog person but only have a dog, named Arla, because my parents aren't fond of cats I listen to rock, heavy metal and alternative music

Make some notes about how you identify - we will talk about these identities in the interview.

Cultural	I am English and Spanish, my mother being Spanish and my dad English. My Great grandmother who I am named after was born in (where) and moved to Spain when she was young.
Gender	I am a ~~straight~~ woman and assigned female at birth, I use she/her pronouns.
Sexuality	I # have been think about it a lot for a few years now but I don't think that I really fit a label so I just like to stay under question.
Political	I ~~been~~ haven't gotten to much into politics ~~XXXX~~ so I feel like I can't form an opinion yet.
Religious	I am an atheist but I have been looking a lot into Satanism. I am not really sure yet, especially with peoples reactions to it now days
Class	I don't get told to much about this from my parents but I can guess I am on the ~~large~~ higher end of lower-class.
Family	I have always lived with my mum ~~and~~, dad and older sister. Though every summer we stay at my grandparents in ~~s~~ Spain for about a month.
Medical	I haven't had to many medical issues, I can't think of any I have now.
Educational	I have always been really good at maths, my parents always tell me my teachers at primary told me I was amazing at it. I struggled a bit with comprehension when I was younger. I remember getting my first good grade in comprehension
Personal	As much as I think # I am close to people and comfortable ~~being~~ around people I still so ~~math~~ outward. I can be very talkative sometimes and I always try and be sympathetic/empathetic
Professional	I want to be an astrophysicist so I am planning on going to uni when I am older. i have never been to uni but i really try hard
Hobbies	I never really have 1 hobby as I keep changing them or doing new things. I have done, reading, writing, drawing, languages, crafting, knitting, gaming but ~~xxxx~~ right now I am somewhat in the transition phase of it.
Interests	I want to become an astrophysicist because I love space. I really like cycling too. I also really enjoy watching anime. I read a bit but the books in my room are ~~xxx~~ pilling up because I keep buying more. I enjoy ~~xxx~~ playing open-world and ~~rythim~~ games the most
Miscellaneous	I am very intreverted, as much as I love being with my friends I need at least one day away from people in a week or I feel like I go crazy

Over to you_

Make some notes about how you identify – we will talk about these identities in the interview.

Cultural	white and British but I have Irish descent on my dad's side and Spanish-Roma gypsy descent on my mom's side
Gender	I'm a female and always have been, gender isn't really something I think about a lot but I love being a girl and don't want to change it.
Political	I don't know a lot about politics at all and I really don't have any interest in it at all.
Religious	I'm kind of between agnostic and atheist, but mostly atheist - I had those phases when I was little where I was interested in christianity, but that left as soon as it came.
Class	I'd say I'm middle class, nothing more to say there.
Family	I live with my mum and dad and gauge brother. I'm really close with them all but especially my mum because we have traits that I got from my father that I hate, like my short temper and anger but that still I don't like being it.
Medical	I don't really see medical as a big part of my identity because I never really have anything going on apart from occasional low iron and head + stomach aches.
Educational	I was always labelled the "talented and gifted" student but as I've gotten older, I've become more and more academically burnt out and feel like I'm not doing good enough anymore.
Personal	I've been described as a ray of sunshine by a few people and I love that - around people I like I'm chatty and funny but if I don't personally like you I'll be quite down, even though I don't mean it to be. I'm also very romantic and been described as missing empathetic and caring person.
Professional	I'm just a student at a secondary school but I'm hoping to find a little summer job to do for a few days a week maybe
Hobbies	I like reading and writing. choreography, drawing and painting. I also LOVE listing to music and collecting stuff like cds, dvds. ect.
Interests	I'm really interested in greek mythology, I had a big hp phase, I also love ACs and 2000s era (fashion, films, music) I love old rock music and the surfy rocker girl look its so cute. I'm interested in space and specific historical decades. tim burton films + horror films – judgfful animals – ex/horror
Miscellaneous	I'm very much a dog person and I love cats. I also have quite bad anxiety but I'm working on that. I'm very opinionated and passionate about certain things

Over to you...

Make some notes about how you identify – we will talk about these identities in the interview.

Cultural	I'm half chinese and celebrate those traditions and beliefs when possible but I feel like I could be more ~~~
Gender	I'm female and usually conform with the usual stereotypes.
Sexuality	I'm bisexual and I'm very comfortable with this
Political	I believe in socialism to a degree but don't really believe in one political party completely - I do believe in *
Religious	I was raised protestant christian for a large amount of time I was ~~~ I now believe in Christianity *G
Class	I'm middle class and always have been as far as I'm aware
Family	complicated - I live with my grandparents and mum and sometimes see my bio dad and ex step dad
Medical	I suffer from bad headaches and things such as anxiety and mental health issues
Educational	I've always been very gifted and ~~~ fall into the habit of aligning my self esteem ~~~
Personal	I would say I'm very academic - but I'm aware that I am not perfect and have got things to improve on as a person
Professional	non existant
Hobbies	violin - I go one a week. I do art and try to keep up with even ~~~ once a week
Interests	history, astrology, violin, art, reading
Miscellaneous	

*I'm not a specific set of

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Make some notes about how you identify – we will talk about these identities in the interview.

Cultural	I am white and english. My family mostly spreads around central Europe (Germany, Wales, France, Scotland)
Gender	I am a girl, but I like expressing myself in ways that some people might not see as typical femininity.
Political	I don't really get politics, I wish people will b just talk out problems, why fight over just having a diff opinion
Religious	I don't know. There is probably something out there, something like heaven and hell probably exist, who am I to say.
Class	Middle class, always have been as far as I know. Same with my parent, maybe not my grand-parents.
Family	I'm quite close with my direct family but I struggle speaking normally to the ones I don't see as much. My nan is ugh.
Medical Insomnia.	I was lactose intolerant when I was younger, it + went away, then came back worse. I have joint and circulation issues
Educational	I've always been told I was the quiet, creative, smart kid, even when I was little. I did well in things I enjoyed.
Personal	I think I'm an understanding, openminded, kind, funny person - but I struggle to say no sometimes.
Professional	I want to work in a café as a barista before I go into theatre. For people experience and for grounding.
Hobbies	I like to daydream about things I could be doing, but not actually do them. Reading, dancing, acting, doodling are fun when I'm in the mood.
Interests	I enjoy nature, art, psychology, animals and my friends. MUSIC! I like knowing exactly what people think of me.
Miscellaneous	I love animals but hate most bugs and am arachnophobic.

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What is creativity?

linked
writing
art
imagination way you talk
the
makeup fashion
hair
expressing yourself
piercings
the things you follow
ideas on something you'd want to do
pillow
creating worlds (fictional)
Studying techniques
free thinking
thinking believing of ideas that aren't physically there yet
seeing situations differently
being able to think in a non-typical way
Problem solving
cooking
painting
music

What is creativity?

making music
making artful / designy stuff
Problem solving (if a problem occurs, how would you tackle it, yk)
thinking outside the box (like not going along with whatever else doing, being independent + your own thing, trying to create something in a different way to most)
movies (idea creativity + etc)
makeup / face paint
decorating
art / painting / sculpting / drawing
writing

What is creativity?

Science

Innovation

Speaking

Philosophy

P Learning

Leadership

Music

Art

What is creativity?

Making my
own world and
story.

Fun

Feels good.

→ Freedom

Myself

→ Sense of self

Inspiration
↳ Stemmed-from
↳ Goes into

→ Imaginative

→ Childhood.

JOURNEY

dʒɜːʳn

NOUN When you make a **journey**, you travel from one place to another.

2. NOUN You can refer to a person's experience of changing or developing from one state of mind to another as a **journey**.

"Adichie creates indelible characters who jump off the page and into your head and heart." —USA TODAY

THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK ·
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI

Ishwari's Children

Shabnam Nadiya

Shabnam Nadiya is a writer and translator from Bangladesh. Her writing explores the isolation individuals face because of boundaries of class, gender, race, age and religion. Nadiya's work has appeared in various anthologies including One World (New Internationalist, UK); In Pursuit of the Perfect Gourmet Garam Masala (Skrev Press, UK); Arshilata:Women's Fiction from Bangladesh and India (Writers Ink, Bangladesh); Galpa: Short Stories by Women from Bangladesh (Saqi Books, UK); From the Delta (University Press Ltd, Bangladesh) and New Age Short Stories (New Age/writers.ink). >>

ONE GOES A JOURNEY

He is going to the T'ung T'ing lake,
My friend whom I have loved so many years.
The spring wind startles the willows
And they break into pale leaf.
I go with my friend
As far as the river-bank.
He is gone—
And my mind is filled and overflowing
With the things I did not say.

Again the white water-flower
Is ripe for plucking.
The green pointed swords of the iris
Splinter the brown earth.
To the south of the river
Are many cinnamon trees.
I gather branches of them to give to my friend
At his return.

Liu Shih-an—Eighteenth Century

time for discussion

What is the most difficult journey
you've ever been on? Why?

What about a metaphorical journey?

Have you ever been on a journey that
has changed your life?

Over to you...
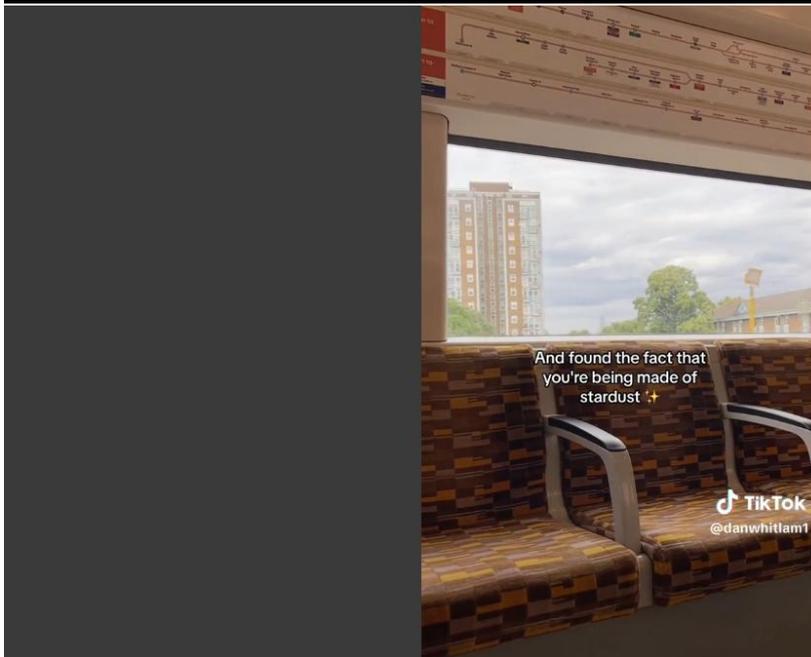
You have the rest of this
session to create anything
you like as long as it is in
some way linked to the word
'journey'...

CHANGE

A common theme in GCSE texts…

And found the fact that you're being made of stardust ✨

♪ TikTok
@danwhitlam1

time for discussion

If you could travel *anywhere* in time, where would you go and why?

If you knew how much time you had left in your life, how would that change the way that you lived?

If you could go back along your own personal timeline and change one of your decisions, what would it be and why? How do you think your life would be different?

Roald Dahl's children's books are being rewritten to remove language deemed offensive by the publisher Puffin.

Puffin has hired sensitivity readers to rewrite chunks of the author's text to make sure the books "can continue to be enjoyed by all today", resulting in extensive changes across Dahl's work.

Edits have been made to descriptions of characters' physical appearances. The word "fat" has been cut from every new edition of relevant books, while the word "ugly" has also been culled, the Daily Telegraph reported.

Augustus Gloop in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is now described as "enormous". In The Twits, Mrs Twit is no longer "ugly and beastly" but just "beastly".

The *re*writing of Roald Dahl

Across his beloved children's books, hundreds of the author's words have been changed or entirely removed in a bid for 'relevancy'

to the rest of his body, waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out—Samsa was a commercial traveler—hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!

Gregor's eyes turned next to the window, and the overcast sky—one could hear raindrops beating on the window gutter—made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he forced himself toward his right side he always rolled onto his back again. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before.
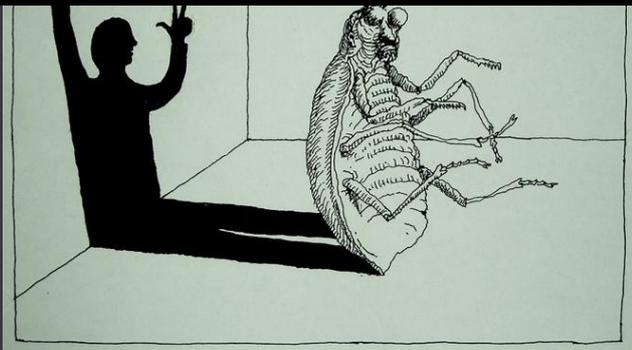
Appendix 9 – Sample of participant's writing from the arts-based workshops

Keyboards clackered in the background. Sequences of numbers and words, answers to long overdue complaints, copyright warnings, finances, legal matters, reports, audits, you name it, all being types away at dozens upon dozens of desks. In between them all, managers walking past, straight up stances, their cold and bright eyes peering over every cubicle, their robotic limbs whirring and whizzing as they moved. Of course, the mere presences of such a sight *'motivated'* any worker to do their job, but at the same time a strong distaste towards the authoritarian and soulless constructs was harboured in the hearts of all in the office.

The man in the third small box deep on the second row on the left had, much like most others working in the room, been alive before the robotic revolution. Automation has been a promise of hope for the future, a world without scarcity, without need for conflict or suffering, but of course this was not the reality. Instead, new ways to cramp humans into tight spaces were established, innovative designs to trap workers manufactured, and the laws protecting such people slowly eroded as the people became more and more reliant. Some had resisted, now pushed out of the cities and into their great slums, some stretching miles and miles wide and hundreds of meters tall. Those were outcasts, some had gone willingly, choosing a life of freedom in exchange for depravity, others had been rags, the out, dissenters and rebels, refusing to accept their bleak lives as rags to be squeezed of money. The man in the third small box deep on the second row on the left on the other hand was compliant. Happy. Satiated. He had taken the deal.

Many had before him and who many will likely after him. He has a house, a car, food, some money to waste, an education of some sorts, a family, and ample resources. In exchange, he works, he works everyday of his life, if he refuses to work he will be an outcast, a rebel, a dissenter. His father too worked, worked in a place unrecognisable however, as the man in the third small box deep on the second row on the left had grown up the world had changed. The introduction of fully capable robots had been the main cause for this change, suddenly, rural space was useless. Farms were now fully automated, massively expanded and controlled by huge agricultural monopolies. More land was used for industry, once open green fields and forests replaced by desolate and booming foundries and factories. The humans on the other hand, were forced to further urbanise. Buildings became higher, rooms smaller, rents skyrocketed, chaos erupted. Suddenly, everyone was a luddite.

Of course, such disorder cannot persist indefinitely, as history has shown there is either revolution or reaction, in the case of the luddite tendencies of the now fully urban human populace, it was reaction. What was once a flawed democracy dropped any illusion of choice and popular consent. Those with middle income, who were already from the cities, came to establishment themselves as the new middle class, whilst the capitalists grew wealthier off of the sweat of the proletariat. Those now flooding into the megacities continued to be the underclass, and all talks of the rights of man and the robots were silenced. The unwavering, unfeeling boot of the state stomped down to protect the interests of capital. Of course, this was taught that 'the system' had to be 'reforged' to maintain 'order and stability' in a changing world.

The man in the third small box deep on the second row on the left however, was bored. Despite having everything that someone may want, he didn't feel entirely happy with it, the cause of this unknown. Until one night, one his way home.

A woman, brown eyes, nothing else visible below a thick black hood and crimson red mask covering her mouth. She looked rough, clearly not fit for any typical job, especially not of someone living in the upper levels of Dover. She brisked past the man, neither exchanged a word, only a short glance from him to her, and nothing from her to him. However, as she walked something flew out of her pocket, a purse? No. Maybe a cloth? Neither. A leaflet of sorts? Yes, that. Subsequently the man reached down to grab it, he was bored, he was intrigued. Upon it: a star, red, upon a white background. Inscribed below the words 'liberation'. This startled the man, being caught with something like this could see him kicked out of the city, so he cast it upon the deep trench reaching into the lower city. He had the thought of reporting the interaction, it was not unusual for outsiders to come into the cities to cause chaos, but something stopped him.

At home, the television flicked on, hundreds upon hundreds of channels, showing hundreds of shows, films, documentaries etc. There was enough on the TV to keep a generation entertained for millennia. He sunk back into his chair, relaxing, not worried about the world around him. Soon after, his wife joined him, sitting next to him, watching the TV, and sinking into the chair.

Rose hastened her pace, a drone had been dwindling behind her about 50 metres for almost twenty minutes now, she quickly turned into an alleyway, waited, waited still. Until the machine whirred around the corner. It was big, large.

Wing-like structures protruded from a spherical centre, a red light in the middle of the sphere. Behind the 'wings' fans whirred, keeping it afloat. The red beam moved around quickly, darting around every corner, every crevice, the slow and loud whirring of the fans growing louder and louder. A clang sounded from another connected alleyway in the great maze that was the lower levels of the city. Maybe a rat, or a cat, or just a scavenger, but no matter—it caught the robot's attention. The whirring moved down the alley, red glow fading with it. Rose calmly stood up from

behind a bin, and exited the way she came before back onto the 'street,' back into the light, and back on her way.

Eventually, after descending another level, she would come across a warehouse, a safehouse—a large, fairly crowded, and draughty building. Within it were boxes, crates, containers, barrels, and the like, as well as five other people. Rose approached them and took a seat. Before her, a large and authoritative man was talking. Strapped to his face was a silvery, thick moustache. Wrapped around his head, equally silver hair, but the very top of it being bald. Despite his obvious age, he commanded the room. He was experienced, he was diligent, and he was as optimistic as you could get in a bleak and dead world. Next to him was a board, upon it some kind of diagram with arrows showing routes of attack and X's marking interest. There was a plan underway.

Back in the office, the man looked at his cubicle once more. The same as always, he looked through documents to check for any errors before sending them to the next level of validation. Today, he was looking at a finance sheet, detailing the income of the business, as well as its expenditures for the month. The numbers looked good, but not something he was going to boast too much about as he reported it. This continued for another twelve hours, eventually ending as the man packed up, calmly left the building, and began to walk.

Intrigued by the woman he had seen the day prior, he headed not home but to a bar—a place typically seen as below a respectable office worker such as himself. But he needed to know something. He was to talk to his close friend and companion, Serge. Since childhood, he had known Serge; they were the closest of friends in youth, but fate had it that they would go on different paths. Unlike the man, Serge would never pass his entrance exam to get into a decent university, thus becoming just another tool for the accumulation of wealth. This was partly thanks to the fact that Serge's family could never afford a good school for him, nor a tutor, giving the wealthier children (such as the man) better chances anyway. Nevertheless, he was bright, and he knew things.

Walking into the bar, the man saw his old friend. His scruffy beard and long hair easily revealed him. His face was dirty and oily—clearly, he hadn't washed since he had been at work. The two hugged, soot getting on the man's clean shirt, before Serge let out a deep and contagious laugh and beckoned the man to take a seat. It seemed odd, seeing a boy who had been one of the best in his class now reduced to a pathetic industrial worker, jobs almost totally eliminated by automation. It was truly amazing how not having a 'good school' on your application form could restrict you so much. Nevertheless, the men drank. One round. Two rounds. Three rounds. Before finally, after hours of talking and laughing and catching up, the man asked about the star. Serge's face went serious.

Sizzling. Hissing. Then a bang. The thick door went flying backwards as the explosives went off. The group of half a dozen entered the building, all armed.

To some degree, most wearing normal clothes. Quickly they fanned out, checking rooms as they went, before arriving at the centre of the structure. Within a cylindrical room there was a huge reactor, powering a massive complex of factories manufacturing robots and drones. Two of the six entered the room. A few tense minutes later they came back out. All six now departed the building.

"You are asking questions that you don't want the answers to now, my friend," stated Serge, bluntly, to the man. "You live a good life, comfortable, you have a wife," he continued, "do not disrupt that with silly curiosity." This only fuelled the desire to know more within the man. Despite the supposed danger, he wanted to learn, he wanted to know what was going on in the world around him. Long

enough had he been a slave, he wanted to discover a better future for not only himself but for the whole world around him.

Six... Five... Four...

Still the man probed, demanding more information, demanding answers. Serge at first resisted but then he began to crack.

Three...

He talked of a movement, an idea. Hope for a better future free of oppression by robots and their owners and full of bright and beautiful skies for all humanity to enjoy.

Two...

A future where the workers would be free, where no longer would they be exploited for the profits they could generate. An idea of a better world, no longer chained down by money and power struggles.

One... A huge explosion rocked the city.

The factories were gone. A grand revolutionary act had been taken, for the first time in decades the powers that be were challenged by the people. The destruction of these factories meant that, at least until they were repaired, the production of robots: enforcers, controllers, and soldiers of oppression was ceased. If the people would take it, they had their chance to throw off their chains and rally together for a better future, free of oppression. The man had learned of a movement. Now it was time for the world to learn it too.

Promises

"Promise we'll be friends forever?"
"Of course! Even when we're older."
We interlock our pinkies.
I wave goodbye and get in the car.
That was the last time I ever saw her.
The last time my socked feet would walk over the plush carpet, the last time I would run up her stairs, tripping over and laughing. The last time I would brush the fake hair of the plastic dolls, the last time I would swap their outfits. The last time I would eat at that huge dining table, the last time we could hide in her room after my mother said it was time to go, hoping for extra play time. The last time I would open the gate to the colourful park outside her house, filled with screeching children and innocent, happy, clueless souls.
I couldn't even savour the last hug, the last time we held hands and skipped, because I didn't know it was the end. Because we promised.
I get a 'happy birthday!' text every year or so. No card. No present.
I always get her a card, though.
I probably always will. Because I promised.
I wonder if she still has her half of the glittery 'BFF' necklace, tucked away in the back of her jewelry box like I do?
I wonder if she ever thinks of me like I do?
I wonder if she remembers the promise we made to each other, as my mum's car backed out of her driveway for the final time.
Promises forgotten.

Change

I used to be 'dad's little girl,' his best friend. The child he was closest with. I used to run errands with him, blasting his music on full volume and driving round his childhood neighbourhood. He'd take me to places from his youth and teach me the way I he wanted to do things. Sharing the stories that made him the man he is today. We'd hug on the sofa in winter, huddled together like penguins. We'd share ice cream, share jokes, share problems.

We'd have a special hug, a special food, special memories.

Until we didn't.

He hasn't changed. I haven't changed. My body has changed. And that alone changed us. He hates to touch me now. Hates what I wear. Hates how I'm built. Hates how grown men look at me, knowing what they think. He hates that I'm not his little girl anymore. I still am I swear inside, but he can't see past the womanly features and mannerisms that physically and mentally shape me now. The biological features of his daughter, that his daughter can't control. The 'wall' separating childhood and womanhood is too tall to climb for both of us, yet cracks in between the intricate layers of concrete brick and cement show a glimpse of what it once was like for them.

If she had a wish, she would make her new body disappear just to be able to hug him one more time without discomfort from him.

He loves her the same, but sees her differently.

He loves her the same, but acts differently.

He loves her the same, but treats her differently.

The change was too much for the both of them and broke them apart.

If her younger self could see their relationship now, she would wonder what had changed.

Why they had changed.

Why change?

Change.

29th January 2024

Creature.

Fear crawled up her ribcage and closed around her heart with a cold iron fist, squeezing all the *** of joy she had left in her after being *** this creature. It stood up on its back legs, looming over her menacingly. The brown lightbulbs above it moved with the silky glow of the moonlight cast on *** onmass shadow over the creature's form. Her back hit the wall behind her, trapping her inside with it. Sliding down the wall with *** *** her face, *** she covered her face in her hands, desperately trying to block it out. Wet, salty droplets *** gushed over her cheekbones and dripped down her neck as *** the slight gaps of her fingers, she saw it advancing. A whimper of fear escaped her and she clamped her lips tight together to avoid making any more noise. 'One step,' the creature *** whispered, *** closer. 'Two steps,' it was advancing, slowly but surely. 'And getting tickly under there.' He reached out with a *** finger, prised her hands apart and reached for her neck. 'NO!' She cried and scooted away. His bare chest reflected the beams from the moon in the most disgusting way. 'Please, I want my mummy,' she whispered pleadingly. 'Mummy ain't here,' he pulled a part and reached for her *** arm. 'And I thought this was your favourite nursery rhyme!' A sob escaped her mouth as vomit threatened to spill, *** her lungs losing air, her heart losing hope with every ticking of the clock. *** 'Let's do the next verse, shall we, sweetheart?' his *** face broke out into a *** devilish grin.
'Round and round the hay stack,' his arm sneaked around her small waist.
It all went black.

* * * *

'Round and round the Garden, like a —' a scream pierced through her, *** up her throat like *** a spider made of sharp metal. kicking. *** a plating *** of limbs, screaming, screaming for him to stop. Screaming for her mother to come back, screaming for him to put his clothes back on, screaming for the creature to go away.
It'll never go away, the creature was always here to stay, the creature was ***

WILLOW: I have it's a bit less (.) it's always labelled as like the talented (.) really smart student like even in not in maths I'd like to say that I'm absolutely awful at maths (.) anyway even in that primary school especially in English (.) I was really good at everything and then I came into Year Seven a really good talented student (.) In year 8 I was top set everything apart from maths obviously but then in year 9 I went down into second set science (.) still top set the English so good (3) and then in year 10 I went down fourth set maths (.) still in second set science and first in English but I've been struggling in lessons and I've not been doing as good as I want to ans I think I don't know I just become really really academically just burnt out I don't know if it's 'cause as we're going into GCSE years it's just like the works got harder and I'm really not academically changed on my level at all it's just the work that's making me seem like I have my teachers say they have no concerns at all but I feel like I'm not doing as good as I should be and I'm disappointing people or I could be doing more I really can't be doing more because I can't force my brain into

KATHERINE: who are you disappointing

WILLOW: I feel like I'm disappointing teachers and past teachers that thought I'd do really well teaches now doing really well I do feel like I'm gonna disappoint parents even though I've had the conversation that's saying as long as I'm trying my best and that's all they can ask for but I do feel like I'm just not good enough really academically at the moment so

KATHERINE: OK another question not good for what

WILLOW: Not good enough for my GCSE's not good enough for me as well and I don't like saying that because I I want to be and everything else I'm good enough for myself and there's another half of me that's like you are good enough academically there's no more you could be doing you're doing everything you can you're trying your best that's great and there's like a little tiny part of me that's like well you were doing better than this why isn't that now I know that it's probably because works getting harder in the back of my mind but feel like I could be doing more I really can't

KATHERINE: yes well if you genuinely are trying your best there is genuinely nothing more you can do

WILLOW: yeah exactly

KATHERINE: you know that isn't something that teachers and parents just say I think they mean it you know as long as you have tried and you know who to go and see if there's things you're stuck with or struggling with like you know I don't know many teachers it was go away rather than let me help you with that if you came to see them about that kind of thing something so yeah it's interesting though you know you talked about feel burnt out with it too I like that phrase almost as a metaphor as well

WILLOW: Yeah

KATHERINE: like you're a candle or something

WILLOW: That is how it feels because in year seven I felt like like the candles just been lit and I was ready to learn and i was really excited for school and as it's going down I'm like I don't want to be here I'd rather be anywhere but school at the moment and I hate it to be honest

Sample taken from Iggy's Interview 3

KATHERINE: I always find it does anyway (.) OK that's interesting too (.)how do you think that your experiences inside school have shaped your identity as a writer and outside of school same question

IGGY: I'd say school has **killed** all of the creative spark that a lot of people (.) including myself (.) **had** (.) it kind of chips away at you and whittles you down to just 'this is how you do it' (.) it takes away the **fun from being creative** (.) which IS fun (.) if you go into a Reception class they're just all loving it and you know (.) throwing paint at each other (.) and I think that's probably reduced my enjoyment of writing and how I feel about writing has probably changed because of that (.) into more of a (.) a (.) **task** rather than an activity to enjoy (.) and outside of school (.) kind of connected to that (.) I feel kind of detached from writing and creativity which means that it reinforces that feeling from school of writing being a task just for education and just to **get stuff done**

KATHERINE: when you're writing kind of to people online and writing about politics does that feel different

IGGY: yeah I think it does because rather than being something attached to a mark scheme or being creative as in like (.) storytelling (.) it's the same as talking but in the form of writing (.) I guess that's the best way to describe it (.) it's like having a conversation but without speaking

KATHERINE: so there's definitely a dialogue occurring between two or more people

IGGY: yeah it varies

KATHERINE: okay so sometimes multiple people (2) okay so you know we've kind of got this sense then that there is still this creativity within you which is expressed when you're doing the things that you enjoy that writing about politics however the rest of the time your joy for writing is kind of you said 'killed'

IGGY: yeah (.) it is a strong word but it's what I meant (.) I do think writing is a menial thing quite a lot of the time and I just associate it with boring lessons in school

KATHERINE: so it's lost some of its meaning to you

IGGY: yeah

KATHERINE: do you think you could get it back

IGGY: yeah I think (.) detached from education is the only form of writing that I really want to do (.) and I think if I can have that as its own separate thing it will be okay

KATHERINE: so possibly when you leave when you finish your GCSEs then you'll be able to come back to it without the negative associations (.)

IGGY: I hope so

KATHERINE: how have you found engaging in this project

IGGY: well I've missed quite a few workshops because I've been busy with stuff (.) but I think taking part has given me time and space for reflection and to refine my perception of things

Sample of Mai's Interview 3

KATHERINE: so how does the writing that you are doing outside of school in terms of creativity compare with what you are doing in school

MAI: in school I have a lot more of a mindset to actually get on and do it (.) and thinking back to when we were doing creative writing in class (.) in lessons I actually would be motivated to write and to do it more (.) whereas at home I have to really be inspired to write about something (.)

KATHERINE: what do you think changes your mindset in school (.) was it knowing that it was something that you had to do for school or being inspired by your teacher (.) what sort of helped you

MAI: I think it was just like (.) I'm more actually focused in school (.) and yeah I have to do it (.) but that's not a bad thing (.) if I was at home there are more options of things to do so it's harder to persuade myself to do it (.) whereas in school I can either write or I can detention so…

KATHERINE: so you're motivated by wanting to avoid sanctions as well as just for its own sake (.) fair enough(.) I wouldn't want a sanction either (.) erm is there a part of this that's about you feeling tired when you get home because you have been writing and working all day and you want to do something else (.) because if you think about the actual physical writing you do all day I would imagine that most of it is at school

MAI: yeah (.) when I write at home (.) because in school I don't have a computer to use so I will be writing everything by hand (.) so when I go home (.) especially after a day with like five writing heavy English lessons in a row (.) when I go home if I want to write more I don't write by hand I type it up(.) **but** when it's on a screen then it's not as real to me

KATHERINE: ooh tell me more about that (.) that's a really interesting point

MAI: well I found an old story that I wrote (.) and I mean I didn't read it because it wouldn't load (.) I think it like (.) it's gone past now (.) but the title was there and it said how many words there were and it was only a couple of hundred words from ages ago (.) and I was like hmm that's weird (.) because I don't remember it at all (.) but I can clearly remember pieces of writing I did in primary school (.) and I think that's because with those ones I'd actually written it down (.) it might just be to do with how I process things sometimes (.) like if I type it up I know it's happening but I; not looking at my work whilst I'm typing (.) I'm just looking at the keyboard (.) and when I look up if there are mistakes I can just autofix them (.)

KATHERINE: so it actually sticks with you more when you write by hand

MAI: yeah

KATHERINE: okay yeah (.) interesting (.) so you mostly choose to write by computer at home but you find that it is harder to remember much about the writing process that way

MAI: yeah I would like to write more by hand (.) and if I hadn't done much writing in a day and I felt inspired by something I'd seen earlier (.) then I probably would choose to write by hand

KATHERINE: how do you feel at the end of a school day

MAI: tired (.) well I get off the bus (.) and I've just had like an hour's bus ride (.) and I just go upstairs and throw my bag down and then I fall onto the bed and just lay there for a minute (.) and you know in the movies where they wake up and they sit up for a second and just sigh (.) I do that (.) like sigh (.) I guess I've got to do something now (.) I don't want to sleep (.) because if I have a nap after schoo

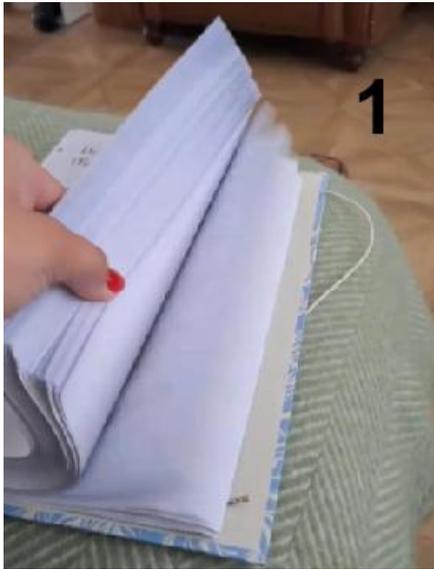## Appendix 11 – Photographs of the thematic analysis process

Image	Description of image and how it illustrates thematic analysis process
1	Printing and organisation of transcripts of interview data after transcription process, reading through data.
2	Initial coding of data.
3	Start of the day having hired a room in The Wave building at the University of Sheffield. Beginning to organising codes and group into themes and subthemes.
4	Initial themes and subthemes laid out on the table.
5	Organisation of codes around initial themes, which formed the basis for my final themes in Chapter 4.
6	
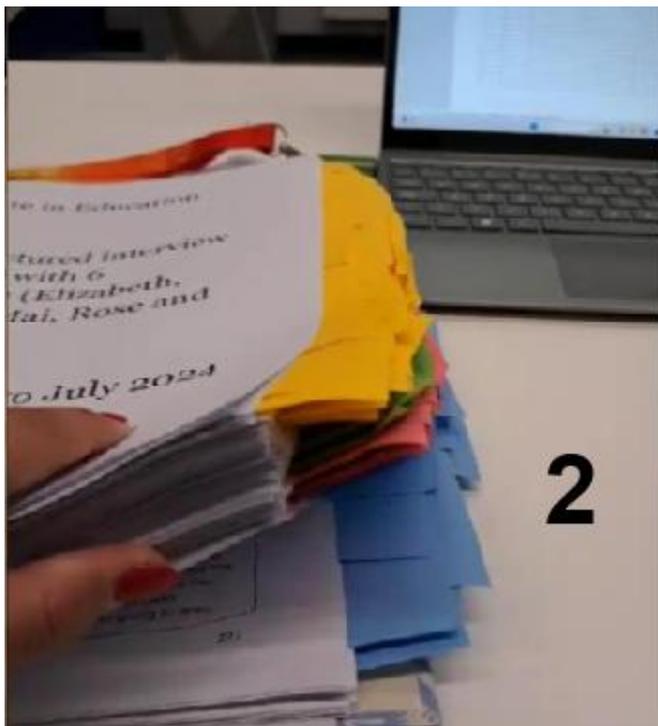
The National Curriculum in English: Key stages 3 and 4 framework document: DfE, p. 13

'culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually'
This is an asyndetic list which is ordered alphabetically. This is an interesting choice as it does not therefore imply any suggestion about what the policy makers found most important from this list of adverbs. It raises the question, if they were to order these characteristics in order of importance, how would the list change?

'pre-eminent'
This adjective is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'surpassing others in rank or excellence, or in respect of some quality; exceptionally distinguished, outstanding' (OED, 2022).As an English teacher, I would agree. However, despite this choice of adjective commending English in the highest terms and despite the placement of this adjective in the first line of the opening paragraph of this policy, I would argue that the policy makers undermine this assertion indirectly in the Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 curriculums through their lack of provision of truly contemporary texts.

Purpose of study

English has a pre-eminent place in education and in society. A high-quality education in English will teach pupils to speak and write fluently so that they can communicate their ideas and emotions to others and through their reading and listening, others can communicate with them. Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development. Reading also enables pupils both to acquire knowledge and to build on what they already know. All the skills of language are essential to participating fully as a member of society; pupils, therefore, who do not learn to speak, read and write fluently and confidently are effectively disenfranchised.

English – key stage 4

'high-quality education'
'High-quality' as defined by whom? Where is the guidance on what this actually looks like in practice? How will teachers, and students for that matter, recognise that they have delivered or received a 'high-quality education'?

'especially'
This modifier places emphasis on the power of literature – whoever wrote this policy is obviously passionate about literature and its benefits to the students in our charge. Perhaps, though, they are only passionate and interested in the 'right kinds' of literature?

'knowledge'
What does knowledge look like in English? Is it knowledge of set texts and poetry, literary terminology or facts about contextual information? Is it knowing which Assessment Objective to use in which GCSE question? Or is it something else? How does it relate to skills in English?

'participating fully as a member of society'
Is this the most important aim of the policy, to produce functional members of a society? Is that, in the view of the Department for Education under Michael Gove, the primary reason to educate citizens?

Appendix 13 – Sample of posts from the online journal I created via Instagram to document my doctoral journal
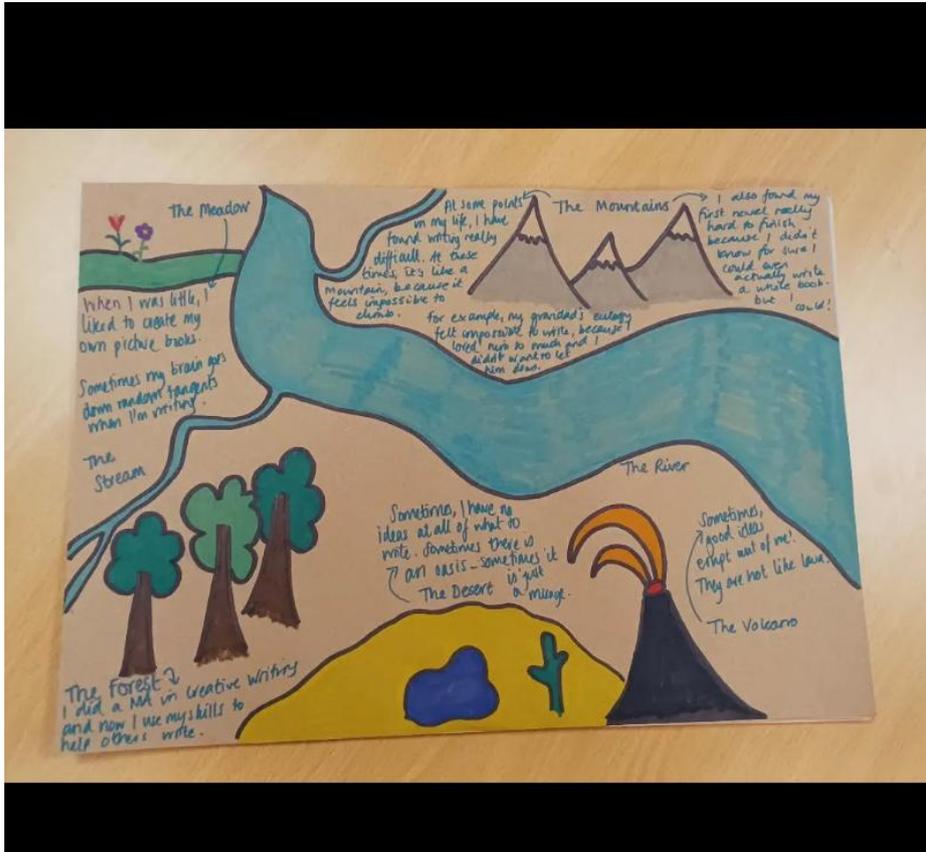
doctoralprog

doctoralprog Here is a picture of a visual aid that I created as a "Map of my Writing Journey".

I had reflected on my own identity as a writer and the was in which I wrote - what was easy, what was difficult...

My Dictaphone was fully charged and ready to go. I had my list of questions to as.

And yet, my first interview was an unqualified disaster. My participant refused to talk to me on tape. He seemed stressed out and started to shut down. I stopped the interview after about 20 seconds and he eventually withdrew from the study, after I reminded him that his participation was 100% voluntary and he didn't *have* to be there. And then he left and I cried.

I felt like it was my fault and that I couldn't do interviews well. I'd had a busy and honestly quite awful day, I'd not eaten since dinner the night before and it was 3pm, and I felt like a failure.

Doctoral research + full-time teaching = a very finely balanced life.

I reflected on this when I got home and over the weekend and I feel much more positive about it now, especially since I had a very successful interview the next day. But actually, ethics and procedures are there for this reason, right? I wouldn't want a participant to take part and it to cause them stress or discomfort!

But it was a milestone, I guess. First bump in the road on this doctoral drive.

86 w

1 like

22 January 2024

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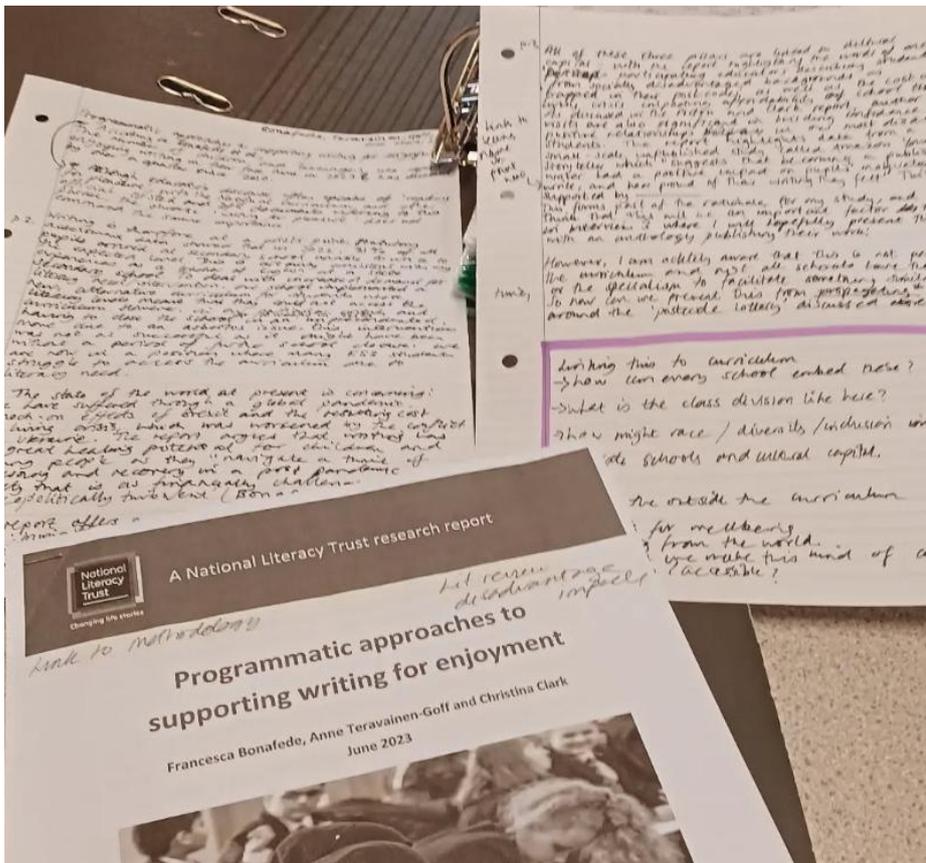
doctoralprog

doctoralprog My approach for getting over writer's block 💕

First I print the report or paper I want to use and then read it and highlight important and relevant bits.

Then I write a paragraph about each part I highlighted, with page number references, for the paper, and indicate where it might fit in the literature review.

And then the bit in the purple box is how I might link it to other parts of the lit review or what other questions it raises for me.

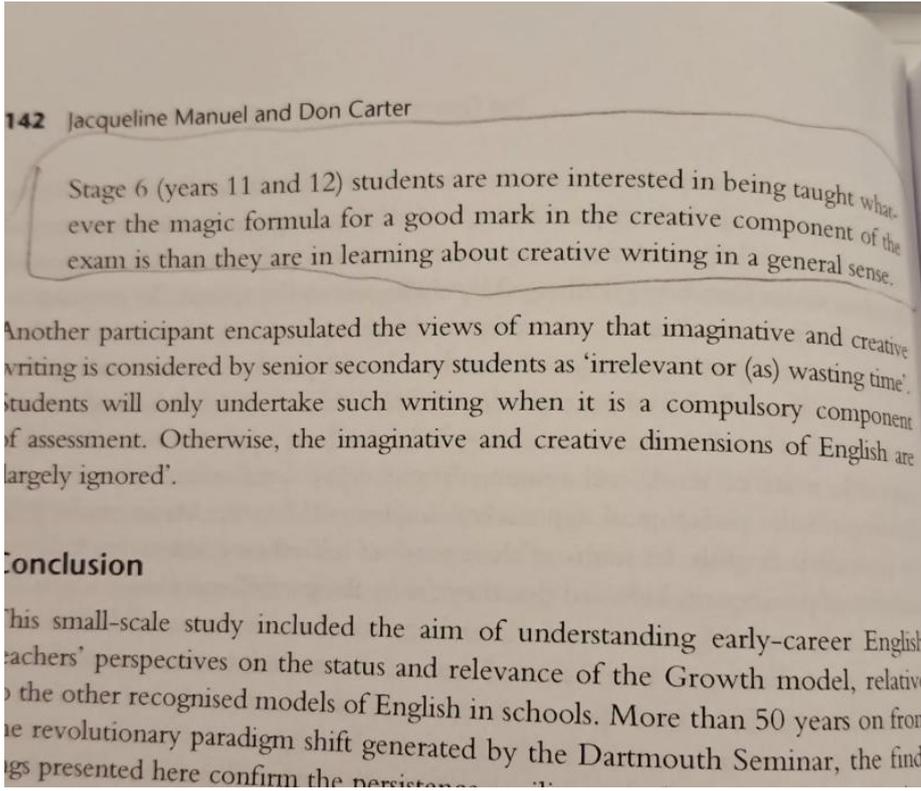I've found that really helpful in getting over the writer's block because I'm not staring at a blinking cursor on a blank page, I'm just writing about one paper! And that, certainly, is achievable!

Before I know it, I've done this for 5 papers! Then 10!

Not bad going for someone with a hugh asthma flare up and chest infection. I have to keep pausing to hack up a lung 🫁 🥵

83 w

1 like

15 February 2024

142 Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter

Stage 6 (years 11 and 12) students are more interested in being taught whatever the magic formula for a good mark in the creative component of the exam is than they are in learning about creative writing in a general sense.

Another participant encapsulated the views of many that imaginative and creative writing is considered by senior secondary students as 'irrelevant or (as) wasting time'. Students will only undertake such writing when it is a compulsory component of assessment. Otherwise, the imaginative and creative dimensions of English are largely ignored'.

Conclusion

This small-scale study included the aim of understanding early-career English teachers' perspectives on the status and relevance of the Growth model, relative to the other recognised models of English in schools. More than 50 years on from the revolutionary paradigm shift generated by the Dartmouth Seminar, the findings presented here confirm the persistence

doctoralprog

doctoralprog Went to a wedding last week and had an argument with a man working in finance about the importance of teaching creative writing in school. His argument was that studying literature and learning to write creativity are pointless because those skills haven't ever helped him in his job. And maybe he's never needed to do those things, but that doesn't render them pointless.

As Stephen Fry argues, "It is the useless things that make life worth living and that make life dangerous too: wine, love, art, beauty. Without them life is safe, but not worth bothering with."

64 w

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doctoralprog

doctoralprog Today I FINALLY finished doctoral interview transcription... 18 hours of interviews to write up and 6 hours of workshops. One minute of audio took somewhere between 8-12 minutes to transcribe depending on what was said and how many pauses and false starts there were (I opted for verbatim transcription) - so completing my transcription took 240 hours to complete. If an average full-time work week is 35 hours, that's 6.8 working weeks. But of course, I did it all in the last four weeks because I'm mad.

It's honestly been the most HELLISH process and I felt that no one really understood how hard it was, so apologies if I've been stressed with you in the last month - this is why. I honestly was questioning whether my doctorate was worth it at times, working insane hours and averaging 3 hours of sleep a night. A huge thanks to Matt for keeping me fed and relatively sane. BUT IT IS DONE. I couldn't be happier to have my life back.

Just kidding. Thematic analysis starts tomorrow. 🤪 But I'm looking forward to that bit!

58 w

247
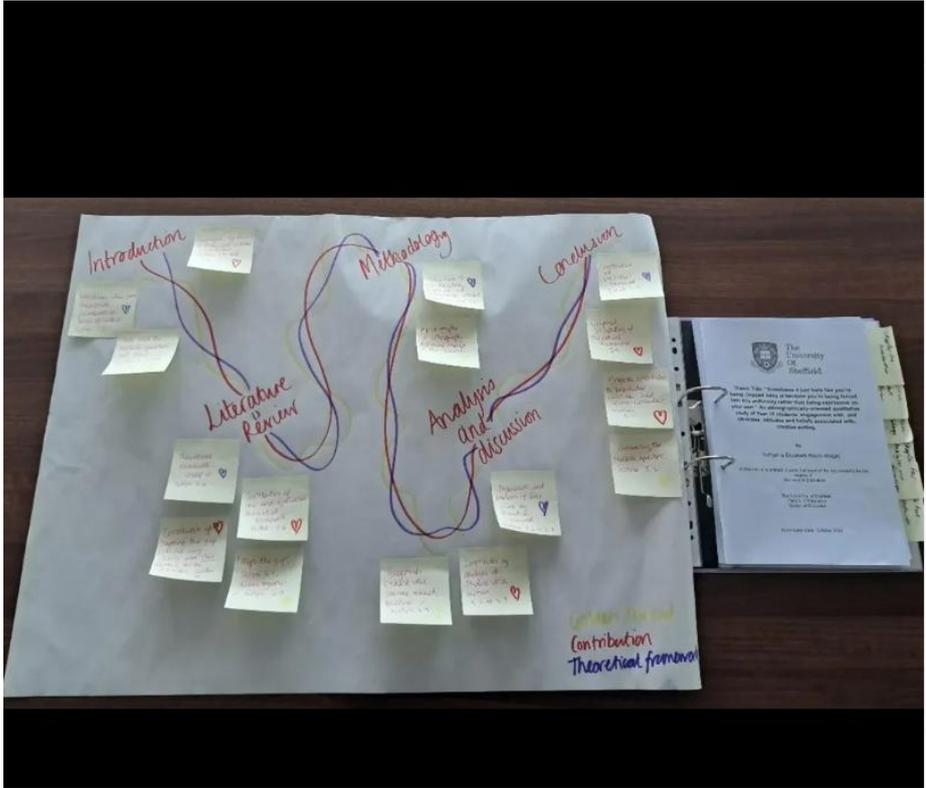
doctoralprog

doctoralprog Really productive session with Dr Angela Colvert yesterday discussing our original contributions to knowledge. I'd printed my thesis draft before the weekend so I could make notes onto the manuscript (what Stephen Fry's Pup would call his Meisterwerk in 'Making History', but no one ever gets that reference), and it was really useful to chart not only the mentions/ use of my theoretical framework, but also my original contribution and golden thread throughout the thesis. And it is most definitely there!

18 w

doctoralprog
FIAP Paris - Séminaires

doctoralprog I've had such a great time at the EACWP conference in Paris this week - it was great to hear the other speakers, take part in workshops, speak on a panel and present a lecture (including some of it in French, surprising myself!). I think my talks went very well and I quite possibly have a range of exciting opportunities open to me as a result... watch this space.

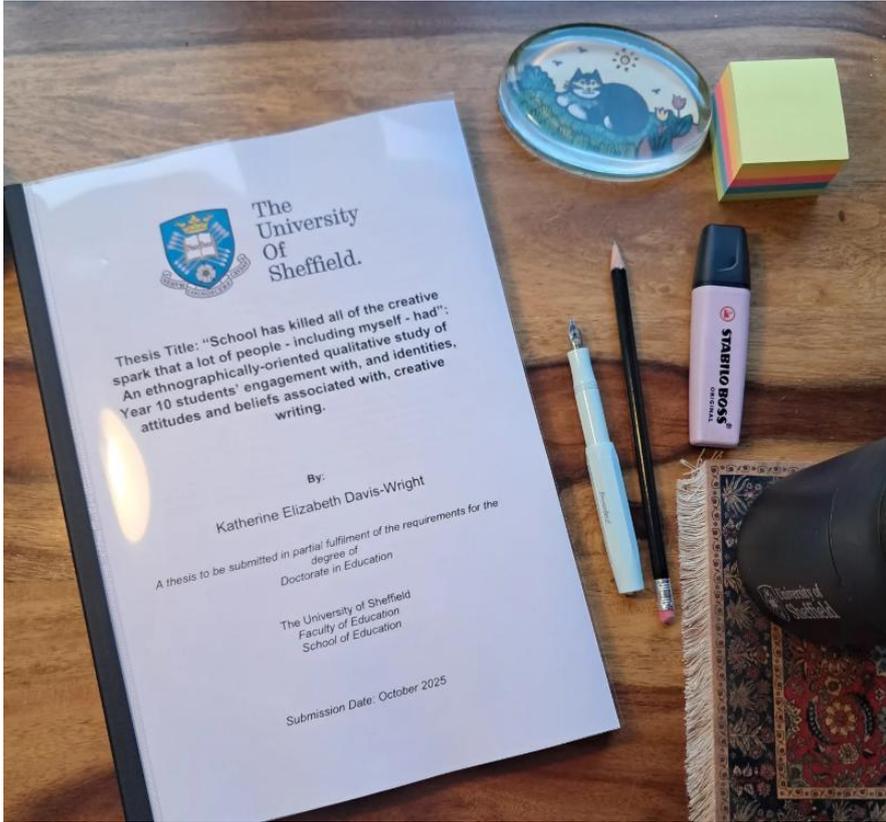Maybe the doctorate IS just start...

17 w

> Proud of you 🧡 🍌
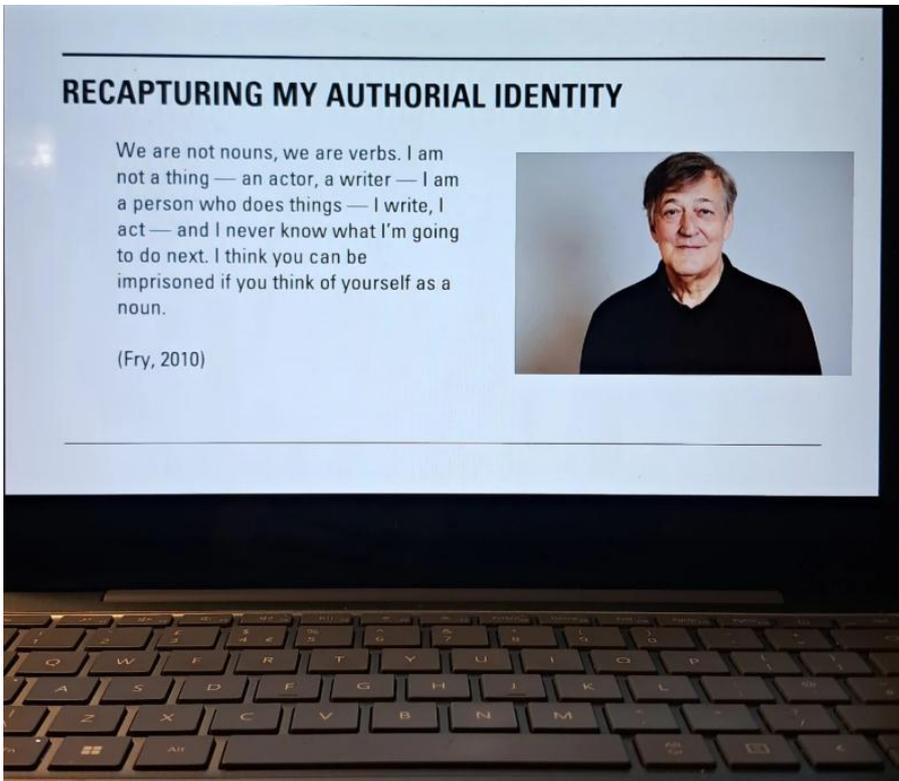> 17 w   1 like   Reply
> ── View replies (1)

Liked by   and **12 others**
16 May

doctoralprog Reached a new stage of editing today! 🖤
10 w

1 like
7 July

RECAPTURING MY AUTHORIAL IDENTITY

We are not nouns, we are verbs. I am not a thing — an actor, a writer — I am a person who does things — I write, I act — and I never know what I'm going to do next. I think you can be imprisoned if you think of yourself as a noun.

(Fry, 2010)

doctoralprog · · ·

doctoralprog Finishing my lecture PPTs for tomorrow's conference at UCL - of course SJF made it onto my slides!
Edited · 9 w