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'Something I've carried with me': Visibility and vulnerability within the writing journeys of preservice secondary English teachers

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Abstract

There is an assumption that English teachers identify as writers. This article explores the stories of three secondary preservice English teachers, their descriptions of their writing experiences and their self-perceived vulnerabilities around writing. These narratives originated in a broader research study into the writer identities of preservice English teachers. Situated with a qualitative paradigm, the research design aligned with a relativist ontological approach. An interpretivist epistemology led to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Participants completed qualitative surveys, drew 'writing rivers' and reflected on these in semistructured interviews. A story map represents participants' writing journeys over time. Findings suggest that participants associated writing with exposure from an early age. Assessment of writing made participants visible; they experienced negative feedback on their writing as personal criticism and disconnected from writing. Faced with teaching writing as preservice teachers, participants encountered the same pedagogical practices that they found challenging as students. Reflection on their writing histories led participants to explore the source of their writing vulnerabilities and how these were 'carried' with them into classroom practice. Findings illustrate how assessment-driven writing pedagogies can erode the writer identities of young people over time. The research therefore has implications for educational practice in a variety of contexts.

Key words: vulnerability, teacher–writer, writer–teacher, teachers of writing, writing identity

Introduction

This study started with a curiosity about why secondary English preservice teachers seemed reluctant to share their writing in university sessions. Although studies have explored teachers' relationships with writing (Cremin, 2006; Cremin and Baker, 2014; Draper et al., 2000; Gardner and Kuzich, 2023; Grainger, 2005; Luce-Kapler et al., 2001; Street and Stang, 2009), Cremin and Oliver note that 'relatively little appears to be known about teachers' attitudes to writing [or] their sense of themselves as writers' (2016, 270). Research into teachers' writing identities suggests literary histories deeply impact teachers with some lacking confidence in their writing abilities (Draper et al., 2000; Gardner, 2014; Street and Stang, 2009). Awareness of potential discomfort shaped the research design for this study, which focused on developing an understanding of 'what's happened to you?' rather than 'what's wrong with you?' (Bloom and Sreedhar, 2008, 50). Method selection focused on those with elicitation and reflective properties: qualitative surveys, the creation of a visual 'writing river' and semistructured interviews. While the use of participant-created imagery alongside IPA is 'relatively rare' (Bartoli, 2019, 1012), the use of the writing river aimed to facilitate the articulation of hidden stories (Boden-Stuart et al., 2018; Shinebourne and Smith, 2010). This method also supported participants' autobiographical reflection on their vulnerabilities around writing (Brown, 2006; Kelchtermans, 1996).

The etymology of 'vulnerable' stems from the Latin for 'to wound' (Brown, 2006, 48). Bullough defines vulnerability as being 'capable of being hurt' (2005, 23). In this negative framing, vulnerability is an undesirable state of fear and insecurity (Jordan, 2008). Lasky describes vulnerability as a 'fluid', 'multidimensional, multifaceted emotional experience that individuals can feel in an array of contexts' (2005, 901). Research into teacher vulnerability suggests that these contexts include classroom practice, interpersonal interactions with students and colleagues, and at a wider socio-political level, with a sense of disconnection with educational policy (Bacova and Turner, 2023; Kelchtermans, 1996, 2009; Lasky, 2005). The visibility of teaching may also intensify feelings of vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 1996).

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Brown (2006, 45) argues that acknowledging vulnerability can be challenging, especially as this is associated with shame, 'an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging'. Shame may present as feeling trapped, disempowered, judged or the need to hide (Brown, 2006). Shame is likely to be more overwhelming if vulnerability in this area is unacknowledged beforehand (Brown, 2006). However, recognition and sharing of personal vulnerability can support empowerment: 'speak[ing] shame' enables shame resilience (Brown 2006, 48). Thus, vulnerability can be a place of growth and connection as well as fear (Jordan, 2008). It is part of the human experience, a 'shared ontological condition' (Clift et al. 2023, 3). While being vulnerable leaves us exposed, it also means that we are open to others. If our vulnerability does not meet with an authentic response, we often 'disconnect' as a protective strategy (Jordan, 2008, 14). To be vulnerable is therefore an act of courage (Brown, 2012; Jordan, 2008).

Literature review

Vulnerability in teachers of writing

Writer identity is 'the culmination of one's writing experiences, beliefs, and habits' (Premont, 2022, 2). The limited research into the practices of teachers of writing suggests that teachers with strong writing identities are effective classroom practitioners (Premont, 2022; Woodard, 2015). By writing alongside their students, these teachers create writing communities (Cremin and Baker, 2014; Cremin and Myhill, 2012; Heger, 2023; Kaufman, 2009; Vasques, 2020). Here, the teacher's vulnerability facilitates connection, as sharing writing 'draws writers closer together' (Cremin and Myhill, 2012, 131). Furthermore, teachers who write with students engender a sense of belonging within the classroom (Zumbrunn and Krause, 2012; Young et al., 2022). However, the same body of research suggests that 'many' teachers do not identify as writers (Premont, 2022, 1). Studies report teachers' discomfort with writing (Cremin and Baker, 2014; Cremin and Myhill, 2012; Cremin et al., 2019; Grainger, 2005) and lack of confidence with teaching writing (Cremin and Myhill, 2012; Draper et al., 2000; Luce-Kapler et al., 2001). In one study, participants avoided modelling 'spontaneous' writing in the classroom, instead they prepared writing at home and 'pretended' to think aloud as they wrote in front of students (Grainger, 2005, 132). These teachers vocalised a dissonance in their practice, while their own writing benefitted from time and redrafting, they did not extend this opportunity to students (Grainger, 2005).

Young and Ferguson define a teacher–writer as, 'simultaneously a writer who knows how to teach writing and a teacher who identifies as a writer' (2021, 199). Cremin and Baker identified a 'constant oscillation' between teacher–writers who write for the system and, at the other end of a continuum, writer–teachers who write for themselves (2014, 6). In the literature on teacher writer identity, there is an implicit deficit in the language used to describe teachers of writing who do not identify as writers themselves. Descriptions of teachers who do not identify as writers refer to their 'weak' or 'negative' writer identities (Premont, 2022, 6) where practice is 'pedestrian' (Street, 2003, 38). Draper et al. refer to their participants as 'writers' and 'nonwriters' (2000, 193). The use of 'non' feels problematic, especially in a context where the 'writer' part of the label is desirable. This term also implies that these teachers cannot write, connoting a lack of competency, rather than volition. An alternative term could be 'teachers of writing'. Given that research suggests that writing may be a source of vulnerability for teachers, perhaps it is useful to reflect on how teachers' writing identities and consequently, their writing vulnerabilities, may be impacted by 'external demands and contexts', starting with the positioning of the teacher within the current secondary context (Alsup, 2019, 131).

Product or process: The current secondary writing context

Several reports recommend teacher modelling of writing as a key pedagogical strategy (DfE, 2012; Ofsted, 2009, 2012, 2022). However, Barrs (2019, 18) argues that the most recent curriculum implicitly prioritises 'form over content' and values an assessable outcome. Instead of teaching writing as with composition and then transcription, the 2013 curriculum reverses this so that writing focuses on transcription (spelling and handwriting) before composition (articulation of students' ideas). This implies that a teacher should first ensure that the students' writing is correct. The 2022 Ofsted research review mirrors this focus on the creation of a written product with teachers as experts, demonstrating 'different ways of constructing sentences' and providing 'models of effective writing'. Cremin and Myhill (2012) have questioned the positioning of the teacher within a modelling context, pointing out that demonstration and construction does not necessarily involve 'being' a writer. It is worth considering whether the visibility inherent in modelling writing may amplify feelings of vulnerability in teachers who do not identify as writers.

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In the current UK system of terminal GCSE exams and high levels of teacher accountability, it is understandable that teacher writing pedagogies are more likely to focus on the production of a final assessable product (Reeves, 2018). The dominance of assessment-driven writing pedagogies throughout the secondary experience is implicit in the recent Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) *Practice Review of teaching Writing* (2024). This reports that schools create writing approaches by 'working backward from expected GCSE standards' (2024, 17). GCSE pupils are unmotivated and 'struggle to see the link between [writing for] self-expression and exam results' in a curriculum overshadowed by academic writing (EEF, 2024, 24). This lack of motivation implies that students have disconnected from a system that they do not believe values their writing (Jordan, 2008). Teachers' practices also reflect a preoccupation with assessment criteria, the report highlights teachers' lack of confidence with drafting, revising and editing, skills which carry no marks in the English Language GCSE exam. As dominant discourses of writing tend to centre 'particular beliefs and practices at the expense of others' (Ivanič, 2004, 227), the current system of writing instruction values the creation of an assessable product, rather than student (and therefore the teacher's) understanding of a writing process.

The influence of assessment-driven pedagogies of writing also extends to feedback, a process inherently linked to vulnerability (Brown, 2012). The Ofsted research review (2022) explicitly warns against writing that adheres to a mark scheme. This aligns with Kulz's description of a system where 'results-driven quantification directs learning' (2017, 55). If 'assessment criteria dictate practice' (Barrs, 2019, 25), it is unsurprising that writing lessons feature students' inclusion of key features from a prescribed list and 'formulaic, tick box pedagogy' (Webb, 2020, 16). Reliance on stipulated criteria may disempower teachers, undermining their own perceptions of what constitutes effective writing and destabilising their teacher identity (Barrs, 2019). Furthermore, we should consider the impact that this practice has on students, especially if we perceive the sharing of writing as an act of vulnerability, where the writer is 'exposed' (Gannon and Davies, 2007, 95). Cruice asks, 'whether good writing can be measured by a list of technical devices or whether there is something more nuanced, more subtle and more human happening when a person seeks to communicate their view of the world to another person via words on a page' (2018, 51). This description frames sharing writing as an act of seeking connection, 'to judge my writing is to judge me … to share my writing is to share myself' (Whitney, 2018, 130). The EEF (2024, 34) report recommends 'teacher modelling of creative writing to share vulnerability … providing safe environments in which self-expression is encouraged and supported'. These principles seem incongruous with the aforementioned context around the teaching of writing in UK secondary schools.

Studies highlight teacher discomfort with teaching writing, the potentially problematic positioning of the teacher as expert and the dominance of assessment-driven pedagogies of writing in the current UK context. Recognising these issues, I posed the following research question: "How do secondary English teachers describe experiences of writing that led to their perceptions of their own vulnerabilities regarding writing and writing instruction?"

Methodology, methods and data collection

This paper presents findings from a larger research project that sought to understand participants' experiences of writing over time and to encourage individuals to reflect on their writing histories. Within the study, I noticed an underlying feeling of vulnerability from the participants regarding their writing. This paper reports on that aspect of the data.

As a methodological framework, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) values an individual's narration of experience where both the participant and the researcher attempt to make sense of the participant's story, a process described as double hermeneutics (Bartoli, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). In the first phase of the research study, participants responded independently to qualitative survey questions about their experiences of writing at specific points in their lives (see Appendix 1). At the end of the survey, participants were provided with drawing materials and encouraged to draw an autobiographical river of their writing journeys, considering their emotional responses to writing over time and the inclusion of factors that may have influenced these feelings.

Several IPA studies use visual methods as a means of prompting a participant's reflection on a challenging experience: transitions (Bartoli, 2019); recovery (Shinebourne and Smith, 2010); pain (Kirkham et al., 2015; Nizza et al., 2017) and experience of psychotherapy environments (Morrey et al., 2022). The creation of nonverbal data reflects another mode of participant sense-making, with independent analysis of the visual elements. This 'triple hermeneutic' involves the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interpretation of the visual depiction of their experience (Kirkham et al., 2015, 400).

The use of writing rivers as a visual research method to understand participants' writing experiences evolved from Cliff Hodges' 'rivers of reading' where a river

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represents a participant's personal reading history (2010). Participants in this study had experience of reading rivers, having made their own as part of their Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) programme. The metaphor of the river conveys an 'ever changing' process (Cliff Hodges, 2010, 188), aligning with the fluid natures of identity and vulnerability (Alsup, 2019; Lasky, 2005). Taking the time to represent their experiences metaphorically encouraged participants to articulate affective aspects of their experiences that could prove challenging in an interview setting. Communicating through a non-verbal medium also offered a means of 'disrupting … rehearsed narratives', facilitating a deeper connection to their experiences (Boden-Stuart et al., 2018, 221). Prompting a participant to create their own narrative of experience can be therapeutic, reasserting their autonomy 'as the dominant author of their own life story' (de Muijnck, 2022, 77). The temporal depiction of the writing river has reflexive potential, allowing the creator to look backwards and forwards through their writing history, drawing 'the sediments of past experiences' to the surface (Steadman, 2023, 1) and facilitating a 'dialogue' between the 'past and present identities of student and teacher' (Alsup, 2019, 116). Other studies have used writing rivers as a means of exploring writer intentions (Cremin and Myhill, 2012) and to chart the development of a writer over time (Cremin and Baker, 2014).

The second phase of the project took place 3 months later and engaged participants in online semistructured interviews about their writing histories. The participants' writing rivers were shared on the screen, involved them in the co-construction of meaning (Birt et al., 2016; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Smith et al., 2022).

I asked all participants the following questions:

- Please can you tell me about your writing river?
- Could you describe a positive experience of writing?
- Could you describe a negative experience of writing?
- How do you feel about writing now?

In addition to these questions, I created a series of personalised questions for each participant. These derived from my analysis of participants' completed surveys and writing rivers in the first phase. These personalised questions focused on eliciting a more detailed description of the formative events and experiences of writing instruction mentioned in phase one data.

Participants and ethics

For the duration of the research project, all three participants (Amira, Faye and Jessica) were studying for a PGCE in English at a post '92 university in the East Midlands. All identified as female, and all volunteered to participate in the study. The use of pseudonyms supported confidentiality, as did the removal of some details in participants' writing rivers (Mannay, 2016). Given that I was also a lecturer on the PGCE course, consideration of the power dynamics within the research design emphasised the need for participant autonomy and agency (BERA, 2018; Newman et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2022). Participants chose the time and place of their interviews. All opted for Microsoft Teams. Prior to the interview, I reminded participants of their right to withdraw and signposted support. Both phases of the project received a favourable opinion from the university ethics committee and the research followed BERA guidelines (2018).

Limitations

These findings relate to data collected from a sample of three female participants at a post '92 university. While the intention of IPA is not to generalise from findings, it would be interesting to see how findings might differ in other institutions or with a more diverse population (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Smith et al., 2022). While the time frame between the two stages of the research process could perceived as an issue (Birt et al., 2016), this seems to have offered participants time to reflect on their writing experiences, adding depth to their final interviews. Aligning with IPA's emphasis on the individual, interviews took place in a one-to-one setting (Smith et al., 2022). On reflection, focus group interviews may have offered a supportive space for participants to share their stories, forging connections and supporting shame resilience (Brown, 2006). Finally, the use of writing rivers alongside qualitative surveys in phase one generated some overlaps in participant data. However, the interplay between these two methods also offers insights into participant experience of writing.

Data analysis

The idiographic nature of IPA means that the researcher engages with each participant's data separately (Smith et al., 2022). The data analysis process for phase one (Figure 1) drew on Bartoli's (2019) adapted six step IPA analysis and Boden and Eatough's (2014) visual analysis framework.

Data from each participants' survey and writing river led to the creation of experiential themes for each participant, reflecting their original data and my interpretations of this (Step 3). These were clustered, focusing on participant descriptions of their writing experiences, their perceived vulnerabilities around

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Step 1: Engagement with one participant's data, reading and re-reading survey responses and engagement with their writing river. Focus on the participant's words and images used to describe or depict writing experiences and / or perceptions of vulnerability around writing or teaching writing in school
Step 2: Exploratory and conceptual notetaking on written responses • With surveys: focus on linguistic choices, repetition, and dissonance. How do participants describe their writing experiences? • With rivers: focus on content and composition. Exploration of materials, shape, colour, and symbolism around depictions of writing. Consideration of focus – what is the eye drawn to? Text choice and font.
Step 3: Creation of experiential themes for participant
Step 4: Clustering of experiential themes into PETs for participant
Step 5: Creation of potential questions for further discussion with participant in semi structured interview
Step 6: Repeat the process for each participant
Step 7: Creation of GETs for participants, consideration of commonality and divergence

Figure 1: The analytical process for phase one of the research study.

Step 1: Checking one participant's interview transcript for accuracy and careful reading and rereading of their original data. Focus on their descriptions of their writing experiences and / or perceptions of vulnerability around writing or writing instruction
Step 2: Exploratory and conceptual note taking on content
Step 3: Creation of experiential themes for participant
Step 4: Clustering of experiential themes into PETs for participant
Step 5: Repeat the process for each participant
Step 6: Creation of GETs for participants, consideration of commonality and divergence

Figure 2: The analytical process for the interview data.

writing or writing instruction. Each cluster then became a Personal Experiential Theme (PET) for each participant (Step 4). As individual experiential statements referenced key lines within the survey transcript or details from rivers, this process supported the subsequent drafting of interview questions for phase two (Step five) and created an 'evidence trail' (Smith et al., 2022, 95). After creating individual participants' PETs (Step 6), analysis then moved to creating Group Experiential Themes (GETs) across all participants' data (Step 7). A GET is a 'construct which usually applies to each participant within a corpus which can be manifest in different ways within the contributing cases' (Smith et al., 2022, 186). For a GET to be feasible, it should cover at least half of the participants, however a GET may also reflect 'the distinctive concerns of a small subset of participants' (Smith et al., 2022, 105). Data analysis considered participants' surveys and writing rivers separately and alongside each other. Analysis of the interview data in the second phase of the study followed a similar pattern to data analysis in phase one (Figure 2).

Findings and discussion

Figure 3 is a collective, visual representation of participants' writing journeys over time. This is an amalgamation of data from participants' surveys, writing rivers and interviews, employing cartographic elements to tell a story (Roth, 2021). This story map includes places 'visited' by all participants in the original study, but additional annotations highlight Faye, Jessica and Amira's journeys.

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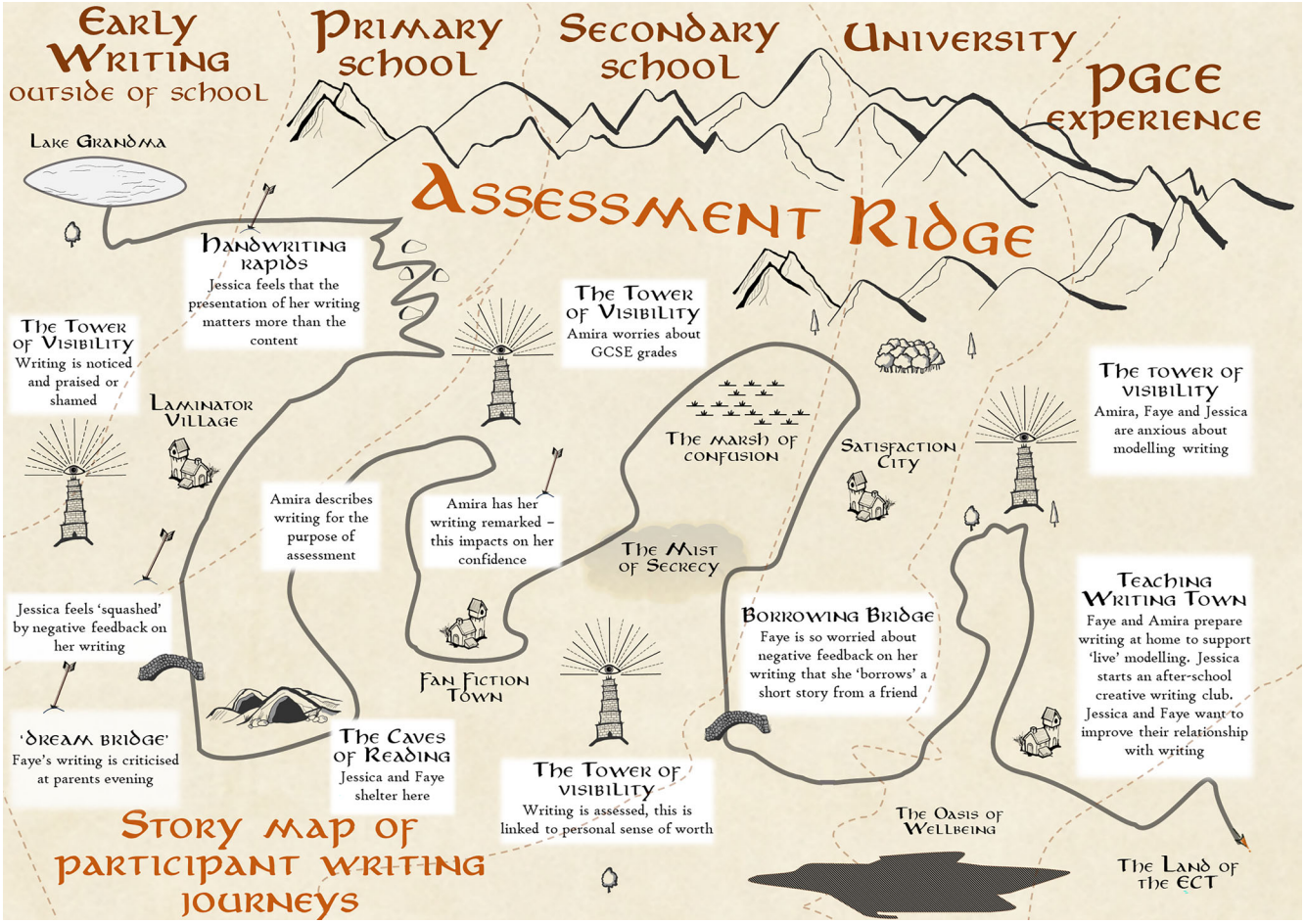

Figure 3: A story map of participant writing journeys created by the researcher.

Like Cliff-Hodges' (2010) reading rivers, the story map (Figure 3) utilises the metaphor of a river moving through a terrain. Distinct territories represent different time periods. The inclusion of the story map supports the dissemination of these findings and aims to engage readers with participants' stories in an accessible form (Kara, 2020). Furthermore, in this format the reader can follow participants' writing journeys, supporting IPA's focus on individual and shared experience, (Bartoli, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). The following section presents findings chronologically, starting with participants' early experience of writing as exposing. Negative feedback on participants' writing led to a disconnection from writing. As preservice teachers, participants reengaged with writing but still carried the scars of their earlier experiences.

Assessment of participants' writing exposed them to others

Participants' feelings about the assessment of their writing were present throughout their experiences of education and awareness of assessment practices also coloured participants' PGCE experiences. Assessment Ridge, a dominating mountain range on the story map (Figure 3), represents the scale and duration of this theme throughout participant experience of formal education. At the foothills of Assessment Ridge, The Handwriting Rapids represent Jessica's first experience of writing assessment. In her survey, Jessica noted that her early schooling included a focus on writing being 'neat and joined up rather than the content.' Amira's survey responses continually aligned her experiences of writing with the purposes of assessment. Her response to the survey question about feedback stated, 'I always perceived writing as something that was done with the intention to be looked at by somebody else … Writing was completed for a purpose … to be marked.' In Amira's experience, writing was not a volitional act. In her description of writing being 'looked at by someone else', writing is associated with visibility. This theme links to the participants' creation of an observable outcome but also extends into the public assessment of a written product, a process whereby participants become vulnerable. In Amira's interview,

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she remembered a teacher at primary school showing her book to the rest of the class,

> *It was about the length; how much I'd written … she probably hadn't actually read what I'd written … When you're a child, you think that it's all about the quantity and not the quality.*

In this description, the content or 'quality' of Amira's writing is unimportant, what matters is quantity, something that is immediately visible. The phrase 'when you're a child' may convey Amira's empathy with her younger self, or with her own students.

Teacher assessment of a final written product was also evident in Faye's data. In her survey she described an experience where her use of 'it was all a dream' at the end of a story provoked public criticism, 'The teacher hated it, told my parents at parents evening and they also hated it!' The repetition of 'hate' connects Faye's writing with negative responses from others. Faye's writing river includes the phrase 'it was all a dream' above a 'BRIDGE' (Figure 4). This bridge is the focal point of Faye's drawing and seems to act as a dam, 'writing river becomes a writing trickle'. A second stream, 'THIS WAY TO READING' is more heavily shaded. Here, the bifurcation of the river may represent Faye's disconnection with writing as a vulnerable response to perceived criticism (Jordan, 2008).

Participant descriptions emphasise the power of writing to expose, making writers vulnerable to shame (Gannon and Davies, 2007; Whitney, 2018). I have used the metaphor of a Tower of Visibility (Figure 5) to illustrate how participants repeatedly associated the assessment of their writing with an increase in their exposure to external praise or censure. The tower symbolises the unassailable authority of those looking at participants' writing. The Tolkienesque eye represents participants' feelings of vulnerability and their inability to remove themselves from scrutiny. This image first appears on the story map in participants' early accounts of school. It reappears during participants' recollection of their GCSEs and again during their PGCE experiences.

Participants experienced assessment of their writing as personal judgement

All three participants experienced feedback on their writing as personal criticism. Arrows on the story map (Figure 3) indicate where negative feedback wounded participants.

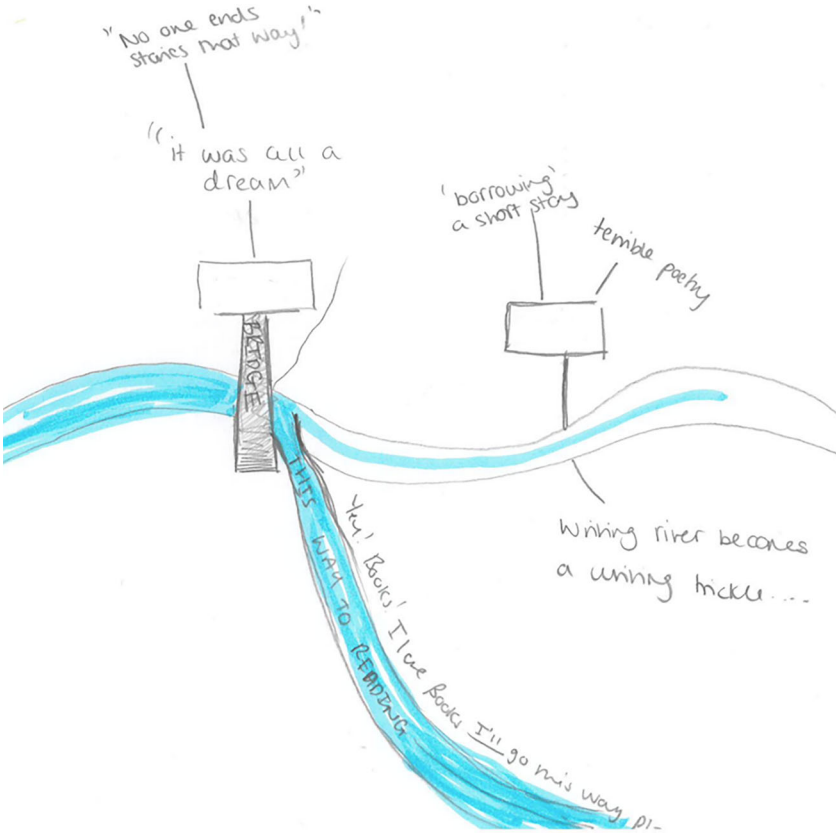

Figure 4: Extract from Faye's writing river.

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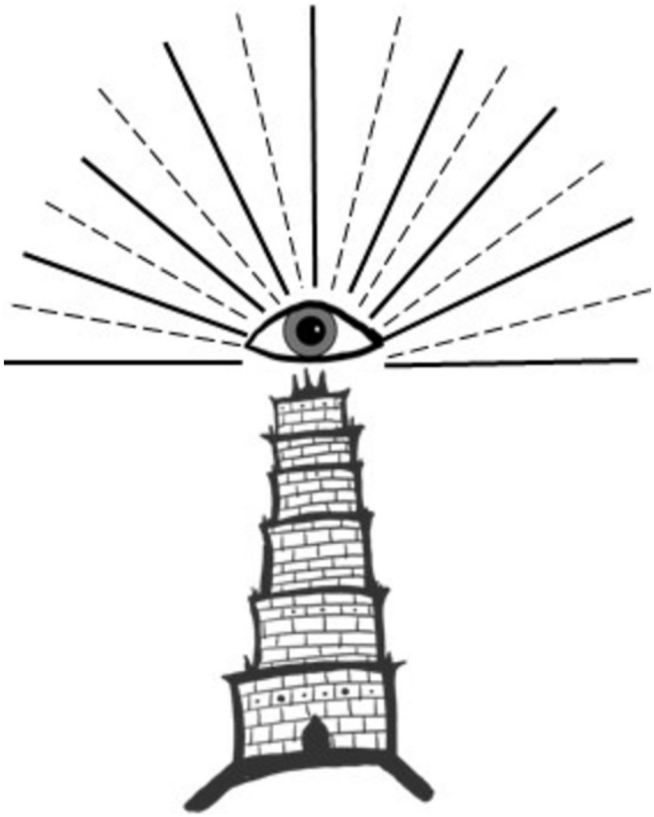

Figure 5: The Tower of Visibility, drawn by the researcher.

Faye's interview focused on the 'bridge' incident (Figure 4). She described how her father echoed her teacher's admonition, 'no one ends stories that way', which resulted in her thinking, 'I'm not very good at writing.' She reflected, 'I think that's why I put that as a bridge, and it was in that moment that I … went deeper into reading'. For Faye, this experience was 'pivotal' to her experiences of English. As an undergraduate, her writing vulnerabilities resurfaced. The unbearable anticipation of negative feedback led Faye to 'borrow' a short story, 'I can't handle that … the anxiety. And the judgment … I'm gonna get torn apart.' Without the 'bridge', Faye believed that she 'would have been happy to share my own writing … it's like that 'sliding doors' moment, isn't it?' Her description of going 'deeper in reading', suggests that reading offered her another path, another identity. The 'Caves of Reading' on the story map represent this sense of reading as a refuge. For Faye, avoiding writing became an act of self-preservation. The story map includes two drawings of a bridge, one where the initial experience happened and later in 'Borrowing Bridge' in the University section, as Faye's writing river linked these two events.

Like Faye, Jessica's survey described negative feedback from a teacher. This left her feeling 'deflated … knocked my confidence and is the last time I wrote for pleasure.' On her writing river, Jessica noted, 'getting negative feedback from teachers squashed my desire to write ☹' (Figure 6).

In her interview, Jessica discussed this negative feedback experience,

> *I just remember that feeling of hiding … and then just shutting it away. I don't think I even looked at the feedback, I just saw the red pen … it put me off … Made me think that maybe it's not for me. I'll just keep reading.*
>
> *But I can still remember the embarrassment. You know, it probably felt worse because I was so young, because at that age, I don't think you can deal with … that kind of criticism when you really tried, and I remember really, really trying at home.*

There are interesting correlations in Jessica and Faye's experience of negative feedback on their writing. There is a somatic aspect to their responses, Jessica's survey mentioned feeling 'deflated', her writing river described her desire to write 'squashed' by feedback, which links with Faye's anticipation of being 'torn apart'. These are classic shame responses and suggest participants experienced vulnerability bodily (Brown, 2006; Whitney, 2018). Like Faye, Jessica sought shelter in reading, disengaging with writing as a means of self-preservation (Jordan, 2008).

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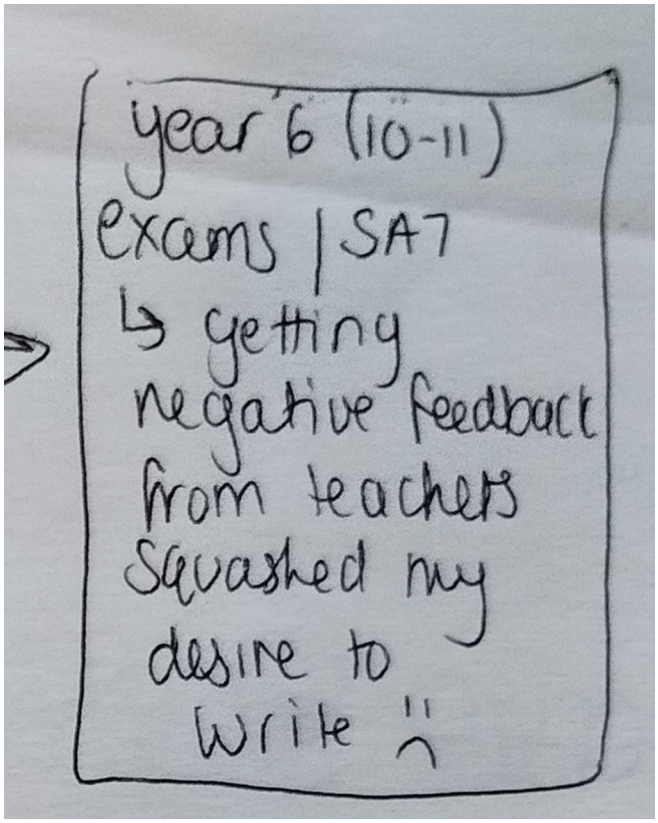

Figure 6: Extract from Jessica's writing river.

Amira's writing river illustrates a correlation between her grades and her self-confidence in writing. Her river notes that a piece of writing received a higher grade after a re-mark (Figure 7).

In her interview, Amira discussed the impact of this experience, 'I knew that I was good at [English], so not getting my expected grade … Would have just made me feel like I'd failed'. There is an interesting conflict here between Amira's knowledge of her own competency and the perceived messaging from assessment. The unexpected nature of this criticism may have amplified Amira, Faye and Jessica's emotional responses (Brown, 2006). Furthermore, if we perceive the sharing of writing as an act of vulnerability, all three experienced disconnections when their writing met with negativity (Brown, 2012; Cruice, 2018; Jordan, 2008).

Participants' negative experiences with writing impact on their pedagogical practice

The final question on the qualitative survey asked participants if they wished to add anything further about their thought on writing. Jessica wrote, 'I wish I had [had] a more positive experience with writing at school. Then maybe I would not feel anxious about writing/sharing my ideas as an adult.' Faye made a similar link between the consequences of her 'sliding doors' moment and vulnerabilities around her practice in school, 'because of my own hang ups with creative writing, I do not enjoy teaching that at the moment.' She went on to explain,

> *I haven't felt comfortable with it for a very long time. It's that exposure, you know … I love that visibility when I'm talking about a text … but when it comes to creative writing, I feel really exposed … that they are gonna see through me … Like, who the hell is this at the front of the classroom?*

Faye's sense of visibility is interesting. When she is comfortable with the topic visibility is enjoyable, something that she 'love[s].' Her sense of being comfortable with 'talking about a text' may link to her early identification as a reader. Writing, however, is associated with a sense of exposure and implied inadequacy. Faye anticipates being exposed as someone who should not be 'at the front of the classroom.' In her interview, she said that she was reluctant to live model writing because, 'I've started to feel exposed again and all that anxiety was rushing back'. Preparing at home offered 'something to fall back on'. There is a clear parallel here

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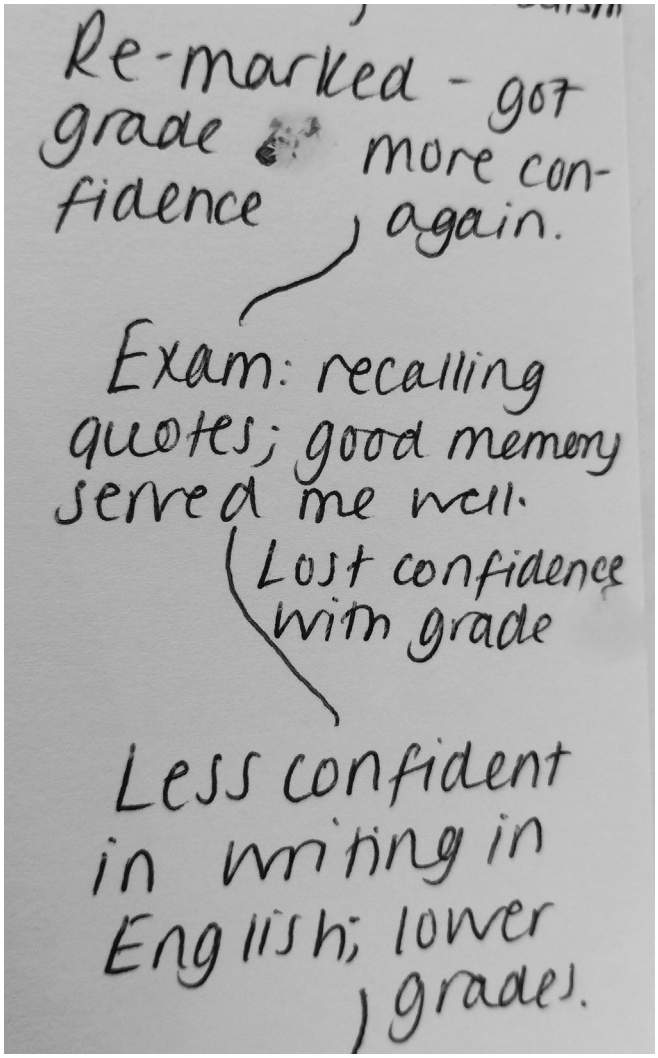

Figure 7: Extract from Amira's writing river.

to the experiences of Grainger's (2005) students who avoided live writing due to the sense of exposure. Furthermore, modelling writing may exacerbate feelings of visibility and vulnerability (Kelchtermans, 1996).

In her interview, Jessica explained how her classroom practice on the PGCE focused on supporting students' writer identities. She said that the writing river 'made me start thinking about the kids in the classes I teach. That's why I have promoted creative writing outside of the school hours. So … we don't have to put these restraints on them.' Jessica's use of 'restraints' suggests that she finds the teaching of writing confining. She said that students produced superior writing in her after school writing club. In lessons,

> *They normally have a check list on the board … to make sure they include like a metaphor or simile … and they struggle to put it in. But when they are allowed to do it on their own [in the writing club], it goes in naturally.*

Jessica's description of the 'checklist' suggests that classroom writing practice focuses on students producing a formulaic, assessable outcome (Barrs, 2019; Webb, 2020). Her work with students outside of this context has given her an insight into another way of viewing writing, where student agency matters (Young and Ferguson, 2021).

In her interview, Amira described planning writing at home because she, 'hate[d] writing on the spot.' She explained, 'Well, everybody can see it for a start … And it feels like it has to be right. Because I'm teaching somebody else.' This suggests that Amira feels a teacher must model perfect, or 'right' writing. She went on to speculate that writing, 'gives people an opportunity to judge me.' She went on, 'I guess it comes from being … being graded. Because essentially your writing's being judged, isn't it? I always link that to who I am. That's the grade that I've got and that that defines me.' In this, Amira links her current classroom practice back to her teenage experience of written

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assessment and the impact of this on her identity. Faye's interview also drew parallels between her historic experience and her current classroom practice. She found marking writing frustrating as this focused on ensuring that students 'followed the right formula.' After a pause, she commented 'it's creative writing! There shouldn't be a formula! And why can't you end a story with a dream?'

This reflection was also visible in Faye's awareness of the need for sensitive feedback on writing. In her interview she said,

> *This is what it all boils down to. You have to be so conscious when you give feedback to … someone so young … I was … 12? 13? Still a kid. I'm learning how to write. I think that's something I've carried with me into my teaching.*

Here there is a sense of the adult Faye's connection to her younger self. The phrase, 'still a kid … learning how to write' feels empathetic. There is also a recognition of her own vulnerability and an explicit link between her writing history and her current practice. The phrase 'carried with me' implies that she has shouldered a physical manifestation of the negative consequences of feedback. It also suggests that her sense of herself as someone who struggles with writing may not be easily set aside.

Implications for practice and conclusion

Writing rivers as a means of facilitating exploration of writer vulnerability

At the start of her interview, Jessica reflected on the process of creating a writing river,

> *It was quite eye opening …. I stopped [writing] at school… due to teachers mainly … I'm writing a little bit, now …it's something I really want to improve, but it made me realise where my issues came from.*

For Jessica, the writing river was a means of illuminating her past. The sense that the process was 'eye opening' is striking, as this suggests that this bought new insight into the source of her 'issues' with writing. In her interview, Faye commented that she 'confessed' to 'borrowing' a story in her drawing, supporting the potential of visual methods to disrupt established narratives (Boden-Stuart et al., 2018). There was also a shift in the emotional tone of Faye's data from phase one and phase two. In her survey, she criticised her writing ability but, in her interview, she expressed sympathy for her younger self and frustration with the system that so negatively impacted her. Writing rivers could therefore be a useful tool for encouraging personal reflection within initial teacher education (ITE), or in a classroom setting. For Jessica, reflecting on writing was 'uncomfortable' because she recognised her own reluctance to share her writing but acknowledged that the process would support her practice, 'If I can't do something myself then I can't really ask the students to do it.' Similarly, Faye wanted to improve her writing confidence, 'if I'm expecting my pupils to do it, I should feel comfortable doing it myself.' Vocalising the commonalities within these experiences may also have the potential to depersonalise them: most participants struggled with feedback and all participants found it hard to teach writing. Sharing these vulnerabilities may then engender the creation of a community (Brown, 2006).

Conclusion

This study suggests that participants' vulnerabilities in teaching writing stem from early experiences of writing as exposing. Negative feedback on participants' writing undermined their confidence in their writing competencies. As adults, the PGCE experience bought them back to writing and encouraged them to reengage with the practices that provoked their disconnection with writing in the first place. Their discomfort intensified because of the experience of an assessment-driven system of teaching writing where teachers must demonstrate 'correct' writing in front of others. Positioned as expert writers, a label that they neither desired nor felt that they deserved, their feelings of inadequacy increased. Their preplanned writing is the consequence of a system where writing is not safe. The tragedy of this is that the presentation of this carefully crafted material as spontaneous is likely to result in students who are unable to replicate it, doubt their own abilities as a writer, disconnect and the cycle continues. There is real courage in participants' sharing of their writing histories particularly in a system where vulnerability has so often met with criticism. Brown's (2006) recommendation that empathy and community can promote shame resilience feels ironic here, as participants have learned that sharing writing is a dangerous business and therefore are less likely to want to do it. As 'many' teachers do not identify as writers (Premont, 2022, 1), discourse around their practice should be compassionate and non-judgemental. Further research might focus on the cause of this disconnection and how we might repair it.

The humanity that Cruice (2018) associates with the sharing of writing seems of paramount importance here. The humanity of writers and teachers of writing matter, since sharing writing is a profoundly

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vulnerable act and feedback has the potential to wound. If 'assessment criteria dictate practice' (Barrs, 2019, 25), we need a system that explicitly values all of the writing process, including the edits and drafts that are part of the authentic journey of the text. An emphasis on the vulnerability involved in writing might then facilitate sharing, making the classroom a more positive space for the confluence of the writing journeys of students and their teachers.

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Supporting Information

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