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The Development of Habitus Over Time

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The Development of Habitus Over Time

Catherine Compton-Lilly

In this paper I use a case study approach to explore the ways in which the accumulation of writing capital influences students' development of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) as writers. I use Bourdieu's definitions of *capital*, *habitus*, and *field* to frame the discussion. In particular, I focus on one low income, African American student, Peter Horner.[1] I use his writing as an example, along with his comments about writing, and reflections from his mother (Ms. Horner), his grandmother (Ms. Waters), and his high school English teacher.

In the 10 years that I knew him Peter developed into a skilled writer. Analyzing Peter's development of habitus allows us to examine Bourdieu's constructs in detail. I begin this paper by reviewing Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus, and field. Following this theoretical overview, I apply the construct of capital to writing and describe different forms of writing capital. I link the accumulation of writing capital to the development of habitus as a writer. Next, I explore the methodological procedures for this 10-year longitudinal study. Finally, I present Peter's story using writing samples from each phase of the research process, and document not only the writing capital that Peter accumulated over time, but also the habitus he developed as a writer. I also explore the complexities that accompany being a successful writer in school, and consider the social field and how Peter's accomplishments are contextualized within school and society.

Capital, Habitus, and Field: Making Sense of Success

The theoretical framework of capital, habitus, and field, constructed by Pierre Bourdieu, is well suited for examining how literacy has been socially and historically used to differentiate and privilege certain groups of people. Like Carrington and Luke (1997), I found Bourdieu's sociological theories useful for constructing a "template for identifying contingent factors influencing the local possibilities and limits of school-acquired literate practices and competencies" (p. 96).

Capital: Culturally Valued Ways of Being, Knowing, and Acting

Bourdieu (1986) defined capital as accumulated labor that is acquired in the present while providing the capacity for people to act in the future (Kramsch, 2008). As Bourdieu explained, the construct of capital makes it

> possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from different classes and class factions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class factions. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243)

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[1] All names of people and places presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

Bourdieu (1974) argued that schools support the existing status quo through "objective processes which continually exclude children from the least privileged social classes" (p. 32). He theorized that families indirectly transmit to their children various types of capital and accompanying sets of ethos that carry with them "implicit and deeply interiorized values" (p. 32).

Capital can assume economic, social, and cultural forms. Cultural capital, defined as culturally valued ways of being, knowing, and acting, are particularly significant. Children who accumulate cultural capital early are generally more successful in accumulating substantial amounts of capital. The accumulation of cultural capital is affected by the age at which acquisition begins and remains marked by the situations and relationships in which it was acquired (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu believed that "all cultural goods—paintings, monuments, machines, and any objects shaped by man, particularly all those which belong to the childhood environment—exert an educational effect by their mere existence" (p. 255).

The acquisition of cultural capital takes time, and people who can prolong the acquisition process (i.e., through long-term educational opportunities) have an advantage in that they can accumulate substantial amounts of capital prior to seeking their place in the social/economic system; accumulation "depends on the length of time for which the family can provide [the child] with free time, i.e., time free from economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 246). In addition, cultural capital is dependent "on the usable time (particularly in the form of mother's free time) available to it (by virtue of its economic capital, which enables it to purchase the time of others) to ensure the transmission of this capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253).

Habitus: An Infinite Capacity

Habitus is a "system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, apperceptions, and actions* and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Bourdieu, 1971a, p. 83).

Habitus does not determine ways of being, acting, knowing, or believing; rather it evolves out of and contributes to sets of experiences and options made available within historical, social, and physical contexts. As Bourdieu explained, "The habitus is an infinite capacity for generating products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

Specifically, habitus is a social, historical, and collective construct. Bourdieu (1991) maintained that a person's habitus is affected most by what is compatible with his or her past experiences; what resonates with existing habitus is most likely to inform his or her evolving habitus. Swartz (1997) drew on the work of Bourdieu to remind educators that "not all social worlds are equally available to everyone" (p. 107) and it is through habitus that prior life experiences teach people what may or may not be possible; agency is intertwined with and perhaps limited by past experiences.

Over time, accumulated capital informs the construction of habitus (Bourdieu, 1986a). In particular, Bourdieu highlighted labor, patterns of consumption, and parent-child relations as conditions that inform habitus and in turn become the basis for the "perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). People can adapt their habitus to accommodate new situations; however, these changes tend to be incorporated slowly and unconsciously as elaborations rather than drastic changes to existing dispositions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The factors that most significantly affect the development of habitus are subtle. They often involve nonverbal and unconscious ways of being, acting, and interacting, and they include ways of looking, physical positioning, silences, and movements that are acquired unknowingly in the course of everyday activity (Bourdieu, 1991). These ways of being are difficult to resist because they develop silently, insidiously, and insistently.

Contrary to some interpretations of Bourdieu, people are not trapped in simple processes of social and economic reproduction. While habitus, because it is grounded in the past, involves expected limits and norms, it also acts "as an acquired system of generative schemes, the *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular condition of its production—and only those" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

Fields: Contexts and Considerations

It has recently been argued that scholars who draw on the work of Bourdieu have not attended enough to his construct of field (Albright & Luke, 2007; Swartz, 1997), which is critical to understanding relationships between individuals and social structures. Bourdieu describes fields as "semiautonomous, structured social spaces characterized by discourse and social activity" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 100). They are described by Swartz as "arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize these different kinds of capital" (Swartz, 1997, p. 117). Bourdieu (1990) argued that "wealth can function as capital only in relationship with a specific economic field" (p. 123). Successful activity within a field requires people to tacitly accept the rules of the field. Through the analysis of fields, attention is moved away from the particulars of individuals and groups to the struggles and tensions that occur and shape people's practices (Bourdieu, 1990). By attending to field, researchers consider the invisible ways of being that define action rather than accepting naïve explanations that have been historically imposed on people and situations.

Bourdieu made an analogy between his conception of field and athletic fields. However, unlike athletes, people in everyday life are not generally conscious of the rules of the game; "one is born into the game" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 67) and must find one's way within the field. Bourdieu presents the case of the child learning to speak:

> In the case of primary language, the child learns at the same time to speak the language (which is ever presented in action, in his own or other people's speech) and to think *in* (rather than with) the language. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 67)

As Bourdieu maintained, the earlier children enter a field, the less aware they are of the knowledge and beliefs that privilege natives within that field.

Together, habitus and capital are activated within social fields that both constrain actions and provide possibilities. It is this interaction of capital, field, and habitus that informs the social worlds available to individuals. Options for change are made available through combinations of capital, field, and habitus. Possibilities for agency are tied to the lessons life teaches children about viable possibilities for the future.

Forms of Writing Capital

Capital can exist in three forms: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Writing capital can also take these three forms. Economic writing capital includes possessions (such as computers) that require economic investment and that support writing success. Social writing capital includes connections and group memberships (such as a creative writing class) that privilege people with writing. Social writing capital entails being able to recognize, access, and utilize social relationships (such as relationships with teachers and peers) to support oneself as a writer. Cultural writing capital involves culturally valued ways of being, knowing, and acting relative to writing; it exists in three states: embodied writing capital, objectified writing capital, and institutionalized writing capital. Embodied writing capital includes "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) that are associated with people who are accomplished writers. Objectified writing capital includes using and creating products that are recognized as evidence of writing ability, including reading abilities. Institutionalized writing capital includes qualifications, certifications, and credentials that are associated with writing proficiency.

Table 1 shows examples of some forms of writing capital. These categories of capital are not discrete. For example, social writing capital is closely related to embodied writing capital (e.g., when a student displays mannerisms and gestures [social capital] that fulfill school ideals [embodied capital]).

Table 1
Examples of Writing Capital

Forms of writing capital	Examples of writing capital
Economic writing capital	Computers that enable students to easily revisit, revise, and rework their writing and provide numerous opportunities for writing (e.g., blogs, e-mail, and instant messaging), cell phones with text messaging capabilities, Palm Pilots and Blackberries, conventional writing materials, including writing utensils and notebooks, writing tutors, proofreaders, keyboarding services, spell checkers, and editors
Social writing capital	Social networks that support writers, productive relationships with family members, teachers, community members, peers, organizations, and/or institutions
Cultural writing capital: embodied	Allegiance to school-sanctioned writing norms (e.g., writing numerous pages of text, participating appropriately in writing tasks, following school norms relative to writing style and mechanics)

Forms of writing capital	Examples of writing capital
Cultural writing capital: objectified	Class work and portfolio writing pieces
Cultural writing capital: institutionalized	Passing the state English Language Arts Test, receiving good report card grades, receiving school awards, attaining the next grade level, and attaining institutionally sanctioned writing proficiency benchmarks

Methodology

Longitudinal Research

Thompson and Holland (2003) explained that despite an obsession with time in people's lives and work (e.g., annual reviews, semesters, credit hours, tenure clocks, publication schedules, research timelines), very little qualitative, longitudinal research has explored the ways people live, interact, and make sense of the worlds within and across time. Neale and Flowerdew (2003) argued that attention to time in qualitative research would allow researchers to conceptualize and conduct research that captured increasingly comprehensive accounts of people's lives. In their words, we could produce "a movie rather than a snapshot" (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003, p. 191).

While many researchers describe their work as "longitudinal," very little of that research extends beyond 2–3 years. In this paper, I argue for longitudinal research that extends over significant periods: 5, 7, 10 years or longer. Thompson and Holland (2003) worried that we lack studies that "document, record, and understand the temporal process of change over time" (p. 234). This gap prevents educators from understanding children's schooling experiences in their full complexity. Neale and Flowerdew (2003) agreed; they explained that time enables researchers to appreciate how the personal and the social, agency and structure, and micro and macro are interconnected in complex and dynamic relationships.

The Research Study

The "intrinsic case" (Stake, 1995, p. 3) described in this paper makes sense of the complex social interactions and situations that surround Peter's experiences with writing and schooling. It draws upon four phases of research, each occurring 3 or 4 years apart. Using a range of data sources, this case study explores Peter's experiences and the ways he made sense of these experiences.

The full study (of which this paper describes one case) includes eight case studies that capture individual intersections among literacy, school learning, and life experiences. The study began when I was the first-grade teacher of 10 children. Initially I randomly chose 10 of my students to participate in a series of interviews focusing on concepts about reading; the initial study was planned as a 1-year study. However, I was able to periodically restudy (Saldanã, 2003) the same group of children and their parents at 3- and 4-year intervals over a 10-year period, for a total of four phases. The study ended last year when the children were in high school. By Grade 11, seven of the original students remained in the study. I constructed the case study described in this paper during the final phase of the research process.

The families participated in the study during the four phases of the project (see Table 2). In first grade the students attended a large urban school, Rosa Parks Elementary School, where 97% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Rosa Parks Elementary School served children from the lowest socioeconomic population of a midsize northeastern city referred to in this paper as Cityville. Cityville had the 11th highest child poverty rate in the nation. The school was on the state's list of "schools in need of improvement" and was at risk of being taken over by the state if test scores did not improve during the research year. Four years later, consistent with the high mobility rate in this district, many of the students had left Rosa Parks Elementary School to attend other schools in the district.

Table 2
Research phases, participants, data, and analysis

Study phase	Number of families participating	Study components	Types of analysis
Phase 1: Grade 1	10 families	• 4 parent interviews • 4 student interviews • Field notes • Portfolio/classroom assessments • Classroom discussions	Coding across studies
Phase 2: Grades 4–5	9 original families 1 new family	• 2 parent interviews • 2 student interviews • Reading assessments • Writing samples	Case study development
Phase 3: Grades 7–8	8 original families + 1 family added in Grades 4–5	• 2 parent interviews • 2 student interviews • Reading assessments • Writing samples	Coding across studies
Phase 4: Grades 10–11	7 original families + 1 family added in Grades 4–5	• 3 parent interviews • 3 student interviews • Reading assessments • Writing samples • School observations • Interviews with teachers • Optional writing, photos, audiotapes journals, and/or drawings	Case study development

Reading assessments at the early grades consisted of running records of leveled texts (Clay, 2002) and story retellings. Reading assessments in Grade 5 and beyond involved informal reading inventories made up of word lists, reading passages, and comprehension questions (Ekwall & Shanker, 1993, Grades 5 through 8; Leslie & Caldwell, 2006, high school).

Longitudinal Data Analysis Techniques

Once I had transcribed audiotapes, I used constant comparison methods to identify salient categories of information. I did this during each phase of the study. In addition, during the first and third phases of the study, I coded data into categories and used contrastive analysis methods to organize these categories across cases to identify themes and patterns. During the second and

the final phases, I coded data separately for each case and crafted brief case summaries for each family. I then looked across the cases to identify intercase patterns and larger categories of data. As I coded data from each phase of the study, I created a chart to link similar themes across various phases of the research project. I then analyzed longitudinally the categories, themes, and patterns from across the phases of the study.

The Researcher's Capital and Habitus

All research is affected by the habitus and life experiences of researchers. I am a middle-aged woman of European heritage who has never attended an urban school or lived in a poor urban community. I grew up in a family that faced significant economic and mental health challenges, but mine was an academically oriented family and it was assumed that my sisters and I would attend college and graduate. My father was a gifted academic, but his academic success did not translate into economic viability. While we struggled at the poverty line, my sisters and I brought stores of academic capital to school. This background taught me several lessons. First, by learning to go without, my sisters and I learned painful lessons about the privileging of particular ways of dressing, vacationing, shopping, acting, and owning as we competed in the social contexts of suburban schools. Second, we learned about the nonlinearity of life and the ways in which idiosyncratic events can disrupt expected and earned trajectories. These experiences led me to challenge simplistic formulas that describe literacy as leading to financial success while revealing the privileging of particular ways of being that challenge the universality of the American dream.

Peter's Story: Accumulating Capital and Developing Habitus

In teacher researcher notes recorded during the first few months I taught first grade, I described Peter:

> Peter is always well dressed. He often brings books from home to share with the class at independent reading time. Peter loves to please. He works hard and is very focused. He is a handsome young man with a kind personality and a good sense of self-assurance.

I also remarked on his skill as a reader and how quickly he learned new concepts. Peter was among the strongest readers in the class. In January of the first-grade year I also noted:

> Peter stands out from the other children because of his excellent manners, his mature attitude and sincerity. Peter has lots of responsibility at home with his younger brother; his mother has very high expectations for him.

Peter was a remarkable student. He was polite and kind to the other children and very easy to teach. He learned quickly and brought a sincere joy of learning to the classroom. Based on his mother's reports, and later his grandmother's reports, good behavior and a positive attitude followed Peter through school. In the sections that follow, we explore samples of Peter's writing over time and witness Peter's accumulation of various forms of capital as a writer.

Peter as a First-Grade Writer

For the first 5 months that Peter was in my first-grade class, his family lived in a subsidized apartment complex that was designed to support single mothers who were working to get their lives back on track. Mothers and their children lived in the facility for up to 1 year while they found employment, became independent of welfare, and secured their own apartments. Although Peter's mother, Ms. Horner, appreciated the program and its amenities, she left the complex in February to get her own apartment, stating "It's not for everybody and I just think that [it's] for the type of people that need instruction." In fact, Ms. Horner probably did not need the support offered by the complex. She had a regular job working in customer service for the local telephone company. While her job did not pay much more than minimum wage, it was a regular income. The family no longer relied on social services.

On one of my visits to his home, Peter showed me his growing collection of children's books. His mother proudly reported that he had over 100 books and showed me order forms for a children's book club that she was preparing for the next day's mail. Ms. Horner explained that both her mother and her aunt were avid readers. "I've always been surrounded by books," she said. She described her grandmother advising her on how to help Peter with his reading. Ms. Horner believed that writing was important for children, saying, "when they spell out the words [it helps them remember]. Like me, if I write something down I can remember it a lot more than just actually looking at it and reading it." Ms. Horner mentioned several times that she was interested in having her son acquire computer skills, but the family did not own a computer.

I cannot conclude that economic writing capital was either significantly present or absent in Peter's household based on my data. It was certainly not present in his classroom, where I was allocated a budget of $50 to cover classroom supplies for the year. The only writing materials I was shown during home visits were two math workbooks that Peter and his brother had received for Christmas. However, a lack of children's writing materials is a poor indication of the writing resources available to children. Children commonly use the writing materials available to adults (e.g., pencils, markers, pens).

In first grade, Peter reported that he read books and the words on the boxes of his video games. Even in first grade, Peter associated reading with friendships. His older friends at day care helped him with reading: "Sometimes when I have homework, when I don't know what the word says, they help me out." Peter also spoke about helping the younger children at the day care.

When Peter played school, he had his cousins trace the letters and "copy off of what I write." This echoes his mother's account of the importance of having children spell words, He later reported, "If you copy and then you will keep on writing it and be good in school and get a job." He explained that this was important so you could "write all your life" and "be an artist." Peter also taught his cousins school rules, including "Don't fight" and "No running in the hallways."

Peter believed that neat handwriting was important. In his 6-year-old mind, the quality of writing was related to letter formation and neatness as evidenced by several of his first-grade

writing samples, which are shown in Figure 1. In this figure we observe not only Peter's attention to letter formation, but we also note a message about school behavior.

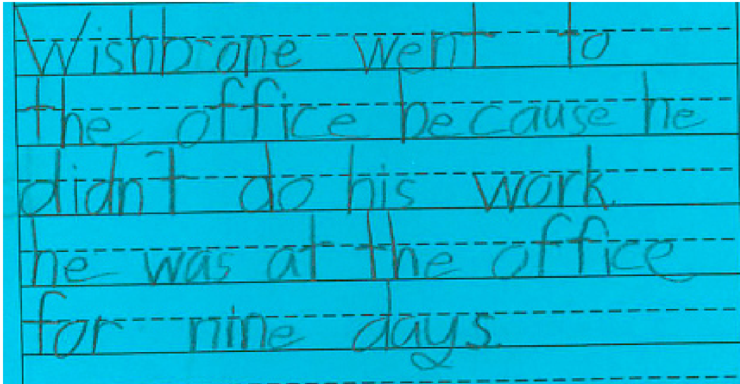


***Figure 1*. Grade 1 Wishbone story.**

Earlier in the school year, the children were not provided with lined paper. While the content of Peter's papers was intriguing and amusing, his early letter formation was notably less refined. In the writing sample shown in Figure 2, Peter was asked to write a book of questions and answers similar to a text that I had read aloud to the class. Peter was the only student in the class who wrote riddles.

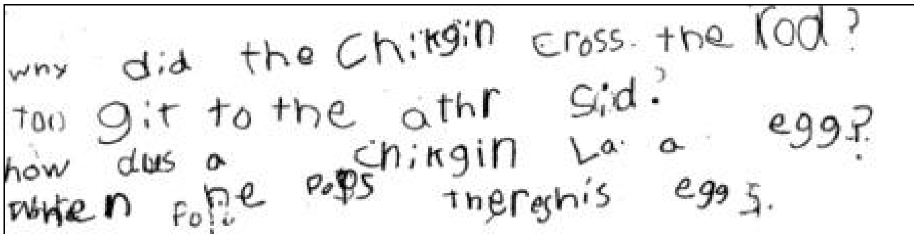


***Figure 2.* Grade 1 riddles.** *(Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side? How does a chicken lay an egg? When he poops theres his egg.)*

In my field notes, I described Peter's book as "disjointed but clever." I noted that Peter needed help with deciding whether to use a question mark or period. I assisted Peter in spelling the words *cross*, *here*, and *poops*. I reported that, "just as in his reading, Peter likes to ask for help to be sure he gets things right."

Even at age six, Peter was gradually learning various writing genres. By April, Peter had learned to write a simple letter, which is shown in Figure 3. While not visible in the blinded copy presented here, not only did he incorporate his polished handwriting on the lined paper, but he also closed his letter with his full formal name—Peter Horner, Jr., indicating his adherence to norms of letter writing beyond those taught in first grade.

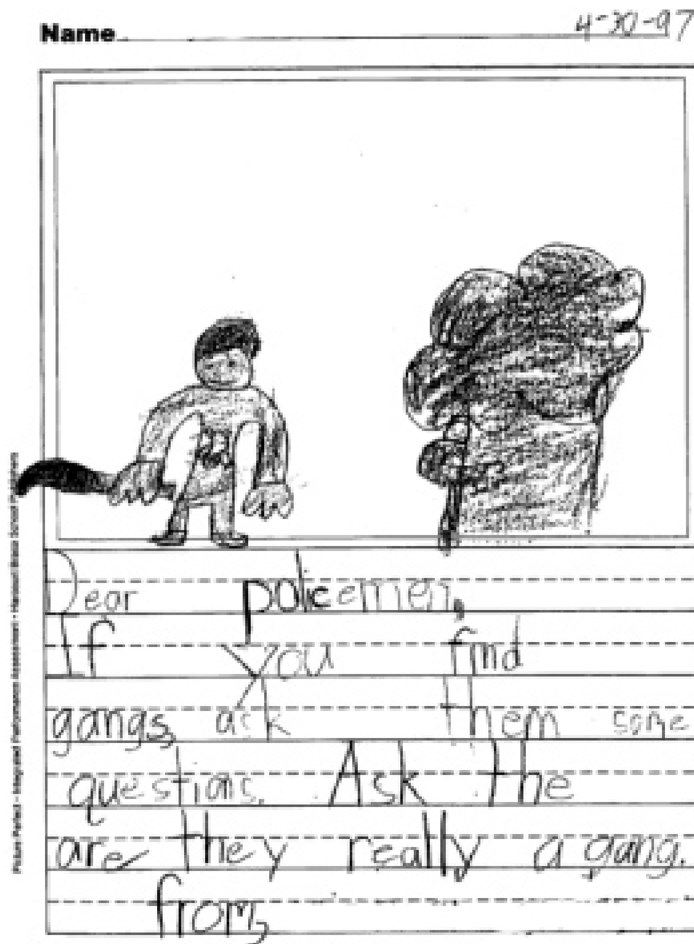


Figure 3. **Grade 1 police letter.**

Peter was also learning to craft texts in other genres. He was able to write simple nonfiction texts. In this example, he incorporated a repeated refrain ("I know about seeds"), from a nonfiction text that I read to the class:

> June 1997
> I know about seeds. Seeds are in the green thing on the carrets [carrots]. Seeds make flowers beautiful. I know about seeds. They are pink, brown, purple, red, greed [green], different cines [kinds] of colors.

Despite having read and been read many narratives during the school year and having participated in class discussions about the structure of narratives (i.e., beginning, middle, and end, problem/solution) crafting a fully formed narrative was a challenge for Peter. In June, he wrote a narrative about a dog named Wishbone, which is shown in Figure 4.

***Figure 4*. Grade 1, Wishbone.** (*A dog named wishbone! He loved to use his imagination. On fieldtrip[s] too. At school, he is great! Good! He goes over [to] her. The brown dog [is] good! He would] not fight. He walk over there. Her boyfriend came.*)

This writing sample suggested a narrative structure. The reader can infer that Wishbone was a good dog who met a female dog who had a boyfriend. While the dogs did not fight and a conflict was avoided, the identity of the brown dog and the significance of having an imagination are unclear. Other patterns were also apparent. Being good continued to be a theme for Peter; Wishbone was described as "great!" and "good!" Peter's mother reported that he was always well behaved in school and that he "gets such a joy from going to school. He loves his teachers and his classmates."

We also have evidence of Peter's growing understanding of spelling. In Figure 4, Peter correctly spelled *good*. When he attempted to write the word *would* he wrote *wood*, inferring a spelling pattern that was both logical and a correct homophone of the target word. While his spelling was incorrect, Peter applied logic to this spelling challenge. Finally in this sample, Peter demonstrated attention not only to handwriting, but to an expanding range of writing conventions including capitalization, exclamation points, and even a correctly used comma. Peter spelled familiar words correctly and relied on invented spelling for unfamiliar words (e.g., maganashun/imagination; fillchrip/fieldtrip). Peter continued to mix sentence fragments with complete sentences and omitted words and some word endings.

Even in first grade, Peter was acquiring various forms of writing capital. This writing capital explained Peter's success in first grade. Although his writing was not perfect, he achieved a level of competence that was acceptable to himself, his mother, and his teachers. Over time, these forms of capital accumulated and contributed to his development of habitus as a writer. Table 3 summarizes Peter's writing capital in Grade 1.

Table 3
Peter's Writing Capital in Grade 1

Types of writing capital	Examples of writing capital
Economic writing capital	• Owned over 100 books • Did not own a computer
Social writing capital	• Received support from mother • Received support from kindergarten and first-grade teachers • Featured peers in his writing • Used writing to amuse his peers • Played school with his cousins
Cultural writing capital: embodied	• Willing to fulfill school expectations as a student and a writer • Embodied being good in school • Completed all writing assignments diligently • Applied his best efforts to all assignments
Cultural writing capital: objectified	• Maintained quality writing • Experimented with various writing genres • Used invented spellings • Used some nonstandard language structures • Had difficulties with crafting simple narratives • Created a Grade 1 portfolio that met school expectations
Cultural writing capital: institutional	• Received A's in both reading and writing on report cards • Promoted to Grade 2

Peter as a Fifth-Grade Writer

When I visited Peter in fifth grade, much had changed for the family. Ms. Horner had gotten married, and the family had moved into a larger home in a nicer neighborhood. She had recently had a baby girl. Ms. Horner still worked at the phone company and was recently promoted with a raise. The family appeared comfortable and happy.

When I asked Peter what he was planning to be when he grew up, he told me that he was going to be a scientist and explained "that's why I want to go to college." His younger brother chimed in with his own goals, saying that he wanted to write books. Ms. Horner spoke enthusiastically about Peter's progress in school: "He's been doing great. He really has. Peter, his lowest grade is a B+."

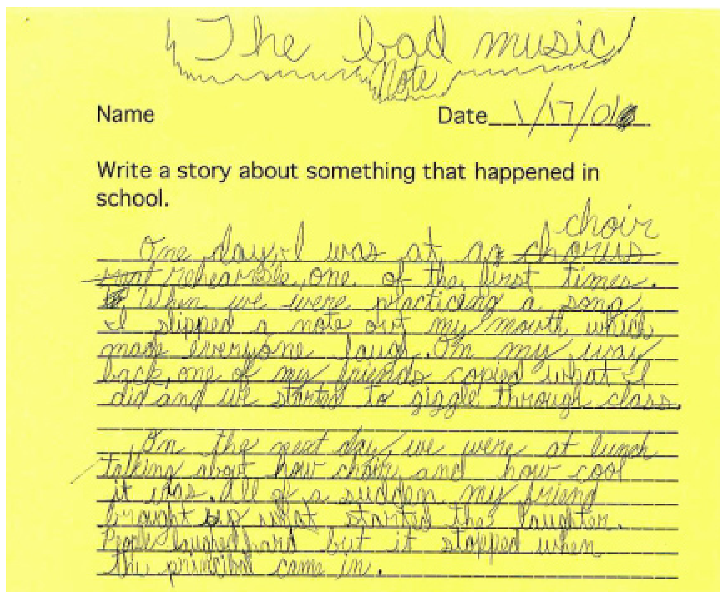
> In fifth grade, Ms. Horner reported that Peter and his younger brother had gone "Pokémon crazy"; they read the magazines that accompanied the cards and games. Peter also liked to read horror and mystery books and named R. L. Stine as his favorite author. He regularly exchanged Goosebumps books (Stine, 1992–1997) with his friends and reported that he had read at least four of these books. Peter excitedly recounted the plot of the book he had just finished for my benefit. As I got up to leave after the interview, Peter

asked me to wait while he ran upstairs and came down with the book he had just finished; he offered it to me, explaining that I really should read it.

At school, Peter worked on projects with his friends: "Well sometimes we have to do like a book report or something, gather up together and we do a report on a book that we all agree on." Peter said that the best thing he had ever done in school was to help his friends: "They are really important to me." Ms. Horner explained that Peter often read to his younger brother and baby sister. She told me, "He loves to read. *And* he's into writing stories also. He has a pretty good imagination [and] his stories are quite interesting."

Peter explained that when they wrote at school he would often work with a writing partner on assigned topics. "Sometimes she [the teacher] puts things on the board and tells us what we have to do in order to write our story." At other times they chose their own topics. Peter's teacher instructed them to "web" their thoughts prior to writing; Peter recalled webbing his ideas and then writing about topics including wolves and Antarctica. "We had to make lines and write all of our notes out, and sometimes we read other books so we can get other notes." When asked what else he wrote at school Peter described practicing spelling words: "We write them over and we practice saying them with our teacher."

In fifth grade, I no longer had access to Peter's writing at school so I asked Peter to write a story during one of the interviews. Unlike his writing in first grade, Peter drafted a short but well-constructed narrative that included a title, a setting, an initiating event, a climax, and a resolution. This story is shown in Figure 5.



The bad music note

Name Date 1/17/0[illegible]

Write a story about something that happened in school.

One day, I was at a choir rehearsal, one of the first times. When we were practicing a song, I slipped a note out my mouth, which made everyone laugh. On my way back, one of my friends copied what I did and we started to giggle through class.

On the next day, we were at lunch talking about how choir and how cool it was. All of a sudden my friend brought up what started the laughter. People laughed hard but it stopped when the principal came in.

Figure 5. **Grade 5, The Bad Music.**

Although brief, this sample is informative. Peter was writing in cursive, something he talked about wanting to learn when he was in first grade. His use of punctuation was strong, including the generally correct use of commas. Most issues with sentence structure and grammar had been resolved. He had become adept at starting sentences with subordinate clauses (e.g., *one*

day, *on my way*, *all of a sudden*) and made few spelling errors (e.g., principal/principal, rehearsle/rehearsal). Peter said that he was "real good" at writing stories and poems. He fondly remembered writing a story about a baby and a poem about pizza when he was in fourth grade. Table 4 lists the various types of writing capital Peter had acquired by Grade 5.

Table 4
Peter's Writing Capital in Grade 5

Types of writing capital	Examples of writing capital
Economic writing capital	• Still did not own a computer • Peter's mother's marriage positively affected the family's financial situation
Social writing capital	• Teachers were pleased with his progress • Mother was enthusiastic about Peter's writing • Brother shared his interest in writing • Friends continued to appear in his stories • Exchanged books with his peers • Remained interested in school writing despite tedious and scripted school writing tasks
Cultural writing capital: embodied	• Valued writing and fulfilled school ideals relative to writing • Wrote stories and poetry at home • Continued to write in a variety of genres • Engaged in various writing practices (e.g., webbing nonfiction texts, practicing spelling words) • Considered himself a successful writer at home and school
Cultural writing capital: objectified	• Crafted well-structured narratives • Continued improvements with spelling and punctuation • Used fewer nonstandard language structures • Reflected fifth grade expectations by writing in cursive
Cultural writing capital: institutionalized	• Received "A" on his report card for reading and writing • Passed the state ELA test

Peter as an Eighth-Grade Writer

Over time Peter accumulated a wealth of writing capital. However, writing capital alone does not ensure writing success in school or beyond. While Peter was in eighth grade he and his family experienced changes that affected every aspect of his life, including his academic writing pursuits.

When I initially attempted to contact Peter's family for his eighth-grade interview, I learned that the family had transferred out of the district; no forwarding information was available. I interviewed the other families in the sample in the fall, but I did not locate Peter's family until spring, and only then thanks to a lucky chance meeting with Ms. Horner. I discovered that Ms. Horner and her family had moved to New York City to join her second husband.

Later that year Ms. Horner separated from her second husband and went to live with Peter's grandmother. Peter moved in with his father and returned to his former middle school. Ms. Horner continued to be involved in Peter's life.

I was able to interview Peter in the spring of eighth grade, then again in the summer. It was not until my second interview with Peter during the summer after eighth grade that he was ready to talk about his experiences in New York City. Peter hated New York and he said to me, "when I was down in [New York] I wasn't doing too good [in school]." Peter explained:

> I stayed home from school and things cause it was like a little bit too dangerous out there for me. I got into a lot of fights down there. . . . like, they would just come across the street and just start with you. At [Cityville], I never fought.

The school Peter was attending in New York was a magnet school that specialized in math, science, and the performing arts, but it was located in a difficult neighborhood. Rather than trying to navigate this neighborhood, Peter simply stopped attending school. It was a devastating year for him. When he returned to his former school in Cityville partway through eighth grade, Peter had to work hard to catch up. His mother was relieved that he was again attending school and struggled to make sense of the changes Peter had undergone while they were in New York: "Here he was always doing wonderfully in school. You know, A's and B's. Occasionally he received a C. But just always on the honor roll." She commented that over the years Peter's teachers had consistently been pleased, "then he comes to New York and (slight pause) unfortunately everything went just downhill."

By eighth grade, Peter and his friends were "really into" the *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954–1955/1994). Together they enjoyed the books and the accompanying video and board games. In school, he read *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988) a book about two African American brothers who were involved with gangs. He also reported that every year he was assigned to read the book *Holes* (Sachar, 1998).

Peter spoke extensively about the support he got from his friends:

> Like if I didn't have them I don't know what I would do. It's like, some of my friends that's not doing too good and things and like I would do this for them [help them in school] and things because sometimes they tell me that they believe in me.

Peter explained that while he was in New York City, "We used the computers a lot because we had to type everything." Peter used the computers available at school and his stepfather's computer.

While the portion of eighth grade that was spent in New York was difficult for Peter, important gains occurred for him as a writer. Because he had to write every day, Peter proudly explained that he was no longer intimidated by essays and spoke enthusiastically about his ELA teacher.

> This teacher I especially liked was Miss Dillie. She was like, she let you be free to express your feelings and things like that. . . Before I left, she said I was her best student in class. She told me I could be a writer with all the stuff I would be coming up with.

At both interviews, I asked Peter to write, He wrote about returning to his school in Cityville. In a second writing sample, he referred to the high school he would attend in

September that was located in the same building as his middle school. Both samples are shown below in Figures 6 and 7.

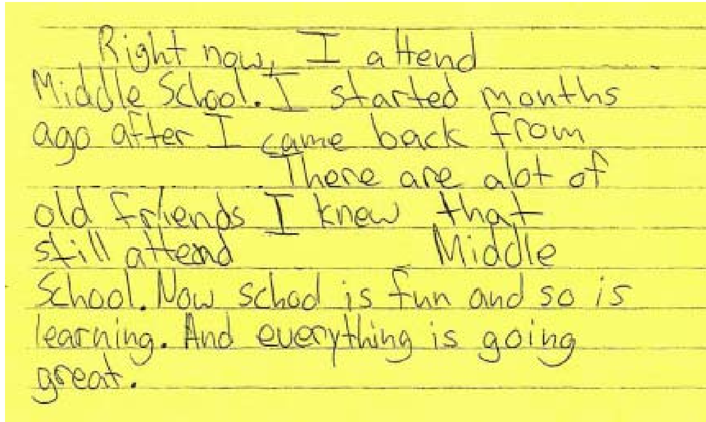


Figure 6. **Grade 8, sample 1.**

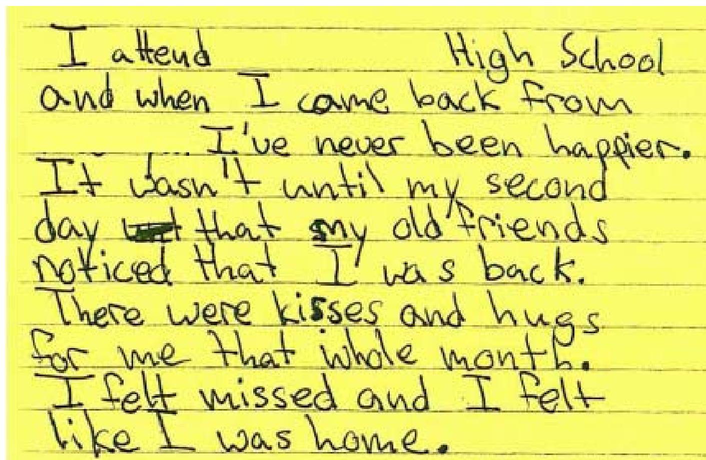


Figure 7. **Grade 8, summer after eighth grade, sample 2.**

In both samples, Peter described his excitement in returning to his former school, his strong alliances with friends, and the emotional connections he had with his school. While both writing samples were powerful emotional accounts of Peter's experiences and were generally mechanically correct, both entailed relatively simple sentence patterns and common vocabulary. We do not witness Peter crafting a well-organized narrative as he did in fifth grade or including the sophisticated language that he would use in 11th grade.

When I asked Peter about taking the eighth-grade ELA test, Peter said it was easy, "Because as soon as I read the question I got the answers just like that." He told me that the essays were the hardest part and that he was worried because he did not have enough time to finish: "You got to write like a predraft, or a first draft, and then write the final copy in the booklet." Peter did pass the eighth-grade ELA exam, but his grades suffered during the move to New York. His promotion to Grade 9 remained in question until the very end of the school year; ultimately, Peter was promoted to Grade 9. Table 5 identifies the forms of writing capital Peter had acquired by Grade 8.

Table 5
Peter's Writing Capital in Grade 8

Types of writing capital	Examples of writing capital
Economic writing capital	• Experienced reduced financial security due to family's relocation to New York City, mother's unemployment, and family's living in separate residences • Did not own a computer
Social writing capital	• Shared a rich relationship with his ELA teacher in New York • Enjoyed strong peer relationships connected to his interest in the *Lord of the Rings* books • Valued peer relationships at school
Cultural writing capital: embodied	• Considered the possibility of becoming a writer • Described his excitement with writing activities • Completed writing assignments diligently • Applied effort to the writing products he produced
Cultural writing capital: objectified	• Created writing products at school that met school criteria • Described the ELA test as "easy"
Cultural writing capital: institutionalized	• Passed the state eighth-grade ELA test • Promoted into the ninth grade

Peter as an 11th- Grade Writer

By 11th grade, Peter was thinking about college. While he was doing better in school, he had never quite recovered the A/B average that he had before moving to New York City. Instead he was a solid B/C student.

Peter's father was incarcerated, and Peter had moved in with his grandmother. While Peter's mother had her own apartment, Peter preferred the quiet and calm of his grandmother's home. His mother's household included his little sister as well as his mother's roommate and her family. Peter's brother lived in a nearby city with relatives. Throughout his 11th-grade year, Peter felt pressure from his mother to live with her, but he and his grandmother, Ms. Waters, resisted this move. Ms. Waters wanted to provide Peter with an opportunity to focus on school during 11th and 12th grade in preparation for college. She encouraged him to work towards a 4.0 average: "I know that we have to really, really prepare, get the grades up so that we can make it a lot easier for him to go to college, and hopefully there's some scholarships out there that we can grab." Ms. Waters was involved with the local Urban League and reported that she had been looking into scholarship possibilities through that organization.

The first time I visited Peter when he was in 11th grade, his grandmother was not present. One of Peter's classmates was visiting and joined in our conversation about reading and writing. It seemed that reading and writing were central to some of Peter's peer relationships. Peter described writing as a common practice among his friends:

Peter: [At my school], you'd be surprised how many people you find writing stories or writing poetry.

CCL: Yeah? And what kind of stories? Do you know anything about the stories and poetry your friends write?

Peter: Mmm, some mystery or ghost stories, I mean they write all kinds of things.

CCL: So about how many of your friends do you think do things like that? Do a lot of writing?

Peter: Let's see, one in this room (referring to his visiting friend) and me on this side of the table and [we] just catch up on our stories and things . . . And all the kids they got a lot of stories but they interested in art and stuff. They read all the time.

Peter indicated that they often wrote and shared stories during lunch at school. At this point in the interview, Peter's friend chimed in to tell me about the book he was writing. I asked him if he planned to publish the book, and the three of us entered into an extended conversation about publishers and the review process. Peter and his friend listened intently to my account of my own experiences with publication.

In 11th grade Peter read *The DaVinci Code* (Brown, 2006), a book he borrowed from his grandmother and later lent to his best friend. After he finished that book, he read *Angels and Demons* (Brown, 2003), which he also borrowed from his grandmother. His grandmother had recently purchased a third book by Dan Brown, *Deception Point* (Brown, 2001), which she explained had "mysteriously" disappeared (this last said while glancing suspiciously at Peter). When I asked if he was still interested in the *Lord of the Ring* series (Tolkien, 1954–1955/1994), Peter answered that he still liked them but "I basically know them by heart." His grandmother mentioned his interest in sports magazines: "anything to do with the NFL."

Peter spoke enthusiastically about the books he read in his honors English class, including a collection of Langston Hughes' poetry, *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1982/1990), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960/2002), *A Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry, 1959/2004), and *The Pearl* (Steinbeck, 1947/1994). Peter described his appreciation for poetry and his efforts to write poetry outside of school. He told me that when he was in 10th grade, he often shared his poetry and stories with his ELA teacher: "I'll sometimes I'll give her my poem book, my story book, and see what she thinks about them." Peter said that he had been writing a book for about 2 years. He described it as a "story of the streets, like a ghetto story." He identified the best book he had ever read in school as *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 1967/2003), a book that deals with similar themes.

Peter's grandmother recognized his writing ability:

> He's very creative and always writing. . . When the kids were in day care, he used to tell the kids short stories. And he was just a kid himself, you know. And I think of him as pretty creative you know, he's got those creative juices flowing.

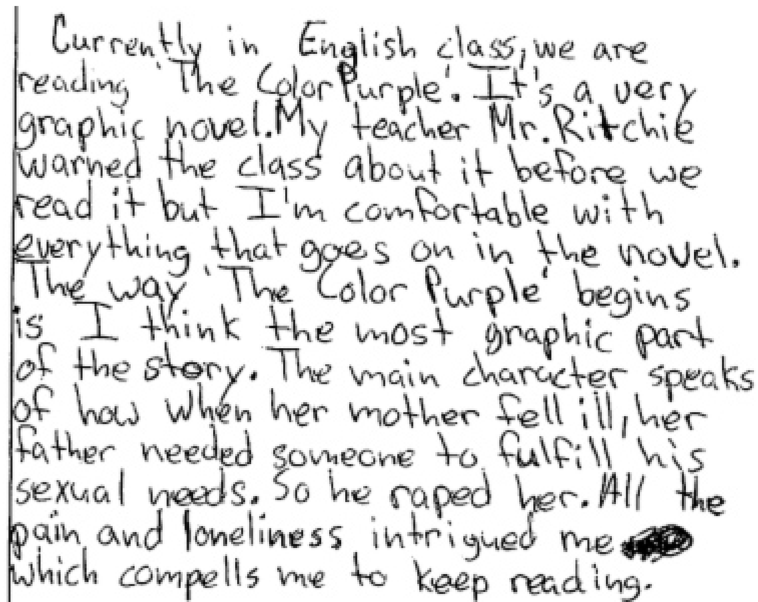
Over time it was evident that Peter's literacy interests were intertwined with social relationships; friends, siblings, family, and teachers were central to Peter's reading and writing practices. As his grandmother explained, they were not a passing interest. They were an integral part of Peter.

Throughout 11th grade, Peter spoke extensively about going to college. At various points in the interviews, Peter described different options, including culinary studies, art history,

photography, and football. However, his primary and most often reported interest was journalism. Peter described his intention: “These next 3 years, I’m going to try to do it. I’m going to try to just go all out now. I’m might try to get straight A’s, or a couple, occasional B’s.” While Peter was interested in playing professional football, he understood that because his school had no football team that his experiences were limited and college football might not be in his future. Instead, he reported: “I’d really like to go to Columbia to try journalism.”

Peter received mailings from many colleges. He read these with interest and had recently attended a college fair at his high school. His grandmother planned to sign him up for a college bus tour offered by her church during spring of Peter’s senior year. She explained that “this last tour that they went on [at] Easter, it was visiting some of the Black colleges.” When I asked Peter what he thought about attending a Black college, he laughed and responded, “Sure, any college, right now.”

During the second interview, I asked Peter to write about school. In contrast to his eighth-grade writing samples, Peter provided me with a short but formal writing sample that assumed a notably academic tone. That sample is shown in Figure 8.



Currently in English class, we are
reading 'The Color Purple'. It's a very
graphic novel. My teacher Mr. Ritchie
warned the class about it before we
read it but I'm comfortable with
everything that goes on in the novel.
The way 'The Color Purple' begins
is I think the most graphic part
of the story. The main character speaks
of how when her mother fell ill, her
father needed someone to fulfill his
sexual needs. So he raped her. All the
pain and loneliness intrigued me
which compells me to keep reading.

Figure 8*. Grade 11, *The Color Purple.

In this sample, Peter was experimenting with adverbial phrases (“Currently in English class”) and embedded phrases (“when her mother fell ill”). Although he was not yet correctly using commas in conjunction with these phrases, he was successful in producing writing that sounded academic. His writing featured sophisticated vocabulary including *graphic*, *novel*, *character*, *intrigued*, and *compels*, and he consistently used single quotation marks to indicate the book’s title. The academic nature of the writing was further established by his use of appropriate language such as *graphic novel* and *sexual needs* rather than vernacular expressions. I suspected that Peter was using this writing sample to both demonstrate his writing ability and to

proclaim his identity as a writer. The mature content of the piece positioned Peter as a young man in contrast to the 6-year-old I used to know.

During these final interviews, I gave Peter a notebook and invited him to send me journal entries on topics of his choice. Peter sent me copies of poems he had written. A sample is shown in Figure 9.

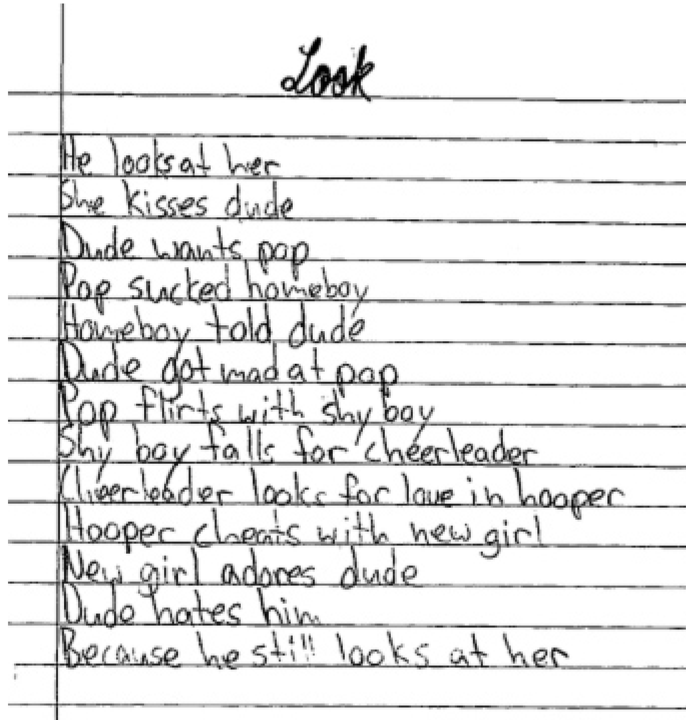


Figure 9. **Grade 11, Look.**

In the sample shown in Figure 9, Peter experimented with short, simple sentences. These short sentences were effective in conveying the linear and "soap-operatic" nature of the poem's content. Each event led to the next. While the statements were simple and pointed, the total effect evoked a complex social setting. The use of the word *look* in the title, the first line, and the final line pulled the piece together. Notably, each line offered a unique and powerful verb that provided each of the characters with a particular positioning. Consistencies in formatting contributed to the effectiveness of the poem; by starting each line with a capital letter for each person's name, Peter emphasized the agency of each person. However, capitalization was abandoned when characters became the recipients of imposed actions.

This poem, and several others that Peter shared, focused on traditional adolescent themes of love and rejection. Early in the final interview, Peter described himself as needing therapy. I was not sure if he was joking, so I asked him about this statement:

> Well I do got a lot of things that I keep bottled up. I mean there are a lot of issues, but stuff I just don't feel comfortable telling anybody. . . so I keep a journal and I started writing things, mostly bad days or I should have started it a couple years ago because last year was just filled with drama.

Writing had become a coping mechanism for Peter as he learned about the complexities of families, romantic love, and rejection. In the following poem (Figure 10), Peter incorporated mathematical symbols into his writing.

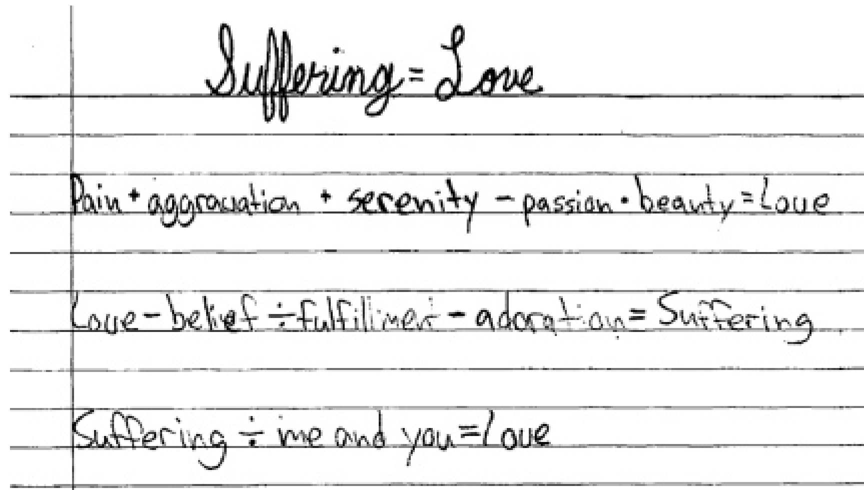


Figure 10. **Grade 11, Suffering = Love.**

While the poem does not provide an opportunity to observe traditional sentence structures, Peter uses strong vocabulary (e.g., *serenity*, *aggravation*, *adoration*). The craft of the piece is evident. The last word of each line is the first word of the next line. As the title suggests, the poem moves back and forth between suffering and love. The only consecutive words in the piece are “me and you.”

In the final example (Figure 11; next page), Peter engages a sense of irony with a poem about not being a poet. Peter’s themes of love and rejection are again evident. While Peter denied being a poet, he described himself as a writer of “stories in the form of sad paragraphs to remember.” He identified himself as an “artist of words” who knew what words to use as well as when and where to use them.

Like his teachers in New York, some of his teachers in Cityville recognized Peter’s abilities with writing. In 10th grade, Peter participated in a school sponsored poetry contest. While Peter did not win the contest, he received encouraging feedback from his teacher

> My English teacher, she said that she was one of the judges and she said that I would have won. . . it has to do with something and the judges and the students. She said something stupid [happened] but all three of mine would have won.

Not a Poet

I'm not a poet
Just more of an "Artist of Words"
I know what to use
When to use it
And Where
Why?
Affection
To be noticed and recognized as the romantic soul I am

But I'm not a poet
I write stories in the form of sad paragraphs to remember
To know me is to understand my poems
To understand that I'm looking for love
Love that will stay

But I'm not a poet
Poets write about sadness, what they have, or want
I simply write stories in the form of sad paragraphs to remember

Figure 11. **Grade 11, Not a Poet.**

At the end of 11th grade, Peter was presented with an award for writing from this English teacher. His grandmother interjected saying that only two writing awards were presented—one went to Peter and the other to Peter's girlfriend. Table 6 illustrates the various forms of writing capital Peter had acquired by Grade 11.

Table 6
Peter's Writing Capital in Grade 11

Types of writing capital	Examples of capital
Economic writing capital	• Maintained minimally comfortable lifestyle living with his grandmother • Owned a computer that needed to be fixed (grandmother's computer) • Used computers at school • Concerned about money as they considered college
Social writing capital	• Recognized by 10th-grade teacher for his writing ability • Shared poems and books among friends • Advocated for by his grandmother • Exchanged books with his grandmother and friends • Shared his love of poetry with his girlfriend
Cultural writing capital: embodied	• Benefited from grandmother's recognition of writing as a part of his identity • Took on the identity as a writer as he planned to study journalism in college

Types of writing capital	Examples of capital
Cultural writing capital: objectified	• Wrote good content, with good mechanics, and was creative • Was competent with academic writing • Experimented with sentence length, patterned text, thoughtful word choices, repeated words and motifs, irony, and even mathematical symbols in his writing
Cultural writing capital: institutionalized	• Met the criteria for success with school writing • Awarded a prize for writing in 10th grade • Passed the 11th-grade ELA exam • Promoted to 12th grade

Writing Habitus

Peter's Development of Habitus

The accumulation of capital and development of habitus begin early in life and types of capital acquired early affect the ease with which later ways of being are embodied (Bourdieu, 1990, 1986). Over time, we witnessed Peter assuming the habitus of a writer (Bourdieu, 1971a, 1990). This habitus was grounded in his early experiences with literacy and his mother's, his grandmother's and even his great-grandmother's commitment to literacy and education. Peter's habitus was complex and intimately connected with dispositions that he assumed.

Peter existed within a social field of schooling that values particular ways of being and being a writer; specifically, the criteria for writing success in contemporary classrooms places value on writing conventions, organization, and the craft of the students' writing. Peter's writing success was confirmed by his ability to pass tests and achieve institutionally sanctioned benchmarks. However, as Peter's story illustrates, success within this social field involves more than simple writing abilities; it involves ways of being that are valued and productive within the school context. Having good behavior, high grades, and academically productive relationships with friends is also valued. Specifically, I focus on four dispositions that contributed to Peter's habitus as a writer. These dispositions are related to being good, being a student, being a friend, and being a writer.

- *Being good.* An early quality that was most evident in Peter's earliest writing was his desire to be recognized as good. Not only were the characters in his stories, including himself, described as good and great, but he also attended to behavior when he played school with his cousins. Over the course of the 10-year project, Peter never got in trouble at school.

- *Being a student.* Peter also assumed the disposition of being a student. Not only did Peter's mother report that he was consistently recognized by his teachers as a "star student," but his investment in schooling was evident in the serious manner in which he treated writing assignments. Unlike most of the other children in the sample, Peter did not complain about his teachers or school assignments. Peter liked all his teachers and felt they were doing a good job. Unlike the other children, he spoke enthusiastically about the books he was assigned to read at school.

- *Being a friend.* Peter's disposition as a friend was intimately intertwined with his literacy practices. Peter included his friends in the stories he wrote in first grade, and he exchanged books such as *Goosebumps* (Stine,1992–1997), *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954–1955/1994), and Dan Brown books with friends. He wrote poetry with his girlfriend and shared drafts of his poetry and book manuscript with his friends.

- *Being a writer.* Peter's habitus as a writer was most evident in the dispositions he assumed as a writer. For the most part, these attributes aligned with school expectations—mastering mechanics, being able to write in a variety of genres, and developing craft as a writer. A less acknowledged aspect of writing success relates to identity. By 8th grade, Peter identified himself as someone who could be a writer and by 11th grade he dreamed of being a journalist. Peter's identity as a writer was both public and personal. He shared his writing with his friends, family, and some of his teachers and kept a journal to explore his feelings.

As Carrington and Luke (1997) explained, capital, habitus, and field exist within a "web of mutually reinforcing and regulatory social relationships" (p. 100). The writing capital that Peter acquired had value in school, contributed to his development of habitus as a writer, and reinforced and regulated particular ways of being a student, a friend, and a writer. Fields require buy in; as Swartz (1997) wrote, "every field presupposes and produces a particular type of *illusion* which Bourdieu defines as a belief or acceptance of the worth of the game of a field" (p. 125). Peter was invested in writing and had accepted the challenge of becoming a good writer.

Is Habitus Enough?

While coding data from the final phase of this study and writing this case study, I became aware that school-defined failure loomed for some of my former students as they left school. The issues I explore in this paper not only reflect conclusions that have consistently emerged from the data, but also a growing concern about the ways in which my former students are defined as successful or not successful in school and the ways that issues beyond academic skills (e.g., reading and writing) contribute to this success or failure.

While Peter accumulated various forms of capital and developed a habitus as a writer, a series of contingencies threatened to complicate Peter's educational trajectory beyond high school. When Peter told me that he planned to study journalism in college, I asked if he had taken a journalism class and if he was involved with his high school newspaper. Peter explained that there was no journalism class and that the school only had a single page newsletter that "tells things about sports . . . and new things that [are] going on." He was not involved with the production of this newsletter.

Peter spoke on numerous occasions about his interest in pursuing journalism at Columbia University. However, he seemed unaware that Columbia does not offer an undergraduate journalism program. In addition, if Peter did not attend Columbia, his other choices were Ohio State, Notre Dame, and a small fine arts college in California. Peter's grandmother suspected that Peter's interest in football influenced his choices of Ohio State and Notre Dame. Peter said that the small fine arts college attracted his attention when he received a glossy recruitment brochure in the mail.

While Peter passed all his high school classes with B's and C's, he did not always complete his schoolwork. As his grandmother explained, this was "his downfall." While B's and C's were considered good grades in Peter's urban high school, they are not competitive in the larger field. Our final interview occurred in May of 11th grade, and Peter had not taken either the PSAT or the SAT. He had no timeline for completing college applications, and his high school ELA teacher was unsure of his future as a writer. While this teacher viewed him as capable, he had concerns: "He doesn't get all of his work done. But he lets you know he's one of the honors kids that's just coasting . . . he does what gets him by." He described Peter's writing as adequate but he did not think it was "on par with what it was earlier in the year." And he added, "Maybe it's just he's not trying, you know, as hard." While his teacher was confident that Peter would pass the course and the state ELA test, he was not encouraged by Peter's progress. The teacher made no mention of Peter's poetry and was not aware of the writing that Peter did outside of school.

Complexities of Becoming a Writer

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provided tools for exploring the writing capital that Peter accumulated over a 10-year period and for documenting his emerging habitus as a writer. The contextualization of Peter's accumulated capital and developing habitus within the local social fields reveals the complexities that accompany the development of habitus and the fragility of that habitus across social, political, and economic fields. In this concluding section, I draw upon the data and Bourdieu's theories to consider how Peter was positioned within educational, literate, and economic fields.

The Educational Field: Schooling Trajectories

Considerations beyond talent, skills, and hard work matter. Other factors are invisibly and insidiously operating. Bourdieu reminds educators that "degrees are just as much a part of magic as are amulets" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 119); degrees, opportunities, and acclaim require more than talent, skills, and hard work.

As Bourdieu (1974) explained, if we consider two children with equal scholastic achievement, the child of high social class is more likely to continue his or her schooling for a longer period of time. What appears equal is not, and it is in treating the unequal as equal that the system favors advantaged children. The culture of schools and the culture of the elite share important similarities; children of the lower classes require much effort to attain what is "*given* to the children of the cultivated classes" (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 39).

Bourdieu (1974) maintained that society acts upon the underprivileged classes by

> making them see as natural inability things which are only a result of an inferior social status, and persuading them that they owe their social fate (which is increasingly tied to their educational fate as society becomes more rationalized) to their individual nature and lack of gifts. (p. 42)

As Bourdieu (1993) argued, newcomers to a particular field (i.e., children whose families do not have experience with higher education) enter the game with a disadvantage. They must

recognize the game and learn the rules at the same time they are immersed in the process. Successful participation in particular fields is easier when players have a history with the game and understand the particular moves that privilege players.

The Literate Field: Power and Promise

While we often recognize literacy as a means to success, literacy operates within social, political, and economic fields and the benefits associated with literacy are tempered by the knowledge and the resources needed to successfully maneuver within these fields. Carrington and Luke (1997) explained that "without prerequisite forms of capital, the ability to demonstrate a particular literate practice may well be of limited value to the individual" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 107–108). Factors beyond Peter's artistry with words are involved.

Bourdieu (1991) argued that symbolic systems of violence, such as the tracking of students or the privileging of particular ways of talking and writing, operate to maintain existing social and economic structures. In short, certain ways of reading and writing privilege certain groups of people, and although Peter achieved success in the context of his inner-city high school and demonstrated notable competencies with writing, there are no guaranteed benefits for his acquisition of school literacy.

The Economic Field: Contingencies of Capital

As Bourdieu reminded educators, the valuing of abilities is contingent on complex interactions of various forms of capital that Bourdieu asserted could consistently be traced to the possession of economic capital:

> Economic capital is at the root of all the other types of capital and . . . these transformed, disguised forms of economic capital. . . produce their most specific effects only to the extent that they conceal (not least from their possessor) the fact that economic capital is at their root. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252)

While other forms of capital may present the illusion that assets beyond monetary gains contribute to social ends and economic success, all advantages can be traced back to economic advantages.

The effects of economic capital, disguised as cultural and social considerations, interact within social fields. Bourdieu explained that the rules that govern the exchange of capital are the "equivalent of the principle of conservation of energy (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253)." He argued "profits in one area are necessarily paid for by costs in another" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253).

While conceivably limiting, habitus is also productive and generative:

> Because the *habitus* is an infinite capacity for generating products—thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions—whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 55).

Peter's grades were fair. He was interested in college but lacked knowledge of some of the processes that accompany college admission. He had strong support from his grandmother but worried about his mother's and his father's situations. With middle-class resources, many of these issues would be easily alleviated. Money easily compensates for less than stellar grades and for delays in the application process. Money can also contribute to a stable family life. Despite challenges, many middle-class students move smoothly into 4-year colleges. Without money, students' situations are fragile and are vulnerable to even small ruptures (e.g., moving to New York City).

While Peter's habitus as a writer and as a student had problematic gaps, it involved action and movement, although sometimes awkward and stumbling, toward goals and possibilities. Thus, Peter's habitus as a student and a writer brought constraints grounded in his past experiences as well as a wealth of possibilities. This notion of habitus explains both the limited success of many of Peter's peers and the notable success of some who manage to navigate complex social fields by activating existing capital in unique, creative, and strategic ways.

The Larger Picture

In this conclusion, I have explored three intersecting and related fields that complicate Peter's potential as a writer. Historically constructed educational trajectories intersect with fields surrounding education, literacy, and economic advantage. Each of these fields operated on Peter both as individual forces that brought their own expectations and requirements as well as in combination. These fields function together as part of larger social and economic systems that act on and through students to maintain existing social and economic structures—privileging the privileged and disadvantaging the disadvantaged. A few strategic and lucky people do gain advantage; this reassures educators and the larger public that equity exists and that natural ability and hard work prevail. It is not that agency and hope did not exist for Peter. Rather, the nature of social and economic fields complicates simple formulas that associate talent, skills, hard work, and school success with economic and social advantage. As Kramsch (2008) explained, "Bourdieu's main contribution to education is a deep appreciation of the fundamental paradox of literacy as being both liberatory and conservative, an instrument of both social change and social reproduction" (p. 45).

This research illustrates the potential power of long-term qualitative research. It is only when we look back over time that we recognize how Peter accumulated writing capital and how that capital supported the development of his habitus as a writer. It is only when we recognize social and economic fields that have been constructed over long periods of time that we begin to understand the limits of habitus and the conditions that accompany agency. Certainly some children do succeed, and Peter may easily be among those success stories, but for every child who succeeds from underfunded, inner-city schools, far too many students are denied their potential, and the status quo prevails.

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