

# The Development of Writing Habitus: A Ten-Year Case Study of a Young Writer

Written Communication

1–33

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## Abstract

Peter, an African American writer from a low-income community, is followed across a 10-year period as he progresses from first grade through high school. Drawing on writing samples and interviews, the author identifies a set of interrelated dispositions that contribute to his development of *habitus* as a writer. This article considers Peter's developing writing abilities alongside these emerging dispositions that include (a) meeting school expectations for reading and writing, (b) being good in school and being a good student, (c) forming friendships and affiliations that involve reading and writing practices, and (d) crafting future goals related to writing. Future success as a professional writer was contingent on his writing abilities being recognized, valued, and taken up in contexts beyond high school. The author draw on Bourdieu's constructs of habitus and field to explore Peter's becoming a writer across time.

## Keywords

Longitudinal qualitative research, literacy, identity, social context, habitus and writing, Bourdieu and writing, longitudinal studies of writers

While short-term studies have revealed significant insight into the writing identities that children enact at particular points in time or across relatively

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brief periods of time, little is known about the longitudinal development of identities of successful writers. Specifically, we know little about the long-term processes and the contextual influences that support becoming a writer. As an African American student growing up in a high-poverty community who attended underfunded schools, Peter's process of becoming is particularly salient. The study described in this article follows Peter across a 10-year period from Grade 1 through Grade 11. Specifically, I ask, what dispositions have supported Peter in becoming a writer as he progressed through school, and how well do these dispositions serve him as he moves beyond high school? I illustrate how changes in writing proficiency and craft co-occurred alongside the development of dispositions of self.

My focus is on *becoming* as Peter comes to define himself as a writer across time. To do this, I invoke Bourdieu's construct of *habitus*, which he defines as 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, 1977, pp. 82-83, italics in the original). In short, Peter's *becoming* a writer is grounded in an emerging set of dispositions that contribute to his development of habitus as a writer. I maintain that these dispositions are as significant as Peter's writing abilities evident in his actual writing samples. In short, I situate the process of becoming a writer within a longitudinal set of social and contextual relationships related to home, school, and peers.

Of the seven children from my first grade class whom I followed for 10 years, Peter was one of two students on track to graduate from high school, and he was the only student to claim an identity as a writer. I have no doubt that many low-income African American children, including other children from my first grade class, had the potential to become gifted writers. Thus, I investigate Peter's success to provide valuable insight into the roles teachers and schools can play in fostering writing identities.

## Conceptualizing Writing Development and Identity Construction

In this brief review, I maintain that an emerging focus on self and writing has invited studies that highlight identity construction as a dimension of writing development and reveal the potential of longitudinal qualitative research to provide insights into the construction of writing identities. As a profoundly temporal construct, *habitus* is uniquely suited for the longitudinal examination of identity construction over time. Research connecting writing with identity draws on the work of writing scholars (Applebee, 2000; Schultz &

Fecho, 2000) who highlight the role social context plays in children's writing development. This recognition of social context increased attention to issues of motivation and affect (Nolen, 2007), self-efficacy (Pajares & Valiante, 2006), and student interests (Lipstein & Renninger, 2006) and has set the stage for explorations of writing identity. For example, Ivanic (2004) argued that writing always involved a presentation of self and this, in turn, affected the identity of the writer. Similarly, Dutro, Selland, and Bien (2013) maintain that school experiences with writing across time inform how children come to define themselves as readers and writers in classrooms.

In 1993, Sternglass proposed longitudinal research as a bridge between traditional cognitive approaches and investigations of writing that recognize and explore the cultural resources that writers bring to their work. Longitudinal research has tracked how writing is connected to the experiences of individual students. For example, researchers (Lipstein & Renninger, 2006; Nolen, 2007) documented developmental changes as students moved from situational interest in a particular writing task to the development of long-term interests in writing. A related body of work has specifically explored writing identity and how issues and ideas are taken up, revisited, and revised through cyclical talk among participants across time.

Lillis (2008) identified longitudinal ethnography that incorporated rich and varied data sets as particularly useful. For example, in their longitudinal work, Burgess and Ivanic (2010) draw on the construct of timescales (Lemke, 2000) to explore how short-term events persist across the time as people construct meanings in the present while simultaneously drawing on the past and projecting themselves into the future. They maintain that people construct meanings, including meanings related to self, over time.

In this article, I use the construct of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1971) to explore multiple dimensions of identity and writing development in ways that honors context as well as the longitudinal development self. By focusing on dispositions, I attend to embodied ways of being that are grounded in Peter's early learning experiences while also responding to available messages about who he is and who he could be. I apply Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to Peter's longitudinal case study to explore to how children's writing practices become part of their everyday lives as they operate within social institutions (Lillis, 2008). *Habitus* invites explorations of how writing is deeply embedded in social practices related to literacy and schooling over long periods of time.

This article explores Peter's longitudinal trajectory as a developing writer who attends a high-poverty, urban public school to explore the dispositions that operate across time as he becomes an accomplished writer. Rather than considering only context or self, this analysis presents the student and his embodied dispositions around writing within Peter's process of *becoming* a writer.

Specifically, the current analysis situates Peter within conversations about writing development, noting how particular dispositions—some that are indirectly related to writing—contribute to his becoming a writer. The current analysis makes a novel contribution to our understandings of writing development by

- a. Identifying the varied dispositions that contributed to the longitudinal process of becoming a writer
- b. Situating writing development within intersections among writing competencies, dispositions, and identity construction
- c. Identifying multiple fields in which writing competency is constructed and highlighting the varied expectations across those fields
- d. Expanding the notion of identity to include temporal dimensions of becoming through *writing habitus*—the emerging and enduring dispositions that support becoming a writer across time

## **Habitus, Capital, and Field: Making Sense of Success**

As a “system of lasting transposable dispositions” that draws upon past experiences, habitus involves labor practices, patterns of consumption, and parent–child relations as conditions and is described as the basis for the “perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences” (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, p. 54). Habitus involves processes of cultural mediation that result in dispositions that operate across multiple fields. Thus habitus is defined by an evolving set of schema that develop through relationships as people adjust, adapt, and negotiate within and across multiple contexts. The dispositions that contribute to habitus are the propensities and inclinations, often subconscious, that people embody over time. Initially constructed in early childhood, these dispositions are generally durable and transposable in that they operate intuitively across contexts, situations, and time.

People construct habitus across the life span in relation to the contexts they occupy and the relationships they form. In short, habitus is a “structuring structure” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 167) that contributes to the construction of both limits and possibilities. As composed of embodied ways of being, habitus is intimately connected to Bourdieu’s description of accumulated embodied cultural capital which begins in early childhood and remains marked by the earliest conditions of its acquisition (Bourdieu, 1984). People who can prolong the acquisition process (i.e., through long-term educational opportunities) are advantaged in being able to accumulate substantial amounts of capital prior to seeking their place in social and economic systems. In particular, cultural capital is dependent on the amount of time that families, and particularly mothers,

can invest in their children which in turn is contingent on adequate economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu argued that families indirectly transmit cultural capital to their children through internalized values (Bourdieu, 1974) while schools tend to support these same values through ostensibly objective practices that often exclude children from less privileged backgrounds. As Bourdieu explained, the construct of capital explains the unequal academic achievement of children from historically underserved populations (Bourdieu, 1984).

While embodied capital references ways of being that have value within particular institutions, spaces, and contexts, all people possess habitus—the subtle nonverbal and unconscious ways of being, acting, and interacting including ways of looking, physical positioning, silences, and movements that are acquired unknowingly in the course of everyday activity. These ways of being are difficult to resist because they develop silently, insidiously, and insistently. While capital refers directly to ways of being that privilege people in particular contexts, habitus and the dispositions associated with habitus may or may not privilege people within a given field.

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 deeply rooted dispositions, it also acts “as an acquired system of generative schemes” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 95). Habitus does not determine ways of being, acting, knowing, or believing, rather the limits on habitus are set by the historical and social conditions in which it was acquired (Bourdieu, 1984). 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).

Swartz (1997) drew on the work of Bourdieu to remind educators that social and economic possibilities are equally available to everyone, and it is through habitus that prior life experiences teach people what may or may not be possible; agency is intertwined with, and perhaps directed by, past experiences. These limits are connected to the institutional and social contexts or fields that people occupy. While Bourdieu’s construct of habitus provides a valuable tool for exploring dispositions that have supported Peter in becoming a writer, the construct of field highlights the degree to which Peter’s reading and writing practices and his habitus as a writer are recognized, valued, and taken up across contexts.

## **Fields: Contexts and Considerations**

It has recently been argued that scholars who draw on the work of Bourdieu have failed to attend sufficiently to what Bourdieu describes as “field” in

order to understand relationships among individuals and social structures (Swartz, 1997). Carrington and Luke (1997) describe fields as “semi-autonomous, structured social spaces characterized by discourse and social activity” (p. 100). Swartz (1997) describes fields as spaces for the “production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status” (p. 117). He argues that fields are competitive arenas in which actors struggle to accumulate and control various forms of capital. As Bourdieu argued, capital has value only in relation to a specific economic field. Successful activity requires people to have a feel for the field; they must be able to act, interact, and function in expected and appropriate ways. The construct of field moves attention away from the particulars of individuals and groups to the struggles and tensions that occur and shape people’s practices.

Bourdieu used the analogy of the game to explain how fields operate. While people are not consciously following rules as they engage in everyday life, they are strategically competing for resources, positions, and opportunities. Being successful in the game is easier if “one is born into the game” (Bourdieu, 1980/1990, p. 67) and has embodied ways of being, or dispositions, that are valued within the field. As Bourdieu maintained, the earlier the child enters a field, the less aware he or she is of the knowledges and beliefs that privilege natives within that field.

Practices, including literacy practices, are the result of the adjustments, adaptations, interactions, and negotiations involving dispositions and identities in relation to the fields in which people operate. It is this interaction of field and habitus that informs the social worlds available to individuals; this is not to say that students, like Peter, from high-poverty communities are limited to high-poverty lives. Options for change are made available through possibilities for agency that reflect the lessons that life has taught children about viable possibilities for the future. Thus, to explore the process of becoming a writer, a methodology is needed that attends to context, self, and embodied ways of being across time.

## Research Method

This longitudinal qualitative case study documents the development of Peter’s *habitus as a writer*. This “intrinsic case” (Stake, 1995, p. 3) makes sense of the complex social interactions and situations that surround becoming a writer across time. The full collective case study included seven cases exploring intersections among literacy and school learning. The collective case study drew upon four phases of data collection occurring 3 and 4 years apart beginning when the researcher was the first grade teacher of the 10 student participants and ended when the remaining seven students were in high school.

This project involved periodic restudy (Saldanã, 2003) of the same group of children and their parents at 3- and 4-year intervals over a 10-year period. The families participated in the study during the children's 1st, 4th/5th, 7th/8th, and 10th/11th grade years. In 1st grade, the students attended a large urban school where 97% of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Rosa Parks Elementary School served children from the lowest socio-economic neighborhood of a midsized northeastern city referred to as Cityville. This city 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 slated to be taken over by the state if test scores did not improve. Pseudonyms are used for all people and places.

Because I was the students' first grade teacher, the initial phase of the study involved a range of data sources including four interviews with children and parents, field notes containing my reflections and classroom observations, student portfolios and literacy assessments, and audiotaped class discussions. In Phases 2 and 3, I conducted two interviews with students and parents, administered reading assessments, and collected writing samples. Reading assessments at the early grades involved running records of leveled texts (Clay, 2002) and story retellings and in later grades involved informal reading inventories (e.g., word lists, reading passages, comprehension questions; Ekwall & Shanker, 1993; Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). During the final phase, writing samples and reading assessments were collected and I observed students in their high school classes, interviewed their English language arts (ELA) teachers, and invited the students to create a set of reflective texts (e.g., photographs, journal entries, drawings, audio recordings). Parent and child interviews, reading assessments, field notes, and prompted writing samples in Grades 5, 8, and 11 were collected during home visits that lasted approximately 2 hours. Students were asked to write about school. Interview questions focused on reading and writing practices, school experiences, emerging reading/writing identities, and school achievement. Over time, school success and identity construction became particularly salient as students considered their futures. Some children, like Peter, focused on doing well in school and continuing into college while others left high school; some became involved in illegal activities.

Figure 1 presents the data that were collected for all of the cases including Peter's and briefly describes the writing samples collected across the four phases of the project. While the number of writing samples collected across time is not sufficient to support a stand-alone analysis of Peter as a writer (see Figure 2), the current analysis explores the process of becoming a writer not only through written products but also through participants' voices.

	Participants	Writing Samples	Data Collected
Phase 1 Grade 1	Peter and Peter's Mother Teacher/Researcher	Peter's writing included: Classroom journal entries, and writing assignments in multiple genres.  12 writing samples with a total of 810 words	4 Parent Interviews 4 Student Interviews Fieldnotes Portfolio/Classroom Assessments Audiotaped Classroom Discussions
Phase 2 Grade 5	Peter and Peter's Mother Teacher/Researcher	One piece of writing were collected. 1.) writing about school  1 writing sample with a total of 95 words	1 Parent Interview 2 Student Interviews Reading Assessments One Writing Sample
Phase 3 Grade 8	Peter and Peter's Grandmother Teacher/Researcher	Two pieces of writing were collected. 1.) writing about school 2.) writing about school  2 writing samples with a total of 97 words	2 Grandparent Interviews 2 Student Interviews Reading Assessments Two Writing Samples
Phase 4 Grade 11	Peter and Peter's Grandmother Teacher/Researcher	Two pieces of writing were collected. 1.) writing about school 2.) writing about reading  Students selected writing samples; Peter submitted eight poems  8 writing samples with a total of 830 words	3 Grandparent Interviews 3 Student Interviews 2 Teacher Interviews Reading Assessments 2 Prompted Writing Samples School Observations Interviews with teachers Students selected writing, photographs, audiotaped journal entries, drawings

**Figure 1.** Peter's case: Research phases and data.

### *Analysis of Longitudinal Data*

Once audiotapes were transcribed, data from each phase of the study were coded to identify salient categories of information (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the first and third phases, data were coded into grounded categories and contrastive analysis methods were used to organize these categories across cases. As separate rounds of grounded coding were completed, the limits of traditional coding processes became evident. By focusing on the themes that emerged during particular phases, traditional coding obfuscated



	Writing Sample	Word Count
Grade 1 12 samples 810 words	Funny Story	14
	Wishbone - Office	19
	Bee Story	75
	Seed Story	34
	Fifteen Dogs	66
	Birds	21
	Wishbone Story	39
	Riddle Book	41
	Policeman story	21
	I am sick	60
	School	48
	Writing Journal	372
Grade 5 1 sample 95 words	Bad Music Note	95
Grade 8 2 samples 97 words	Coming Home -1	46
	Coming Home -2	51
Grade 11 8 samples 830 words	Color Purple	92
	Not a Poet	100
	Ghost	73
	Look	55
	Deception	150
	Death	177
	For Her	153
	Suffering	30

**Figure 2.** Writing sample and word counts.

longitudinal patterns. It was through my continuing rereading of the raw data from across the study phases that long-term patterns became visible

(e.g., temporal markers of school success, repeated discourses about Peter as a writer, changes in identity statements related to writing). Particular discourses recurred and participants repeated stories and themes that they had told before (i.e., accounts of sharing books with family and friends). In addition, I became increasingly aware of temporal expectations related to literacy and schooling, and the challenges that some students faced in meeting those benchmarks.

Longitudinal analysis is itself explicitly temporal. Segments of data collected during early phases of the project gained significance when viewed in relation to later data. A story told in Phase 1 about being good in school attained significance when Peter's grandmother recounted the story 10 years later. Recollections of the past (e.g., telling stories to kids at preschool) as well as perceived possibilities for the future (e.g., becoming a journalist) converged as Peter identified and reidentified himself relative to school expectations, literacy practices, and his writing practices.

For the current analysis, Peter's writing samples were collected across the decade and placed in chronological order; changes in writing abilities were noted. Attention was paid not only to how writing conventions improved, but also to the development of narrative structures and engagement with multiple and in some cases unusual genres. I draw upon interviews with Peter and accounts from his mother, grandmother, and teachers to explore how Peter and other participants described Peter as a reader and writer. My awareness of longitudinal patterns across the data led me to Bourdieu's descriptions of habitus as it invited the exploration of temporal dimensions and dispositions that informed the construction of self.

As a "system of lasting transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.p. 82) that integrate past experiences and enable functioning and action, writing habitus involves what is constructed and maintained over time. While I drew on coded data across the four phases, the longitudinal analysis described in this article also required careful and reiterative rereading of the entire data set. For example, "good" was a data category in the first phase of the study. "Behavior" was a code during later phases. These sets of coded data were read to identify longitudinal patterns; then the entire data set was explored to establish the longitudinal nature of dispositions related to goodness across time. Figure 3 presents illustrative data related to each of the four dispositions.

As Peter's case illustrates, being a writer is intertwined with being good in school and being recognized as a good student. It is also connected to dispositions related to being a reader and friendships based on shared literacy practices.

Across the 10-year period, Peter operated within multiple fields each presenting a nuanced set of expectations. As "semi-autonomous, structured

Dispositions	Illustrative Data Samples
Meeting school expectations for reading and writing	<p>In grade 5, writing a well-constructed, narrative including climax and resolution - "But it stopped when the principal came in."</p> <p>Passing his State ELA tests in grades 4 and 8.</p> <p>Using adverbial phrases - "Currently in English class" - and embedded phrases - "when her mother fell ill" - in his writing in grade 11.</p>
Being good in school and being a good student	<p>The researcher noting that "<i>Peter loves to please</i>" in her fieldnotes.</p> <p>Peter writing repeatedly about being good in school - "at school, he [Wishbone] is great! Good!"</p> <p>Repeated comments from mother on Peter's good behavior in school - "he was always doing wonderfully in school."</p>
Forming friendships and affiliations that involve reading and writing practices	<p>Repeated comments from mother and grandmother illustrating Peter's social uses of literacy - "When the kids were in daycare, he used to tell the kids short stories."</p> <p>Peter noting that he and his friends were "really into" the <i>Lord of the Rings</i> series.</p> <p>Peter describing literacy as central to his friendships - "And all the kids they got a lot of stories but they interested in art and stuff. They read all the time."</p>
Crafting future goals related to writing	<p>Even in first grade, Peter identifying writing as significant to his future saying you could "write all your life" and writing could help you to "be an artist."</p> <p>Peter's stated interest in studying journalism.</p> <p>Peter's ongoing and personal commitment to writing - "I keep a journal and I started writing things, mostly bad days."</p>

**Figure 3.** Four dispositions and illustrative data.

social spaces characterized by discourse and social activity" (Carrington & Luke, 1997, p. 100), different fields made differing demands on Peter. In particular, educational contexts beyond high school presented new expectations and challenges related to negotiating college applications, reading and

writing at a college level, and a collegiate level of academic language and writing mechanics.

Many scholars have written about students' identities as writers (Dutro et al., 2013; Ivančić, 2004), yet none have documented the emergence of becoming a writer across a decade. While this collective case study was not originally designed to focus on Peter's writing development, the combination of written artifacts and longitudinal interviewing of multiple participants created a unique data set for exploring the process of becoming and the emergence of habitus as a writer.

### *The Researcher's Positionality*

I am a middle-aged woman of European heritage who never attended an urban school or lived in a poor urban community. Whereas I grew up in a family that faced significant economic and mental health challenges, mine was an academically oriented family. My father was a gifted academic, but his academic success did not translate into economic gains. While we struggled at the poverty line, my sisters and I brought stores of academic capital to school. My background taught me several lessons. First, my sisters and I learned painful lessons about the privileging of certain ways of eating, dressing, vacationing, and owning as we competed in the social context of a suburban school. Second, we learned about the nonlinearity of life and how idiosyncratic events can disrupt expected and earned trajectories, leading us to challenge simplistic formulas that describe literacy the key to financial success.

### *Introducing Peter*

In my field notes, recorded during the first months of 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 sense of self-assurance.

I also noted his skill as a reader. Peter was consistently among the strongest readers in the class. Peter was polite and kind to the other children; he learned quickly and brought a sincere joy of learning to the classroom.

For the first 5 months that Peter was in my class, his family lived in a subsidized apartment complex that supported single mothers who were

working to get their lives on track. Mothers and their children lived in the facility for up to one year while mothers found employment, became independent of welfare, and secured their own apartments. Although Peter's mother appreciated the program and its amenities, she left the complex in February, stating, "It's not for everybody and I just think that [it's] for the type of people that need instruction." Ms. Horner had a regular job working in customer service for the local telephone company. While her job did not pay much, it was a regular income and her family no longer relied on social services.

During one of my first visits to Peter's home, Peter shared his growing collection of children's books. His mother 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 aunt were avid readers, "I've always been surrounded by books." She described her own grandmother as giving her advice about how to help Peter with his reading. Although the family did not own a computer, Ms. Horner was insistent that Peter learn computer skills. Across the 10-year study, Peter consistently associated reading with friendship. In first grade, Peter noted that the older kids 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."

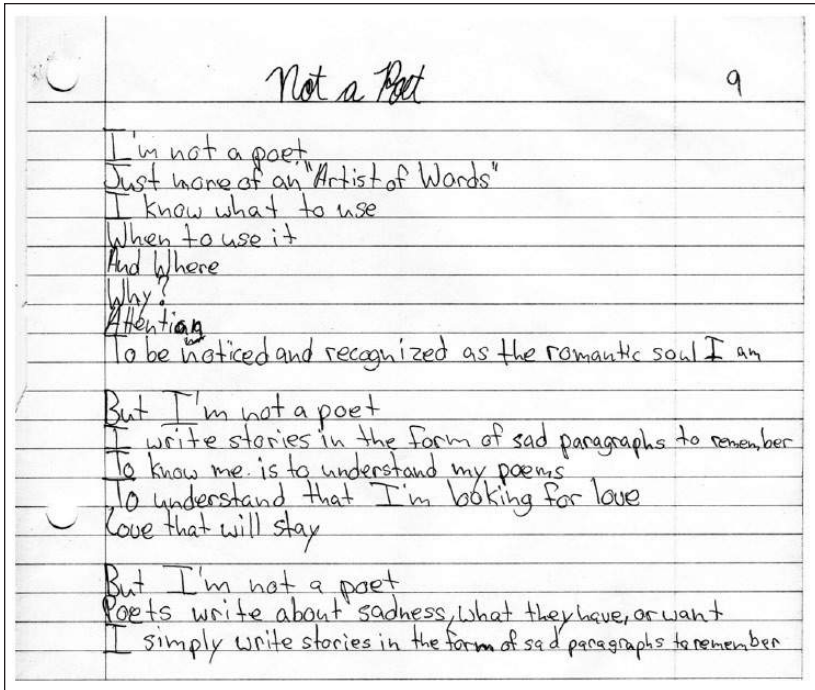
### *Developing Writing Habitus*

In Peter's junior year of high school, he wrote the poem presented in Figure 4. In this poem, Peter ironically denies being a poet. When Peter showed me this poem, I was struck not only by its irony but also by its metaphoric language (i.e., "stories in the form of sad paragraphs to remember") and Peter's description of himself as an "artist of words." Impressed, I was interested not only in how Peter learned to write, but also in how Peter came to describe himself as a writer.

Bourdieu's construct of habitus invites scholars to consider how durable and transposable dispositions develop over time through the integration of past experiences and ongoing events. In the following sections, examples of Peter's writing and interview transcripts are used to explore four dispositions related to (a) school expectations, (b) being good, (c) friendships and affiliations involving literacy practices, and (d) future goals.

### *Dispositions Reflecting School Expectations for Writing*

Across the 10-year study, Peter developed a set of dispositions that reflected *school expectations for reading and writing*. He read and enjoyed the books

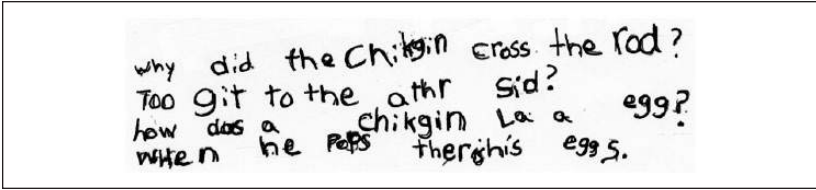


**Figure 4.** Grade 11, not a poet.

that were assigned in school and was able to meet school expectations for decoding and understanding these texts. Peter was able to produce texts that reflected school writing expectations for writing conventions, organization, genre, style, and neatness. Meeting school expectations for reading and writing are among the dispositions that ultimately supported Peter as a writer.

When Peter entered my first grade classroom, he had already discovered the alphabetic principle and was able to use it independently in the classroom to capture letter/sound correspondences between the sounds he wanted to record and the letters he needed to write (Tolchinsky, 2006 [AQ: 6]). In the writing sample presented in Figure 5, Peter was asked to write a book of questions and answers similar to a nonfiction text that I had read aloud to the class. Peter was the only student in the class who adapted the question and answer format to write a book of riddles. While Peter's riddles were intriguing and amusing, his early letter formation was notably less refined.

Why did the chicken cross the road?



**Figure 5.** Grade 1, riddles.

To get to the other side?

How does a chicken lay an egg?

When he poops there is an egg.

While in my field notes I described Peter's book as "disjointed but clever," his creativity was apparent. Peter was particularly interested in accuracy; not only did Peter ask for help in spelling words correctly ("cross," "here," "poops"), but neat handwriting became increasingly important as evidenced in writing samples collected later in the year. Peter also reported attending to handwriting when he played school with his cousins. He described having his cousins trace letters and "copy off of what I write."

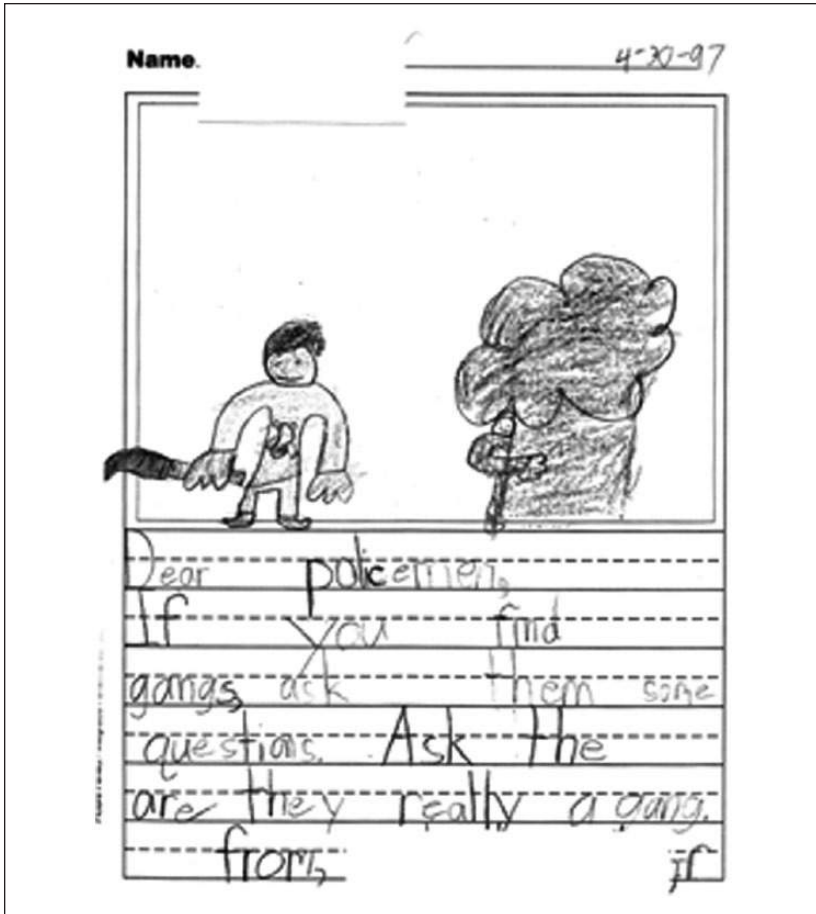
Peter was also learning to write in multiple genres. In April, he wrote a letter to the local policemen (Figure 6). Not only did he incorporate polished handwriting but he also closed his letter with his full formal name—Peter Horner Jr.—which has been masked to protect his identity.

In addition to writing riddles and letters, Peter also wrote a simple nonfiction text using a repeated sentence ("I know about seeds"), to achieve coherence across the piece.

Other genres proved more challenging. Despite having been exposed to stories and lessons about narrative structure (i.e., beginning, middle, and end, problem/solution), crafting a coherent narrative was difficult. In June, Peter wrote a narrative about "Wishbone" (Figure 7)

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 wood[would] not fight. He walk over there. Her boyfriend came.

Peter used a chaining narrative structure (Berninger, Fuller, & Walker, 1996) through his repetition of the pronoun *he*. However, his storyline is not clear. The reader can infer that Wishbone is a dog that meets a female dog who has

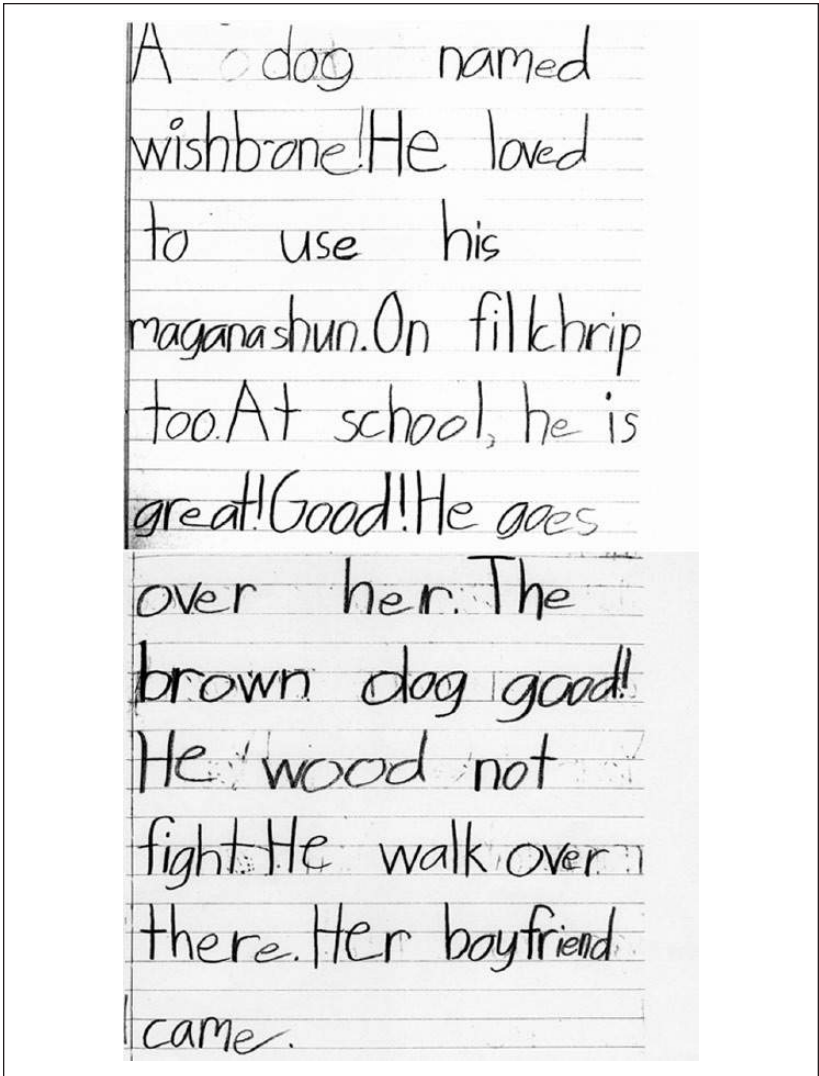


**Figure 6.** Grade 1, police letter.

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 remain unclear.

Peter's writing shows evidence of spelling development. In Figure 7, Peter correctly spelled "good" and used this pattern to write the word "would," which he wrote as "wood." Peter relied on invented spelling to write unfamiliar words (i.e., maganashun/imagination; fillchrip/fieldtrip) and attended to capitalization and punctuation (i.e., exclamation points, commas). Peter continued to mix sentence fragments with complete sentences and omitted words and some word endings.





**Figure 7.** Grade 1, Wishbone.

When Peter was in fifth grade, I no longer had access to his school writing; during one of our interviews, I asked Peter to write a story about school. Unlike his writing in first grade, Peter drafted a short, but well-constructed, narrative that included a title, setting, initiating event, climax, and resolution (see Figure 8).

The bad music

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date 1/17/08

Write a story about something that happened in school.

One day, I was at a choir rehearsal, one of the last 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.

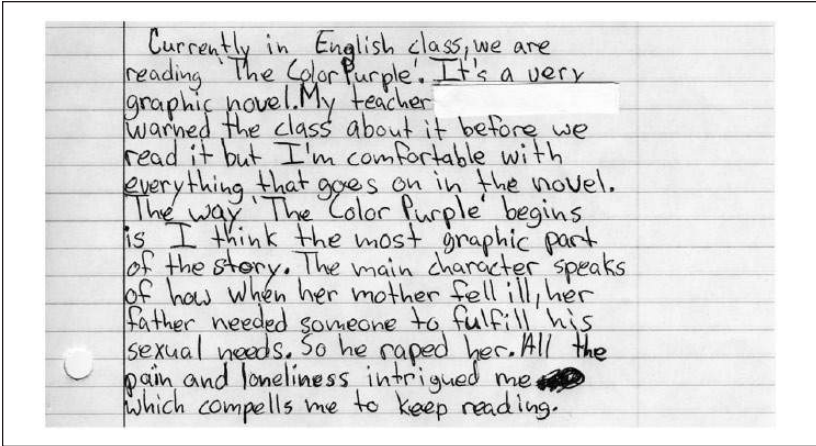
On the next day, we were at lunch talking about how choky and how cool it was. All of a sudden, my friend brought up what started the laughter. People laughed hard but it stopped when the principal came in.

**Figure 8.** Grade 5, the bad music.

Reflecting school expectations, Peter wrote in cursive. He generally used punctuation, including commas, correctly, and his sentence structures were generally correct. He started sentences with subordinate clauses (i.e., “one day,” “on my way,” “all of a sudden”) and made only a few spelling errors (i.e., princibal/principal, rehearsle/rehearsal). Peter reported being “real good” at writing stories and poems.

Peter passed his state ELA tests in Grades 4 and 8. When I asked Peter about taking the eighth grade 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 essay was the hardest part and worried that he did not have enough time to finish, “You got to write like a pre-draft, or a first draft, and then write the final copy in the booklet.”

Peter spoke enthusiastically about the books he read in his high school honors English class including a collection of Langston Hughes’s poetry, *The Color Purple* (Walker, 1990), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2002), and *The Pearl* (Steinbeck, 1994). During our spring interview, I asked Peter to write about school. Peter produced a piece that assumed a notably academic tone (Figure 9). He presented a topic sentence and supporting details.



**Figure 9.** Grade 11, *The Color Purple*.

Peter used adverbial phrases (“Currently in English Class”) and embedded phrases (“when her mother fell ill”). Although he was not yet consistently using commas correctly in conjunction with these phrases, he was successful in producing writing that sounded academic. His writing featured academic vocabulary (e.g., “graphic,” “novel,” “intrigued,” “compels”), and he consistently used single quotation marks to indicate the book’s title. The academic nature of the writing was further established by formal references to sexual language (e.g., “graphic novel,” “sexual needs”) rather than vernacular expressions.

Peter also shared some of the writing he was doing outside of school. In his poem, “Look” each line is simple and pointed with each line leading to the next and thus evoking a complex social setting (see Figure 10). The use of the word “look” in the title, the first line, and the final line pulls the piece together. Notably, each line offers a unique and powerful verb that provides each of the characters with a particular stance. Formatting contributes to the effectiveness of the poem; by starting each line with a capital letter for each person’s name, Peter emphasizes the agency of each person. Capitalization is abandoned when characters became the recipients of imposed actions.

In Figure 11, Peter incorporated mathematical symbols into his poem. While the figure does not provide an opportunity to observe traditional sentence structures, Peter uses academic language (i.e., “serenity,” “aggravation,” “adoration”). The craft of the piece is evident with last word of each line also being the first word of the next line. As the title suggests, the poem

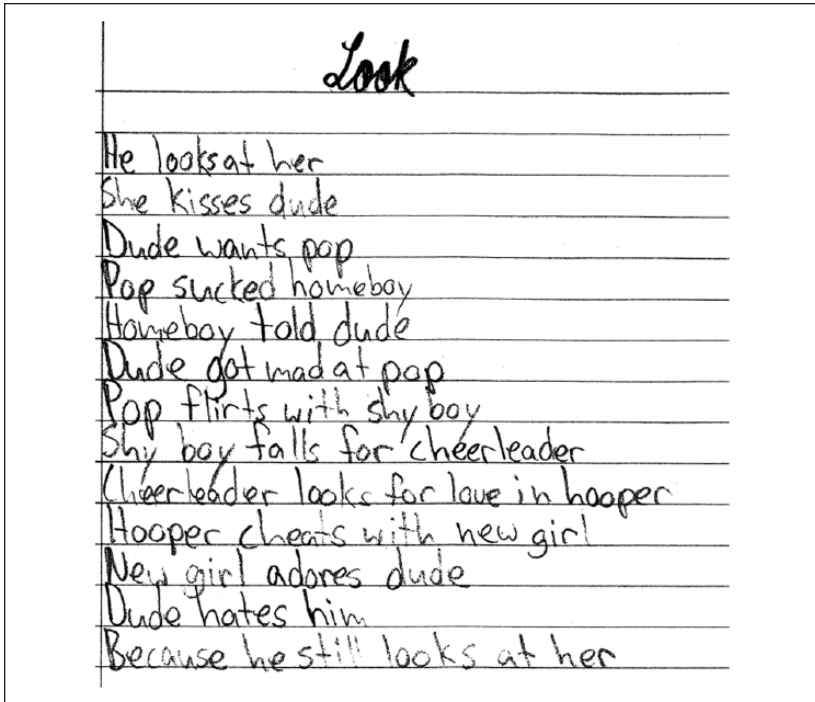


Figure 10. Grade 11, look.

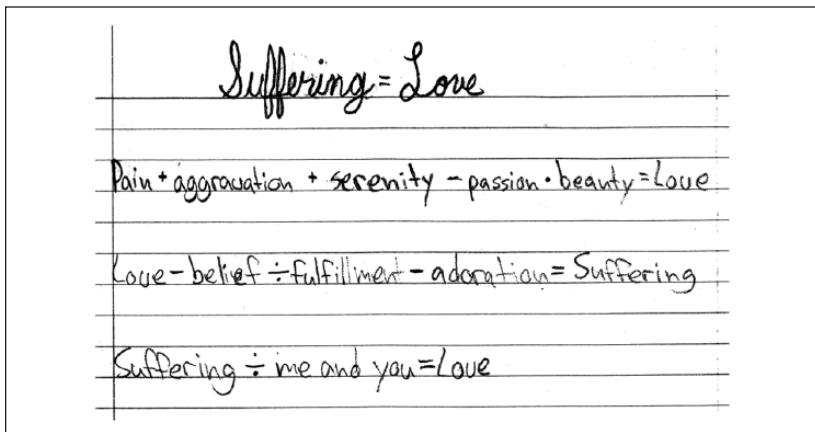


Figure 11. Grade 11, suffering = love.

moves back and forth between suffering and love. The only consecutive words are “me and you.”

From Grade 1 to Grade 11, we observe Peter meeting school expectations for writing not only in terms of passing mandated tests, but also through the writing he produces. Peter learned to apply various writing conventions related to handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. He wrote in multiple genres and explored various aspects of writers’ craft and literary devices to create writing that is coherent, structured, and often moving. However, as other scholars interested in writing development have argued (Nolen, 2007; Pajares & Valiante, 2006), dispositions related to writing ability and meeting school expectations alone did not explain Peter’s becoming a writer over time. Not only have these scholars established the significance of self in the process of becoming a writer, but they have also recognized the significance of the social contexts in which writing is learned (e.g., Applebee, 2000; Schultz & Fecho, 2000).

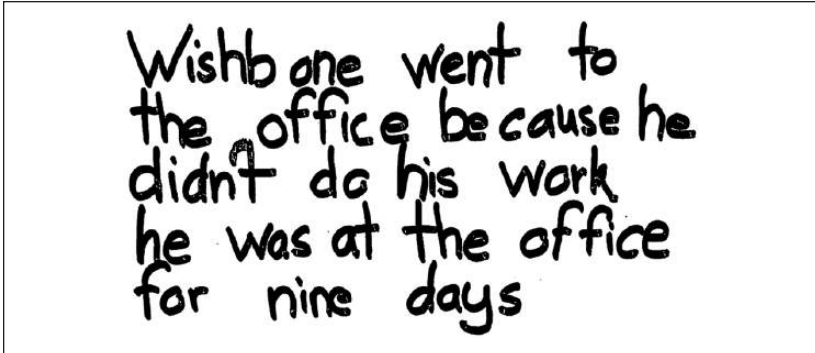
### *Dispositions Related to Being a Good Student*

Peter also exhibited dispositions related to *being a good student*. These dispositions are apparent as Peter talks about school and in how others described Peter. In my very first set of field notes crafted about Peter when he was in first grade, I wrote, “Peter loves to please.” This was a pattern across the study.

Peter’s early writing samples presented a recurring motif about *being good* and following school rules. In his story about Wishbone (Figure 7), Peter wrote that “at school, he [Wishbone] is great! Good!” This same theme is evident in a second story about Wishbone in which the dog is sent to the principal’s office (see Figure 12).

Themes of behavior, being good, and school principals recurred in Peter’s fifth grade writing when I asked Peter to write a story about school (see Figure 8). Peter describes him and his friends laughing about an incident in music class, but the laughter “stopped when the principal came in.” Peter also echoed messages about being good when he described playing school with his cousins and teaching school rules, including “Don’t fight” and “No running in the hallways.”

Significantly, Peter not only wrote and spoke about being good, he was also a remarkably well-behaved student who consistently tried to please his mother and his teachers. In first grade, Peter’s mother noted that he “gets such a joy from going to school. He loves his teachers and his classmates.” In fifth grade, Ms. Horner reported that his teachers have “nothing but good things to say about Peter. I mean that’s how it is with all his teachers. Everything is just so consistent with him.”



**Figure 12.** Wishbone is sent to the office.

When Peter was in eighth grade, I temporarily lost Peter from the longitudinal sample. When I attempted to contact the family, I learned that Peter had transferred out of the school district and no forwarding information was available. While the other families in the sample were interviewed in the fall and again in the spring, it was not until spring that I located the family thanks to a lucky run-in with Ms. Horner. It turned out that Ms. Horner and her family had moved to New York City to join her new husband but had returned when the marriage split up. Peter hated going to school in New York saying, “when I was down in [New York] I wasn’t doing too good [in school].” It was not until my second interview with Peter during the summer after eighth grade that he spoke directly about his experiences in New York City.

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.

In New York Peter attended a magnet school that specialized in math, science, and the performing arts; however, it was located in a difficult neighborhood that Peter had to transverse to get to school. After getting beaten up a few times, Peter stopped attending school.

After returning from New York, Peter’s mother was relieved that he was again attending school regularly and struggled to make sense of the experience: “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 . . . then he comes to New York and unfortunately everything went just downhill.” While Peter passed the eighth grade state ELA exam, his report card grades had suffered and his promotion to Grade 9 was questionable. When he returned to his old school in Cityville, Peter worked hard to earn his promotion to Grade 9.

Across Peter's early writing, his words, and the accounts from his teachers and mother, being good and meeting school expectations for behavior are recurring themes. While he experienced a difficult time fulfilling the role of a good student in New York, he ultimately regained good student status. While being good in school may seem to be distinct from the process of becoming a writer, being good and pleasing his teachers included fulfilling expectations related to writing. Thus the commitment Peter made to pleasing his teachers operated as a disposition that served Peter as he became a writer. In the following section, I explore the social relationships that operated as dispositions and supported Peter in becoming a writer.

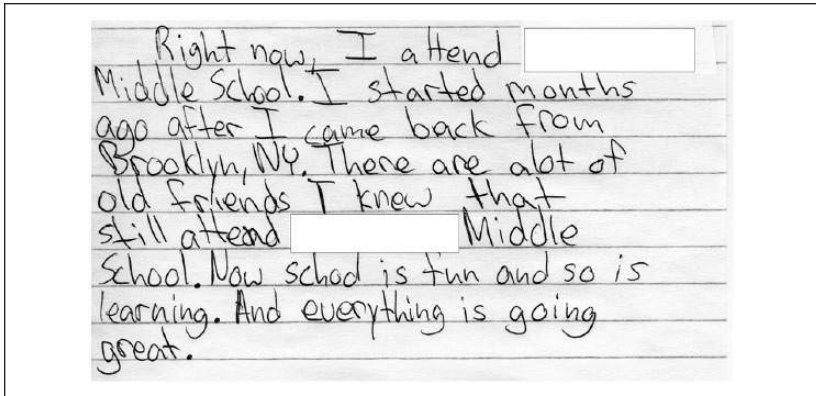
### *Dispositions Involving Friendship, Reading, and Writing*

Connections between literacy and friends recurred across the interviews. At our final interview, Peter's grandmother remembered him telling stories to the other children in day care, "When the kids were in day care, he used to tell the kids short stories. And he was just a kid himself you know."

When Peter was in fifth grade, he identified the best thing he had ever done in school as helping his friends. As he explained, "They are really important to me." Across the longitudinal sample, Peter's reading and writing practices were deeply embedded with his personal relationships with family and teachers as well as his friendships with peers. Thus reading and writing operated as dispositions that connected Peter to people. Significantly, these dispositions involved both reading and writing and highlighted the interconnectedness between these two literacy practices. For example, in fifth grade, Peter was particularly pleased when his teachers asked him to work with peers to complete writing assignments, including book reports. Peter explained, "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."

Like many children in Grade 5, Peter particularly enjoyed horror and mystery books and named R. L. Stine as his favorite author. He exchanged Goosebumps books (Stine, 1992-1997) with his friends and brother and reported reading several books from the series. Peter excitedly recounted the plot of a book he gotten from a friend. As our interview ended, Peter asked me to wait while he ran upstairs and came down with the book; he handed it to me, explaining that I should read it. Peter was inviting me to join his fellowship of Goosebumps fans.

Friendships were evoked in both of Peter's written accounts of his return to Cityville. In fact, Peter moved in with his father in order to reside within the attendance boundary of his former middle school. When I asked Peter to write during both interviews, Peter wrote about returning to this school (see Figures 13 and 14), which also housed the high school that he eventually attended.



**Figure 13.** Grade 8, back home I.

In both samples, Peter described strong alliances with friends and his emotional connections to school. Peter also 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.

In eighth grade, Peter and his friends were “really into” the *Lord of the Rings* series (Tolkien, 1954-1955). Together they enjoyed the books and the accompanying video and board games.

Despite Peter's difficulties in New York City, this was where Peter first spoke explicitly of the possibility of becoming a writer. At his magnet school, Peter was required to write daily. He 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.

When he returned to Cityville, he continued to share his writing with his ELA teacher, “I'll sometimes I'll give her [the ELA teacher] my poem book, my story book and see what she thinks about them.” That year Peter participated in a school-sponsored poetry contest. While Peter did not win the contest, he received encouraging feedback from his teacher



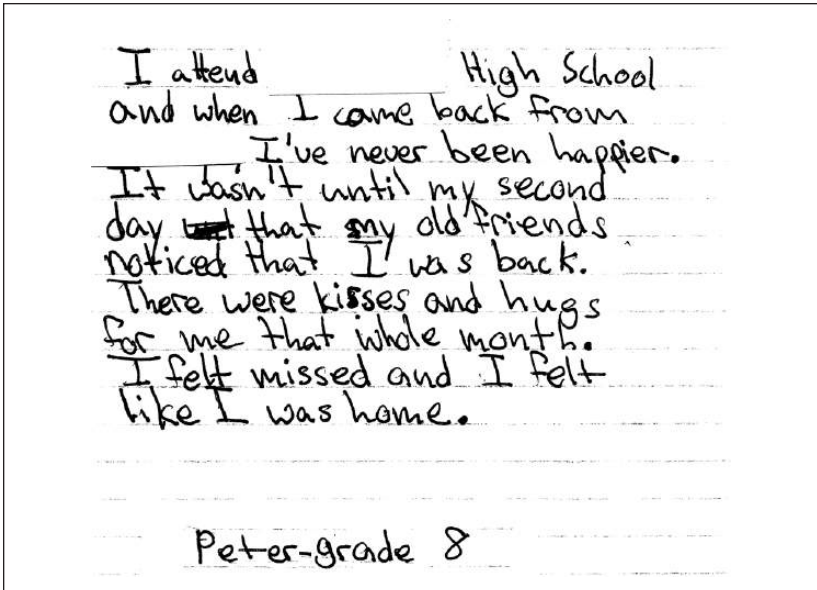


Figure 14. Grade 8, summer after eighth grade, back home 2.

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.

At the end of the year, 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—yet another marker of the social affiliation that accompanied Peter becoming a writer.

The first time I visited to Peter when he was in 11th grade, one of Peter's classmates was present. It soon became clear that reading and writing were central to their friendship. 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: 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 (looking directly at his 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 then explained that they often wrote and shared their stories during lunch at school. At this point in the interview, Peter's friend told 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 the review process and publication. Peter reported that he had been writing a book for the last two years. He compared it to *Scorpions* (Myers, 1988), describing it as a "story of the streets, like a ghetto story." He similarly identified *The Outsiders* (Hinton, 2003)—a book dealing with similar themes—as the best book he ever read in school.

In addition to sharing and writing books with peers, Peter also borrowed *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2006) from his grandmother and later lent it to his best friend. After finishing that book, he also borrowed *Angels and Demons* (Brown, 2003). His grandmother glanced at Peter suspiciously as she reported that she had recently purchased a third book by Dan Brown that had "mysteriously" disappeared.

Dispositions involving literacy friendships are apparent in Peter's poetry. In Figures 10 and 11, Peter wrote about his peers. Just as being good in school inhabited his lived experiences and his writing in the elementary grades, Peter's peers inhabit his writing practices in grade eleven.

Significantly, these dispositions were not discernable until I analyzed the data longitudinally. Links across time became apparent as Peter drew upon dispositions that were deeply embedded in who he was, sedimenting his habitus as a writer. For example, Peter's reading of books about gangs gained significance when he later wrote his own novel of the streets. Similarly, a comment from his eighth grade teacher became notable as Peter became the writer she predicted he could be.

### *Dispositions Directed at Future Goals*

An additional set of dispositions were related to Peter's plans for the future. While most apparent in high school, references to writing and the future recurred throughout the interviews. For example, in first grade Peter articulated the importance of writing. "If you copy and then you will keep on

writing it and be good in school and get a job.” As Peter explained, writing was important so you could “write all your life” and “be an artist.”

By 11th grade, Peter was thinking about college, and Peter and his grandmother agreed that her home provided a quiet place for Peter to focus on his studies and work toward 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.”

Eleventh grade was when Peter first spoke directly about becoming a writer and pursuing a degree in journalism at Columbia University. I asked Peter if he had taken a journalism class or if he had worked on his high school newspaper. Peter reported that his school did not have a journalism class and that they had only a single-page newsletter that “tells things about sports . . . and new things that [are] going on.” He was not involved with its production.

In addition, Peter was unaware that Columbia did not offer an undergraduate journalism program. Peter indicated that if he did not attend Columbia, his other choices were Ohio State, Notre Dame, and a private fine arts college in California. Peter admitted that football influenced his interest in Ohio State and Notre Dame. He then showed me the glossy recruitment brochure that he had received in the mail that had attracted his attention to the private liberal arts college in California.

Other complications suggested that Peter’s path to becoming a professional writer was tenuous. While Peter was passing his high school classes with Bs and Cs, he did not always complete his schoolwork. As his grandmother explained, this has consistently been “his downfall.” While Bs and Cs were considered good grades in Peter’s urban high school, they are not competitive in the larger field of college admissions. Our final interview occurred in May of his junior year. At that time, Peter had taken neither the PSAT nor the SAT. Peter had not met with a college counselor. He had no timeline for completing college applications, and his high school ELA teacher had expressed his doubts that Peter would become a writer. He explained that Peter “didn’t get all of his work done. But he gets [by]. . . . He’s one of the honors kids that’s just coasting.” He described Peter’s writing as adequate but did not think it was “on par with what it was earlier in the year,” adding, “Maybe it’s just he’s not trying as hard.” While his teacher was confident that Peter would pass the course and the 11th grade state ELA test, he was not confident that Peter had a future as a writer. Thus the field, as described by Bourdieu, was about to shift. Major universities would not value what were considered good grades in high school. In addition, knowledge and strategies for getting access to higher education were unfamiliar to members of Peter’s family, and Peter lacked the mentorship that would help him to strategically apply to colleges.

While Peter had developed various dispositions that contributed to an emerging habitus as a writer, he was lacked knowledge and resources that would privilege him as he moved from high school into college. In particular, he and his grandmother were unfamiliar with the processes that accompanied getting accepted into a top college and the affordances of and the differences among various colleges. Eventually, Peter applied to the local community college to pursue a 2-year degree. However, it would be a mistake to limit Peter's evolving habitus as a writer to becoming a professional writer. Peter's becoming a writer involved deeply rooted embodied dispositions that extended far beyond vocation.

Engaging in behaviors, actions, and ways of being that accompany being an accomplished writer in his school and home recurred across the study. I have identified and described the dispositions that supported Peter in *becoming* a writer. While becoming a writer included learning conventions and school expectations for writing, it also involved a broader set of dispositions related to being good in school, friendships, and affiliations involving reading and writing and his future goals as he moved through and beyond school. During the final phase of the study, Peter described a personal commitment to writing:

I do got a lot of things that I keep bottled up. I mean there are a lot the issues but stuff I just don't feel comfortable telling anybody . . . so I keep a journal and I started writing things, mostly bad days.

In this example, Peter presents writing as a coping mechanism as he explored the complexities of families, romantic love, and rejection. Writing had become a way of being in Peter's life and the center of his imagined future.

## Conclusions

As scholars before me have done, I have drawn on scholarship that highlights how people construct identities within social contexts. I strive to complicate existing notions of development by highlighting not only local contexts but also temporal dimensions of context that recognize the cumulating nature of identity construction as events and practices over time contribute to particular ways of being a writer (Burgess & Ivanîc, 2010; Dutro et al., 2013; Ivanîc, 2004; Lillis, 2008).

With these goals in mind, I have found the work of Bourdieu, and particularly his constructs of habitus and field, to be useful. Unlike most conceptions of development, habitus and field directly recognize the significance of time. In particular, habitus draws our attention to embodied dispositions that, while

malleable, tend to sediment over time (Pahl, 2004), endowing people with particular dispositions. Bourdieu's construct of field reminds us of how power operates within and across social spaces, with the result that only some children are born into social structures that enable them to readily conform to the rules and expectations valued on fields of play (e.g., higher education institutions, professional fields). Specifically, dispositions related to meeting school expectations for reading and writing, being a good student, friendships and affiliations that involve literacy reading and writing, and future goals related to writing have assembled and become embodied, supporting Peter's habitus as a writer.

However, despite assuming the skills and dispositions of a skilled writer, a shift in field has complicated Peter's future dreams. My analysis of writing habitus reveals the sedimented and field specific dispositions that operated and failed to operate for Peter. First, as a longitudinal analysis, it highlights the long-term trajectory of *becoming*. It identifies dispositions alongside the significance of social fields. In particular, it highlights how these dispositions formed and operated over a long period of time. Of particular significance is the possibility that the experiences that supported Peter (e.g., being good, social relationships related to literacy) may be significant for other students. Thus, understanding that being good in school is not just a convenience for the teachers but a disposition of affiliation and belonging that is crucial to being a student. Crafting classrooms as spaces that foster success and social affiliation may be key and should be among the explicit goals of teachers especially those serving historically underserved communities. Classroom writing activities must be designed in ways that invite students to engage in social networks that involve literacy. As evident in the ways students gravitate to series books, fan fiction websites, and social networking platforms, becoming a writer involves social dispositions of self that focus on purpose and belonging rather than grammar and main idea.

Second, this analysis reiterates the significance of shifting academic fields as students move from high school to college. Building on a rich body of scholarship (Fine, 1991; Lareau, 1989), Peter's case testifies for the importance of transitional services—even for successful students—as they transition from high school into college. Bourdieu (1974) argued that for 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. Peter had become an accomplished writer, however the dispositions that accompany the possession of economic and cultural capital privilege some children and not others. Children of the lower classes require much effort to attain what is "*given* to the children of the cultivated classes" (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 39). As Bourdieu wrote, society acts upon the underprivileged classes by

“making them seem as natural inability things which are only a result of an inferior social status” (Bourdieu, 1974, p. 42).

Peter’s abilities as a writer illustrate Bourdieu’s point—Peter did not lack talent; he lacked access. As Bourdieu argued, newcomers to a particular field must recognize the game and learn the rules simultaneously as they are immersed in the game. Easy and successful participation involves having a feel for the game and the moves that will privilege players. Schools that employ one counselor to mentor 150 students cannot provide the personalized career counseling needed by students whose families have been historically underserved by educational institutions. Processes for moving across institutional fields must be made transparent, parents must be involved, and students must be provided with outlets for their interests (e.g., clubs, organizations, apprenticeships), and these must be established long before students enter their final years of high school. This will require funding and a commitment from the schools and communities.

Finally, this longitudinal study has contributed to conversations about writing by revealing emerging and enduring dispositions that supported Peter in becoming a writer across time. Becoming a writer did not simply emerge during formal writing instruction; becoming a writer was a longitudinal journey that entailed dispositions that extended across home, school, and peer community involving both writing practices and a broader set of tangential dispositions. Educators must learn about students’ lives outside of school, attend to their interests, and create school spaces that invite and foster those practices. As with all case studies, the findings of this analysis are not directly generalizable to other children. What is clear from the current analysis is that dispositions beyond writing proficiency and activities outside of the classroom contributed to Peter becoming a writer.

This study was not designed as a study of a successful writer. As Peter’s first grade teacher, I could not have predicted his journey of becoming. While longitudinal research can be targeted to explore particular questions, its longitudinal nature increases the propensity for research to take new directions and uncover unanticipated findings. This was the case with Peter’s process of becoming a writer. Had I designed the study to focus specifically on writing, I would have targeted interview questions to focus specifically on writing, collected many more writing samples especially during Phases 2 and 3, and sought out Peter’s writing teachers across time. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

This research provides a powerful illustration of the importance and the potential of long-term qualitative research. Among the significant contributions of Bourdieu’s work is our ability to use the constructs of habitus and field to “longitudinally track what dispositions the ‘educated’ take out into

the systems of exchange of work and further education, civic life, and face-to-face and virtual relations of power, hierarchy and structure” (Luke, 2008, p. 78). Only across time were dispositions recognized and later challenged, revealing the limits of Peter’s habitus as a writer. Certainly some children do succeed and Peter may eventually be among those, but for every child who succeeds from underfunded, inner-city schools, far too many students are denied their potential; the status quo continues to prevail as educators are left struggling to address systemic inequities involving both schools and larger social fields.

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