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## “Without Boundaries, Something Great Might Just Be Created”: Examining Preservice Teachers’ Radical Imagination Through Becoming Writers and Teachers of Writing

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

We would like to thank the preservice teachers and young writers for their work with us.

## **“Without Boundaries, Something Great Might Just Be Created”: Examining Preservice Teachers’ Radical Imagination Through Becoming Writers and Teachers of Writing**

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Literacy can be liberatory, offering young learners opportunities to thrive as leaders in their lives and school. However, in schools, literacy learning often becomes about “decontextualized skills, disconnected from students’ lives, consciousness, and joy. This tradition has resulted in poor achievement, less rigor, and a lack of intellectual advancement, identity development, and developing social and critical consciousness among youth” (Muhammad, 2023, p. 2). Teaching skills in decontextualized ways challenges the purpose of literacy and the focus on how preservice teachers (PTs) are prepared. Moreover, attention to literacy accountability has privileged reading over writing instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham, 2019; Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2020; Juzwik et al., 2006; National Commission on Writing, 2003, as cited in Muhammad, 2023), creating inconsistent opportunities to prepare PTs for teaching writing.

What PTs see in schools often stems from initiatives aimed at outcomes and conformity, which limit writing to be seen as a skill or in response to reading rather than as a transformative tool. Narrow views of literacy limit teachers’ responsiveness in disrupting oppression, especially as initiatives for conformity on literacy teaching are more present in schools serving historically marginalized communities. The continued deprioritization of writing diminishes the capacity for children, as writers, to recognize writing as a tool for communication, expression, and transformation in communities and the world, and silences the voices and experiences of young, diverse learners.

When authentic purposes of writing are excluded in schools and teacher preparation, there is often a discord in personal pedagogy and beliefs about how to teach children (Agarwal et al., 2010; Broemmell & Swaggerty, 2017), as the successes are measured through what children produce rather than how or why they engage in learning. There must be opportunities for the skills of writing within authentic experiences that are meaningful to young children (Land, 2022). Further,

there is a need for teachers to experience authentic writing habits themselves to foster their own voice, communication, and expression alongside young learners.

Implementing imaginative instruction can be challenging for teachers as many states, including Texas, where this study takes place, prioritize explicit instruction that is restrictive and harmful to children and teachers (Hoffman et al., 2021). To ensure teachers' and children's voices are heard, our study focuses on writing instruction that resists policies robbing teachers of their intellectual capital and creativity. We examine how PTs engaged in radical imagination (Sailors, 2018) in approaching liberating writing experiences and practices while teaching writing skills and habits. We prioritize imagination to learn with and alongside PTs who make "concrete connections between what they have read and what is happening in the world, the country, or the local community" (Freire, 1994, p. 34, as cited in Sailors, 2018, p. 441), and match theories of dialogic learning with actionable instruction. We ask, in an educational context focused on accountability, how do PTs move towards liberating writing instruction as writers and teachers?

### **Literature Review**

We draw on literature focused on PTs as writers and on scholarship exploring writing in elementary schools. Our study also builds on research of critical writing pedagogy (e.g., Flint & Laman, 2013) and critical literacy (Freire, 1970). A critical approach to writing examines the power and perspective of writing assignments, classroom interactions, and the purpose of writing. It focuses on addressing change in personal lives and in the world. As such, we align with a view that centers reflection, reimagination, and revisiting the liberatory possibilities of writing instruction and preparation (Kline & Kang, 2022).

### **Preservice Teachers' Writing Identities**

Recent scholarship examines how writing methods courses offer opportunities for PTs to be writers and conceptualize the connections of those experiences in their future instruction (Bomer et al., 2019; Kohnen et al., 2019; Morgan & Pytash, 2014). Despite this increase, there continues to be limited attention on how PTs have opportunities to expand their identities and knowledge as writers (Brenner & McQuirk, 2019; Myers et al., 2016). When given opportunities to write themselves, PTs most often expand their abilities to teach writing and find opportunities to share their own information and written compositions (Dawson, 2017). Many such studies focus on teachers' confidence and awareness of writing as a process (e.g., Whitney et al., 2014) and in connecting to instructional methods (e.g., Fry & Griffin, 2010).

Consistently, findings elevate the value of centering process-oriented writing instruction (e.g., Graham et al., 2016) and prioritizing writing instruction for intentional purposes and audiences. Process-based writing instruction surfaces

as an important approach for skills-based instruction and for writers to build their independence to strengthen the purpose of their writing (Land, 2022). While one approach to writing instruction, when teachers enact process-oriented approaches, it affords opportunities to deconstruct skills- and outcomes-based experiences as learners (Lortie, 1975) and to build a positive writing identity (Norman & Spencer, 2005; Kohnen et al., 2019). In a graduate course with PTs, Morgan (2016) focused on how PTs “rediscover[ed] writing while developing their understandings of principles, practices, theories, and research” (p. 42). Findings demonstrated that teachers gained confidence as they engaged in layered writing experiences. PTs committed to their topics, leveraged mentor texts, and worked “with a process they did not previously possess” (p. 45).

In other studies, there were inconsistencies in the internalization and application of process-based writing. For example, Premont and colleagues (2020) explored teacher writing identity with two teacher candidates. One candidate examined the value of “drafting, redrafting, and redrafting again,” fully applying and experiencing writing as a recursive process (p. 8). In contrast, the other PT gravitated to the structured writing they experienced in schools and preferred a prescriptive model separating purpose and product of writing. These inconsistencies demonstrate further need in examining how PTs are exposed to the writing process as writers and how they envision applying those experiences to instruction.

PTs who engage in writing and are supported to expand their writing identities make connections from their experiences to instructional methods, such as experiencing theory and genres and being able to apply it to future instructional planning (Morgan, 2010). Dawson (2017) demonstrated the benefits of teachers as writers in drawing from their writing with confidence to plan and design instruction centering the writing process and habits with young writers. This promotes another purpose for PTs’ writing: being in a writing community with student authors and building student-centered and led experiences.

### **Attention to Writing in Research and Schools**

Recent revisions to state standards have placed more attention to teaching writing (Shanahan, 2015), however the revitalized attention has continued to prioritize writing in connection to reading comprehension (Graham, 2019; Troia & Graham, 2017). Graham (2019) found that while there were classrooms where teachers spent an hour on writing, most writing instruction “is not sufficient” and “writing is a neglected skill” (p. 281). Studies also show the emphasis on reading is present in teacher education. For example, Myers et al. (2016) conducted a survey with 63 teacher educators teaching at 50 different universities across 29 states. Only 28% of the teacher educators responding to the survey taught a methods course

focused solely on writing, instead, 72% of teacher educators responding said they addressed the teaching of writing as part of a methods course focused on reading.

### **Writing Within the Culture of Accountability**

Since the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, schools have been entrenched in a culture of accountability where curriculum and academic achievement are defined by performance on standardized tests (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Hillocks, 2002; Milner, 2013; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Studies have shown this high-stakes accountability creates outcome-based writing instruction emphasizing the “basics” of writing (Dyson, 2008; 2013; 2020; Yoon, 2013). Further, Hillocks (2002) found standardized writing promoted a focus on mechanics and surface levels of engagement with writing.

Studies suggest teachers remain the primary audience for student writing instead of writing for authentic audiences (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham, 2019; Land, 2022; Yoon, 2013), given the adoption of structured curricula. In their national analysis, Applebee and Langer (2011) found that although there were some shifts, the primary audience remained the “teacher as examiner” (p. 17). Scripted curricula often narrow what counts as writing and who students write for (Yoon, 2013). In these scripted instructional spaces, allowing students to write for authentic purposes and audiences is challenging because of the limitations of “the structured, mandated curricula” teachers are directed to use (Dyson, 2020, p. 124). Many curricula that offer singular ways of teaching writing define writing as “progress up a linear ladder of skills” where student writing was assessed “by forms of skill testing” (Dyson, 2020, p. 124). Despite the social nature of literacy and writing (Dyson, 2013; Street, 2003), mandated curriculums encourage teachers to craft interactions with students in ways that can feel “artificial and contrived” or do not consider how students are drawn to talking to each other when writing (Yoon, 2013, p. 159).

Some studies show the possibility for teachers’ agency to be responsive in supporting students’ writing within provided curricula (Dyson, 2013; 2020; Land, 2022; Wessel-Powell et al., 2019; Yoon, 2013; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Land (2022) found a fourth-grade teacher who shifted from a focus on genre to begin with the purpose of writing, centered audience with students in her writing instruction. Through this instruction students made decisions as writers based on who they were writing for and the complex purposes of their writing, ultimately equipping them with tools as independent and agentic writers.

The current study builds on previous scholarship by integrating opportunities for PTs to expand their writing identities while working with young writers. Further, our study explores how intentional experiences within a writing methods course supports PTs in moving beyond the pervasiveness of accountability

on outcomes in writing instruction. We examine how teachers integrate authentic writing with accountability for student writing development.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The analysis uses radical imagination in teacher preparation as a theoretical framework (Sailors, 2018). Drawing from several scholars and perspectives (i.e., Dewey, 1934; Freire, 1970), Sailors argues that imagination allows educators to envision and try liberatory practices without constraint. Thus, imagination becomes essential for moving beyond the status quo, creating and envisioning what can be. There is a cyclical application in how individuals draw on lived or learned realities, design new possibilities, and, ideally, enact novel realities. Historically, the theory stems from critical ideology around power inequities (Freire, 1970), which informs the term *radical* in relation to addressing oppression. Radical imagination is about transformative practices to make changes in schools and the importance of liberatory practices and awareness for teachers. In using radical imagination, teachers are able to not only think about transformative practices but also live them.

Radical imagination includes three strands: *critical inquiry*, *embodied practices*, and *reflexivity*. *Critical inquiry* speaks to the complexity and relevancy of PT's learning opportunities. Inquiry is the catalyst for employing radical imagination through the possibilities of what can be. *Embodied practices* emphasize the lived realities within preparation programs and in building liberatory schemas. In offering opportunities to grow a radical imagination, this strand illuminates learning within a preparation program to experience alternative teaching practices and prepare teachers to translate these experiences to their instruction in classrooms. In our course, PTs enacted imagination as writers and teachers writing alongside young children for social change. Finally, *reflexivity*, as praxis, exposes contradictions, which allow PTs to deconstruct oppressive powers within schools and society. This praxis is necessary to investigate PTs' views and actions in relation to dominant powers and systems in schools. We drew on the multiplicity of this perspective to examine how PTs envisioned "the possibility of experiencing the world as different" (Sailors, 2018, p. 441). They enacted what being a writer, teacher, and change agent could mean.

### **Methods**

#### **Context**

Using an interpretative, single case study approach (Thomas, 2016) we explore how PTs envisioned writing practices and pedagogies during a university field-based writing methods course. Both authors of the manuscript co-taught the methods course at a public university in a large U.S. city. The study focuses on the purpose of writing to "offer spaces of dialogue where students' linguistic



repertoires, cultural backgrounds, and intersectionalities become starting points for inquiry” (Kline & Kang, 2022, p. 302).

The course was one of three literacy methods courses PTs enrolled in and was the only course about writing. The writing course was housed at a local elementary school serving a community of students where 97% identify as students of color. While in the course, PTs taught in PK-2 classrooms two mornings a week. The majority of PTs in the cohort identified as white women. Focal PTs were identified after the close of the course. Participants were selected after 12 students of 22 gave consent. We excluded four PTs from the analysis as they worked with multiple children across the semester due to child absences. The other 8 PTs who provided consent were included (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
*Table of Topics and Writing Genres*

PT	Identity, Topics, Genres	Young Authors' Grades, Topics, and Genres
Amani	Muslim woman Topic & Genre: Immigration; Digitally Illustrated Poem	Daniel Grade: 2nd Topic & Genre: Safety & wellness; Letter
Sydney	White woman Topic & Genre: Power of Teaching; Poem	Camila Grade: 1st Topic: Equity of medicinal access; picture book
Sabrina	Woman (no race/ethnicity provided) Topic & Genre: Gender equality; presentation	Andrew Grade: 2nd Topic: Neighborhood Cleanup; letter with illustration
Li	Chinese man Topic & Genre: Gun Violence; poem	Xander Grade: 1st Topic & Genre: Access to Education; picture book
Mia	Woman of color Topic & Genre: #metoo; collage graphic	Leo Grade: 2nd Topic & Genre: Supporting homelessness with technological advances; poster



Elana	Black woman Topic & Genre: Racism; YouTube video	Lucia Grade: 2nd Topic & Genre: Affordable Housing; Narrative
Taylor	White woman Topic & Genre: Human trafficking; infographic	Aaliyah Grade: Kindergarten Topic & Genre: Food Donations; Picture book
Marissa	White woman Topic & Genre: feminism; illustrated poem	Mateo Grade: 2nd Topic & Genre: more free time/ recess; Letter

The course met three hours weekly for fourteen weeks. For one hour, PTs discussed theories of writing instruction. For the remaining two hours, the PTs wrote and taught in parallel units of study focused on writing for change. As course instructors, we led a workshop model of writing with K-2 students and the PTs conferred with writers during independent writing. We also led PTs in their own writing for social change. When PTs engaged in independent writing, we conferred to support their experiences and processes. Social change was embedded throughout the course. We opened class with invitations for PTs to write – sharing a text, picturebook, or image to encourage PTs to ask questions of the world around them and respond. Further, we created a collection of mentor texts addressing race, justice, and social change. We used these texts in mini-lessons with PTs and K-2 students and as part of the text flood to support their writing. We modeled how to take an appreciative stance of writers and writing and celebrate how students incorporate multilingualism into texts. PTs were encouraged to question what counts as writing and who decides what counts as writing.

In both workshops, K-2 students and PTs had a choice in their topics and genres with the purpose of writing for social change. Table 2 lists the skills and strategies we introduced to K-2 writers and PTs. During the workshop with children, PTs often modeled and referenced their own writing during conferences with young writers. The authors modeled balancing topics for adult and young writers on skills, processes, and dispositions. We also accounted for the context since children did not have workshop structures in their homerooms.

**Table 2***Overview of Mini-lessons*

<b>Mini-Lessons with K-2 Writers</b>	<b>Mini-Lessons with PTs</b>
Collecting Ideas: Using heart maps to collect ideas	Collecting Ideas: Using storytelling to get started
Collecting Ideas: Making lists	Collecting Ideas: Reading and responding to the world
Reading Like a Writer: Using mentor texts	Reading Like a Writer: Immersing ourselves in different pieces of writing for the same purpose
Topic Selection: Selecting a topic and writing what you know	Reading Like a Writer: Reflecting on writers' preparation for purpose writing
Envision: Who are we writing for and how should we write it?	Topic Selection: Seeing what stands out as important in our writing
Revision: Rereading for clarity	Layering: Writing about what's important to layer on a topic
Revision: Showing and not telling with our words and pictures	Drafting: Writing to get the important parts down
Editing: Considering punctuation and grammar and audience to publish	Revision: Reading like a writer and studying your genre
Publishing: Being an audience member	Publishing: Sharing pieces

**Researcher Positionality**

Authors identify as white, cis-gendered women committed to inquiry, critical literacies, and social justice. We view literacies as a social practice (Dyson, 2013; Street, 2003) and center writing pedagogies that allow writing for authentic purposes and audiences with choice and a commitment to advocacy. PTs were encouraged to be critical as they reflected and inquired about their experiences (i.e., the course, intern field placements, previous experiences with writing, and views of themselves as writers). We worked to trouble the power and positioning of our views through course design and memos. We provided space for open-ended

reflection and small group discussion, and we encouraged protocols that invited critique and challenging of our instructional approaches to garner more authentic discussions.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred during the semester PTs were enrolled in the course. As instructors, we took unstructured observational field notes (Thomas, 2016) while teaching. These were expanded and supplemented with analytic memos over time. Additional data included course artifacts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) from the focal PTs, such as weekly reflections on PTs' teaching with young writers, PTs' individual reading responses, individual writing pieces and reflections, a writing conference analysis, vision statements for teaching writing, and a case study of the writer with whom they worked.

### **Data Analysis**

We used constant comparative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) to understand how PTs talked about their writing and writing pedagogies. Data analysis occurred in four rounds, beginning with precoding and culminating with developing our final themes.

First, we compiled data and organized it by source. We began by individually reading and precoding each data source (Saldaña, 2021). Precodes included attention to our questions of how PTs experienced their writing and the workshop with young writers for social change, and how PTs upheld or resisted the status quo as writers and writing teachers. During this round, we made notes and created anecdotal and analytic memos. After precoding, we met and discussed our initial codes and documented our noticings. Sample precodes and examples of the sequence of our subsequent open, descriptive coding can be found in Table 3.

In the next round of analysis, we used thematic coding and integrated theory to make sense of our initial codes. We created a codebook illustrating the connections of codes to theory, including codes for narratives related to writing and teaching within PTs' reflections on working with writers, their writing pieces and process notes, and their visions for teaching writing. The codebook included examples and non-examples, which guided the connections to radical imagination (Sailors, 2018).

For our third round of analysis, we returned to the data and our codebook using radical imagination (Sailors, 2018). Again, we coded data sources individually, this time using the lens of this framework. We then engaged in a final round of analysis, first of the sources and then looking at case profiles. When starting with sources, we collaboratively coded the vision statements before moving to profiles to ensure reliability. In the final round of analysis, we consolidated codes and developed themes aligned with our research question.

**Table 3**  
*Sample Coding Across Phases of Analysis*

Precoding	Second Round	Third Round	Final Theme
Naming status quo	Evolutions of perspectives	Critical Inquiry	(re)visions of teaching writing
Challenges with timing	Shift in understanding	Embodied teaching reflexivity	
Deficit views of kiddos	Questions about authentic writing		
Strengths-based perspectives of writing	Questions about student-centered experiences		
Narratives of personal experiences learning writing	Application of student-led learning		
Fixed views of what counts as writing	Teacher vs. student control		
Product-oriented	Teaching to a test vs. teaching to the child		
Teacher as audience			
Perfection of writing “Getting it right”			

### Findings

Our findings are organized into two categories: (re)constructing possibilities as writers and (re)visions of teaching writing. Within each finding, we apply the theory of radical imagination (Sailors, 2018) to examine how PTs envisioned, lived, and questioned new possibilities in writing instruction.

## **(Re)Constructing Possibilities as Writers**

This first theme examines PTs' writing processes and identity as writers. PTs often alluded to how they were evolving as writers and making connections to their experiences as teachers. We present data through the strands of radical imagination: critical inquiry, embodied practices, and reflexivity.

### ***Critical Inquiry***

This strand recognizes the value of inquiry as a tool for employing radical imagination in PTs' professional worlds and finding relevance in writing to their lives. PTs inquired into the writing process, the purpose of writing for social change, and their experiences in expanding or establishing their writing identities.

The relevance of PTs' topics for social change provided opportunities to inquire into areas of personal significance (Table 1). Some topics addressed sociopolitical topics, such as racism, human trafficking, and gun violence. In contrast, others focused on change related to issues that are not intersectional in nature, such as advocating for different views on teaching. As instructors, we did not limit or direct their topics. Elana began the semester with questions and hesitation regarding the open-ended nature of a writing workshop. However, by engaging in the process and inquiring into her experiences with racism as a Black woman at the university, she embraced having a choice in the topic and genre to share her voice. Elana reflected, "this class has made me think about writing differently...now I understand that writing can be used in a way more powerful way." As she examined the impact of her YouTube publication about systemic racism at the university, she concluded, "writing is a powerful tool that we can use to change lives, give voices to the unheard, or even protest injustice." Like other PTs, Elana's inquiry on racism ignited awareness that writing could be a tool for communication and change, not simply a course assignment.

Many PTs selected inquiries into topics that spurred deeper reflections on their lives and actions beyond the classroom; the inquiry went beyond the piece of writing. PTs, as writers, selected topics that were purposeful to their experiences and realities, thus providing a liberatory space to process and write. Li's writing was around a new, controversial university policy. The university recently passed a concealed carry law for campus, and his writing became a way for him to explore his concerns. Li explained, "When I wrote this poem [about gun violence], I felt stronger and stronger about this issue." Topic selections were catalysts for inquiry and tools for communicating meaning, experiences, and voices with others.

Through their inquiries for social change, in addition to their topics, PTs inquired into a process-based writing approach. For example, Marissa concluded, "I realize to create a piece that is strong and meaningful takes time and research...Going through this process made me realize how writing can be so impactful. Writing for change motivates all people if they feel strongly about

something.” PTs troubled and embraced what it meant to be equipped with tools that writers use to collect, process, revise, and publish. Amani elaborated that her writer’s notebook “helped [her] to engage and disengage with the world. It was [an] escape and reality.” Writing was a tool for PTs to establish who they were as writers and build a strengths-based approach to their writing identities. Sydney explained, “before this class, I never considered myself a writer...writing to change is already such a powerful and somewhat overwhelming thing to take part in. I wanted to really immerse myself in this writing task.” While the depth of their topics varied, attention to personal inquiry and process-oriented writing provided an imaginative and transformative possibility as writers.

### ***Embodied Practices***

In this theme, the second strand of radical imagination refers to PTs’ lived experiences and the relation of those experiences in building liberatory schemas for writing instruction. When focusing on moving beyond the status quo, PTs used writing to dismantle and unpack power and oppression in their worlds and the embodiment of simultaneously being and becoming a writer while working with young authors. PTs often shared their writing for change or process experiences with young authors in their writing conferences. The embodied nature of PTs’ work was not linear. For example, in the first mini-lesson with the young writers, Erica asked, “What do you know about writing?” A first-grader, Gardy, responded with pride, “It has to be perfect!” He continued with examples of spelling, grammar, and organization. Upon initial reflection, PTs echoed and praised this sentiment. However, through troubling and engaging in a process-oriented writing experience, the PTs considered writing that includes more than the product of a composition alone.

The embodied nature of PTs’ writing was also juxtaposed with previous experiences, at times including deficit views of their writing identities. Highlighting this tension, Sabrina explained, “writing always seemed forced on me,” and Li expressed, “everything we did in school was for tests.” The embodied practices and imagination of writing for social change provided an alternative framework and possibility. Throughout their writing processes, PTs drew different conclusions about what writing was and the purpose it served. As Taylor noticed,

writing is whatever you want to make it...through the real world, writers are celebrated for their product only, they can only reach that success if they first learn the process behind it...writing is not a scheduled, formulaic task that everyone follows; it is paving your own road and seeing where that road takes you.

Taylor envisioned sharing her infographic widely in her networks and also how she might share her topic with young writers. Internalizing her identity as a writer led her to focus on engaging in the purpose of her writing, not only the product.

The embodied work PTs enacted led to affective responses. Marissa reflected on the emotional aspects of writing that are aligned with gathering tools as a writer. She explained, “[In the course], I was taught how to actually enjoy writing and how to write for change. This impacted me so much and influenced me to use some of these same practices within my teaching.” Sydney, who changed her topic after weeks of recursively engaging in the writing process, experienced ambivalence and self-doubt in her decision-making. She noted that she was uncertain if she selected the “right” topic and questioned her process of changing so “late” in her writing process. However, Sydney reflected on the praise she received from her roommates as she shared her finalized writing. She explained, “I realized how crucial it is to receive outside feedback when you are working on a writing piece.” Her embodiment and focus on the writing process was a reprieve from prioritizing the product and arbitrary deadlines for drafts, which may have led her to stick with her original writing. She surfaced the value of acknowledging discomfort and tensions in writing.

The purpose of writing for social change started as an assignment for class; however, over time PTs identified outlets and valuable means to share their writing beyond the course assignment. Amani focused on writing with an audience and the impact of her writing for that audience:

My purpose for writing was for my audience to sympathize or even empathize with me. I could only do this by sharing something personal about my life. That is when I decided to do a poem. The poem expressed two of my views towards America...through my expression and writing, I was able to my get purpose across to my audience.

Amani’s writing addressed power dynamics and oppression, and she recognized the purpose of writing in a way that valued her voice, experiences, and message. Unlike the writing done in schools where outcomes are intended for a grade, PTs embodied a writing experience where they integrated writing into their lives and amplified their voices. Mia, who created a multimodal composition about #metoo, aptly captured, “through my project, I saw, firsthand, how writing can be powerful. Writing can be strong; writing can be effective.”

### ***Reflexivity***

Within the first finding, the third strand of radical imagination applies to how PTs recognized practices, thinking, and writing as a means for deconstructing oppression. Whereas the second strand focused on PTs' embodiment of liberatory practices, this strand examines instances where PTs wrote and responded to power



dynamics. PTs' reflexivity varied; however, PTs regularly considered the personal power they held in making authorial decisions through process-based writing. Reflexivity allowed for analysis of how PTs envisioned "the possibility of experiencing the world as different" (Sailors, 2018, p. 441).

For some PTs, reflexivity as writers shifted personal views of their writing identities. For others, reflexivity led to awareness of the challenges of writing for a process with specific writing tools. It was not always an either-or, as some PTs maintained tensions they experienced and also the strengths of engaging in open-ended and choice-based authentic writing. Many noted, as Amani did, that they were "grateful for this project because not only did it teach me a lot about myself as a writer, but also gave me a platform to express myself." The duality of being a writer and sharing one's voice were important themes, and they often translated the idea of sharing their voice to their teaching visions. Both Sabrina and Elana explored how their engagement and reflections as writers were challenging but resulted in depth in their thinking. Sabrina, who was often vocal about the writing process feeling task-based, felt a significant shift as a writer. She explained:

This class and the writing process has really opened my eyes as to how I see myself as a writer and how I view writing. I know I moaned and groaned a lot about doing the daily entries in my writer's notebook, but that simple routine had the greatest impact on me...As a future teacher of writing, I have found this to be such a valuable experience. Because of this experience, I will give daily space for my students to write. I am even going to have them keep a writer's notebook.

Her reflectivity and resistance to the process-based writing she voiced frequently throughout the semester led to envisioning new possibilities with children. By engaging in the writing process, Sabrina considered how she and future students may simultaneously feel frustrated with the process and also experience the power of being writers. These "eye-opening reflections" came from offering reflective space. Writing reflections to process and conclude one's experiences was essential to PTs' reflective practices.

While Sabrina and others experienced shifts in perspectives, other PTs wrestled with the structure of an open-ended and choice-based writing experience with the tools we offered. Their reflections provided space to make sense of tensions and challenges. Elana reflected on the discomfort of others reading her writer's notebook. She simultaneously explained the "writing for change project was the first time that I actually wrote about something deep in my notebook." Her reflections also connected to her future teaching. She expressed, "when I teach writing I will think about my experience throughout this whole class and try to create a writing environment that supports all types of writers." This was a direct

response to wanting more flexibility in offering writers opportunities for variation in her future classroom compared to being told to use a writer's notebook explicitly.

Relatedly, Mia expressed frustration with the writer's notebook and, conversely, her enjoyment of the workshop structure. She hoped her notebook would be a "creative space" where entries took on different forms. Instead, she reflected that it "ended up being more of a chore than a place of discovery like I had intended. I found it hard to be inspired enough to write." This contrasted with her appreciation of the workshop model. Importantly, the teachers took critical stances on the tools offered.

The personal nature of teachers' engagement and awareness of what worked as writers often led to conclusions of maintaining a writerly life, being writers alongside students, and engaging in reflection as a valuable tool. Marissa and others concluded from their personal writing experiences that

writing is just another form of expression, and it shouldn't be as controlled as it is in most school settings. Students should feel that writing is a way of escape from reality, or a way to make change in reality. We should not be focusing on grades and limiting the child.

Their experiences as writers and their reflective practices fostered imagination for themselves and future students.

### **(Re)visions of Teaching Writing**

The second theme, (re)visions of teaching writing, explores how PTs used radical imagination (Sailors, 2018) to consider the possibilities for teaching writers. This theme focuses on their enactments and envisionments as writing teachers. As with our first theme, we organize the finding using Sailors' (2018) strands of radical imagination. A limitation of our study is that these findings are from methods course data and did not include their field experiences where PTs regularly shared about using worksheets to copy sentences or prioritize handwriting and letter formation rather than a process-based and choice-oriented writing experience for learners.

#### ***Critical inquiry***

This strand recognizes how course design was a catalyst for PTs to inquire into their pedagogy as writing teachers. PTs began the semester reflecting on their experiences as writers in school and extended this reflection through open-ended responses and discussions. Critical inquiries into their histories and course content surfaced how PTs valued choice and authentic purposes for writing.

PTs' inquiries often attended to student motivation and engagement and expanded their thinking about the role choice could play in supporting young writers. Mia connected to course readings, reflecting that for students who "hate to

write” giving them the opportunity to “write about something they like, the year may be much smoother than giving students prompts that further fuel their hatred of writing.” Relatedly, Taylor centered her reflections on working with Aaliyah in the writing workshop and their conferences together. She often could not tell if Aaliyah enjoyed writing or her selected topic. However, after finding Aaliyah loved drawing, she encouraged Aaliyah to start each day with drawing. After these sessions, Taylor wondered if she held space for students to start where they are comfortable or interested, “[the students] might start to feel more comfortable with me...and I can begin slowly introducing what I want them to do.” While this emphasized a continued tension in wanting to direct student learning, she was also expanding her capacities as a teacher through inquiry in teaching Aaliyah. Taylor synthesized that students might not like to write “because they aren’t getting choice in their writing, or they connect writing with grades.” While these conclusions highlight the necessity for choice in teaching writing, Taylor regularly voiced frustration to both course instructors early in the writing process, lamenting Aaliyah wasn’t doing “any writing.” Through peer support and ongoing dialogue, Taylor began accepting drawing as part of Aaliyah’s writing process. Her inquiries allowed her to imagine possibilities for more expansive writing instruction and pedagogy.

In addition to choice as a tool to (re)imagine students’ engagement, PTs considered how it promoted creativity and allowed for relationship building. Elana proposed multiple ways to enact this perspective: “the choices could be as small as letting them decide what they are writing with and on, or it could be bigger, such as allowing them to free-write about whatever lights their fire.” In another example, choice allowed the young writer Marissa worked with to engage creatively with writing and increase engagement. She shared that choice could also empower students to bring what they valued into the classroom and could create a space where “teachers can appreciate writing and give students confidence in showing off their values, culture, and language.”

Similarly, PTs encountered moments of possibility when their visions of children’s writing differed from the young writer’s goals. PTs found that following the student’s lead generated authentic learning for the child and themselves as teachers. Taylor synthesized across her experiences, “we have a duty to show endless possibilities and infinite information.” PTs strove to avoid prescriptive instruction, envisioning what might happen when they afforded space for students to develop their purpose, vision, and plan for writing. For example, Mia considered a writing classroom where she “equip[s] my students with the capability to think through the use of their writing.” Mia imagined writing instruction as a space where students see the power in their writing and for writing to be a space where students “know that their writing can make a difference; their writing can make a change...I want students to be able to think for themselves and think deeply about the world around them.”

### *Embodied practices*

Embodied practices allowed PTs to try new possibilities of instruction. PTs observed mini-lessons for young writers, and through their reflections and conferences, they focused attention on the writing process, relinquished being at the center of teaching, and questioned their practices. However, these were not linear transitions and resulted in moments of cognitive dissonance. As PTs engaged in these instructional practices, they navigated tensions between personal definitions of writing and how the course asked them to teach young writers. Engaging in a model prioritizing choice alongside explicit skills instruction and writing for the purpose of social change varied from the skills-based, decontextualized writing PTs observed in placement classrooms.

PTs observed writing instruction emphasizing isolated skills or products in their field placements. They reflected on providing alternatives for writers in schools. In her vision statement, Amani stated, “the writing process is more important than the product.” Many PTs amplified the process writers engaged in and how they taught fluidly across phases of writing rather than viewing a final product alone. Specifically, Taylor expressed a shift away from viewing the writing process as “fixed” and instead said, “Writing is whatever you want to make it...[I] will teach students the value of the process over the product.” PTs considered how they could teach and center the author's craft through process-centered writing with young writers. Marissa, in her work with Mateo, noted, “Mateo is constantly thinking of new ways he can create many crafts with the materials available to him...when he is writing words, he goes back and uses these materials to make his words stand out even more.” However, for Marissa, this was also a tension, as she wanted Mateo to write longer pieces, focusing on expanding his sentences to align with more traditional definitions of writing. She toggled between this desire and the recognition of the complex thinking Mateo employed in his writing by using images and words together. In her final reflections, Marissa noted, “without boundaries, something great might just be created.” She continued striving towards purposeful, student-led, and imaginative writing instruction.

As PTs leaned into the writing process, they attempted to decenter themselves when teaching young writers by shifting control to children in the writing process. PTs analyzed their conferring transcript with the young writer. This analysis offered an embodied practice for PTs’ to deeply explore how their pedagogy manifested in their language decisions as writing teachers supporting their innovations and reflections. Mia named the tension in wanting to be in control of the situation, “my instinct is to have total control over the situation; [writing] tends to be the opposite of that...[it] tends to be more student-led.” This tension led to what she named as “awkward moments” and struggles with the “balance of creative freedom and guiding students in a certain direction” as she worked to follow the young writer’s decisions. While Mia reflected on her tension with letting

go of control, Amani tuned into the style of questions she asked. Many of her questions were yes or no or elicited a closed response. She noted, “when I asked those closed-ended questions, I got very basic responses...I will be more mindful of focusing on my future students as writers rather than their writing.” There was no script or formula to guide their work; however, they imagined opportunities to open up spaces for students to be leaders in their learning and writing. Similar to Amani, Mia also thought about how she positioned writers:

When we treat our students as young kids, we limit how we see their writing. When we talk to our students as writers and look at them as equals instead of inferior to us, we are able to see their strengths and their potential.

Mia's envisioned positioning of writers allowed her to take a strengths-based stance toward the work of young writers.

While many PTs identified shifts through tensions inherent in teaching writing, there were moments where they also held firmly onto task-based perspectives, prioritizing outcomes within writing instruction. Elana drew on her identities when she frequently shared about the value of traditional approaches in school as a means to provide access to language and structures of power and academic success as a Black student. As described in the first theme, Elana, as a writer, wrote about racism and took “risks” with a digital format for her composition in creating a YouTube video. While she tried these approaches herself, when approaching her teaching with the young writer, her reflections remained centered around skills-based approaches to writing. She called the young writer, Lucia, “a pretty safe writer who doesn’t take many risks.” Analyzing a piece of Lucia’s writing, she wrote, “Lucia could work on spelling and grammar” and also said, “it is clear that Lucia is a strong writer. Because she has almost completely mastered basic writing conventions, she is able to take her writing to the next level.” This complicates the importance of providing authentic writing experiences to learners, the necessity of preparing students with explicit skills to be successful and capable writers, and a critical consciousness of why and how they write. PTs often negotiated tensions in imagining a revision to their teaching but doing so within the experiences they had in their own learning as children. Their imaginative possibilities, paired with the realities of school contexts, kept PTs grounded in what they knew of school, writing, and access to power. PTs were often more open to imagining transformative approaches to writing for themselves but waded through additional external factors when thinking about their work and role in school systems.

### ***Reflexivity***

The third strand of radical imagination presents how PTs solidified imaginative writing instruction and moved beyond the constraints of narrowly

defined writing that is valued in the educational system. Reflexivity facilitated PTs to question their work as teachers. Questioning their teaching opened space where PTs imagined enacting critical writing instruction in oppressive school spaces. PTs used reflexivity to support young writers as they considered the audience for their pieces and to sit in the moment with the young writers as they made decisions about their writing.

PTs reflexively envisioned experiences where students move through the writing process. Mia's vision statement showed her reflexivity and how she considered a broad view of what counts as writing and what she wanted writers to consider in their work as writers:

Students wrote in different mediums to many different audiences whether that be a book, letter writing, or a poster written to businesses, government officials, or family members[...] We keep talking about process over product[...] to make writing more effective, we must keep the audience in mind and I want to teach my students how to be effective writers by doing just that.

Reflexivity allowed Mia and others to consider the impact of young writers' compositions beyond the classroom walls and for audiences other than an assignment for the teacher. PTs considered transformative and liberatory practices where young writers had important ideas to share with authentic audiences and purposes. Sydney concluded, "Teaching students to honestly write about their life is challenging, yet very beneficial." Sydney envisioned instruction that moved beyond restrictive forms of writing. She and other PTs used multiple reflection points to consider teaching centered on the writer, not the writing.

Reflexivity came from recognizing the impact of decisions, language, and words. PTs were aware of moments of silence in their teaching, or puzzling moments when they were unsure what to say next or how much to direct the learning. Marissa said, "It's difficult for me to find the line between too much guidance and letting him do whatever he wants." In addition to considering the responsive balance of support for each child, PTs considered the silences in their teaching and the benefit for learners. Silence was a tool used to consider what they should do in the next moment. It allowed PTs to pause, reflect on their practices, and let the students take the lead. Mia reflected,

During my time with my buddy, I stayed quiet a lot of the times because I thought I was giving him time and space to think for himself. However, I think it was more just because I didn't know what to say. I didn't really know how to guide him without controlling him.

In schooling experiences where students are micromanaged, Mia offered an alternative by pausing and reflecting instead of jumping in with her first idea. PTs



often did not have immediate responses at the moment with writers, and their reflexivity held space to navigate these tensions in their teaching and imagine ways to teach writing so their future students could also envision and imagine the ways their writing matters in the world.

### Discussion

Sailors (2018) challenged the field by asking, “Dare we allow our radical imaginations[...] to challenge and thus change who we are as teachers and teacher educators, researchers within teacher education, and people?” (p. 445). Following the PTs’ lead, we envision a future where writing identities and teaching writing go together. This includes a layered approach where writers are offered authentic and purposeful writing and the necessary skills to share ideas with others thoughtfully. Writing experiences must include skills and strategies for success but cannot be reduced to that alone. Through engaging in *critical inquiry*, *embodied practices*, and *reflexivity*, PTs revised restrictive views of writing towards teaching that recentered learners. Their work was not without tensions, which illuminated an awareness of how they drew on embodied perspectives to envision new possibilities. Oftentimes, they saw the methods context as an innovative space and shared about their continued status quo writing for accountability in their placements. Utilizing a framework such as radical imagination offers opportunities to expand teacher preparation experiences and ensure a continual movement beyond the status quo. Given that accountability and outcomes (Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2020; Young, 2021) continue to be centralized in PK-2 writing instruction, it is even more critical to examine opportunities to maintain high expectations and prioritize authentic writing instruction.

Our findings demonstrated how PTs benefited from being writers themselves. Aligned to previous scholarship (e.g., Dawson, 2017; Morgan, 2016), they experienced the writing process, enacted habits and strategies, and reflected on connections to teaching learners. PTs recognized how vitally essential it was for them to write about self-selected topics with authentic audiences (Land, 2022). As Amani explained, their writing provided a vehicle to “engage and disengage with the world. It was [an] escape and reality.” Writing had a larger intention; it was about genres, modes, syntax, and their authorial decisions and contributions to the world. And yet, as many of the PTs experienced, this type of writing was not always comfortable and at times, generated frustrations, discomfort, and discouragement. We add to Sailors’ (2018) question – dare we engage in the embodied work of radical imagination, in this case as writers, to challenge what we define as literacy? As writing? And as success?

PTs surfaced important discomforts and reflected on the nuances of creating writing communities that empower individuals to share their voices with the world - something that so often is removed or dismissed from writing instruction when



the priority is about writing in response to reading (Dyson, 2013; Yoon, 2013). Sailors' framework (2018) promotes a transformative approach to teaching. To address this call, future research attention might look not only within methods courses but also at how PTs enact writing instruction in placements in combating skills-based approaches and limited views of what counts as writing.

Further, previous research demonstrates the benefits of PTs writing alongside young learners (Roser et al., 2014) as a means for understanding their process and garnering personal connections to inform responsive teaching. However, our focus on writing for social change added complexity of what young learners are capable of in their writing. During the study, beyond the methods course, PTs taught in PK-2 classrooms and shared how children were asked to focus on tracing words, transcription, handwriting, and writing in workbooks. Conversely, in the methods course, writing from a model prioritizing choice, authentic purposes, and engaging in topics that communicate visions of justice shifted many of the PTs' perspectives of what young authors are capable of, how strong their visions and voices already are, and the way learners can use composition broadly to shape their worlds (Bomer, 2011). PTs gained perspectives and experienced challenges in finding opportunities to relinquish control in their instruction. When they did, they were typically awed by the young learners' compositions, writing processes and awareness, and humbled as teachers. Further, PTs could also use this structure to teach explicit writing components to address craft, sentence and text structure, spelling, and syntax (e.g., Sedita, 2022). These foci were not mutually exclusive.

PTs were required to imagine, extend beyond their known experiences, and merge their identities as people, learners, writers, and teachers. Their reflexivity offered recursive opportunities to examine their biases, negative conceptions, and power dynamics in schools to envision how writing could be used "in a more powerful way" (Elana). Further, building on Elana's reflections on the need for writing skills to access power in academic learning, we must see the need to teach processes, habits, and skills to further disrupt singular views of writing. And we saw connections in how teachers took up innovative modes and genres in their writing (YouTube videos, digital collages, etc.), which expanded what modes and genres they viewed as writing with young authors. In this regard, the attention to authorial decisions, critical thinking, and audience was often enhanced in their decision-making because of the choice and autonomy the adult and young writers held in writing for social change.

Current movements in literacy privilege writing as a means connected to reading comprehension (Sedita, 2022). In a workshop and process-based model of writing for change, this connection can be expanded upon through teaching writing skills and elaborating on the structure and purpose of mentor texts. However, connecting reading and writing can be layered with an explicit lens of being

culturally responsive and innovative. To enact this, PTs used mentor texts (Morgan, 2016) and crafted mini-lessons to support young writers in their skills and processes. They compiled a broad set of tools as writing teachers to respond individually to coach the writers *and* their writing compositions. Given the limitations on how much time PTs have to expand their knowledge and practice as writing teachers (Myers et al., 2016) and how little writing is centered in literacy learning, there is often self-doubt (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham, 2019), of how to teach writing effectively. Adhering to teaching from a curriculum or “traditional” approaches in in-service years becomes easy. As Elana, Mia, and others in the methods course explored, there is also a *need* to teach young writers specific skills, spelling, syntax, and structure in their writing to access the dominant narratives and power structures in schools. Both Elana and Mia named, as students of color in schools, it was important for them to have access to explicit writing guidelines and expectations. This allowed opportunities to be provided to them in schools, and they wanted the same for the young learners who similarly identified as Latinx, Black, and multilingual learners.

PTs negotiated complexity in decision-makers as teachers in how they found ways to provide explicit instruction while also following a child’s lead. There was a general ease through which PTs examined writing genres and modes, and also a mismatch, at times, of what they expected from young authors. We found that teaching writing skillfully and through an inclusive lens was not a polarizing binary but rather an approach to teaching writing that supports young writers with skills, strategies, *and* authentic visions and experiences as writers. We want to empower children and teachers, as writers, to share their voices, ways of being, and knowledge with others. It is our hope the field continues to examine the complexity of writing instruction and how teachers uphold culturally responsive and sustaining experiences, high academic writing outcomes, and honor the purpose of writing and composition in the broadest sense: to be and become a writer in the world. Marissa concluded, “Without boundaries, something great might just be created.” Radical imagination offers a lens through which educators, teachers, and children can create and build their own purposes and experiences in writing communities.

### **Conclusion**

Writing for authentic purposes and sharing one’s vision for a more just world and community was central to our course design and analysis. PTs and young learners deserve opportunities to create something relevant, purposeful, and meaningful. Radical imagination provides a tool to experience and examine learning that prepares PTs to be transformative. Incorporating an experience where the teachers also take up liberating writing themselves provides a metacognitive and embodied experience to examine and implement their instructional visions and actions. More research and efforts in methods courses and longitudinally are

necessary to explore how teachers talk about these ideas and apply liberatory teaching into school spaces where they are also navigating the real tensions presented to them.

There was variation in how PTs applied their writing and teaching in the course and the depth of their critical reflexivity. This variation highlights the complicated nature of teaching writing and the beauty of creating room for the messiness of writing preparation and teaching, which includes skills, strategies, habits, processes, and lived experiences. Radical imagination in writing teacher preparation means taking risks, valuing the expertise and interests of writers, and prioritizing a critical lens of how power operates in schools, ourselves, and our curriculums. PTs demonstrated abilities to imagine and live something different as writing teachers and continued to grapple with what that meant for their learning and unlearning. Being able to explore and experience multiple perspectives of teaching writing and being a writer are immersive experiences that will ideally prepare PTs to create something not yet explored for more just, inclusive, and valuable writing instruction and development in schools.

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