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Chapter 2

Professional writers' identities: the perceived influence of formal education and early reading

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Introduction

The range and amount of writing taking place across all domains of life in the 21st century is expanding rapidly. At home, in school, at work and in the community, children, young people and adults write for numerous purposes and in multiple modes. Professional writers too capitalise on the multimodal diversity available and employ a range of materials and technologies. What it means to be a 'writer' in different domains and the myriad of influences upon individual writers' texts composed in different contexts is part of the focus of this book. Predominantly it explores the identities of teachers, trainee teachers and students as writers, both within and beyond school. However this chapter focuses on the identities of professional writers. It draws upon a cross-university study which investigated the nature of twelve UK-based professional writers' identities and histories as writers and their composing practices.

There is a great deal of literature which retrospectively examines professional writers' life stories and personalities (e.g. Piirto, 2002; Kaufman, 2002; Goertzel, Goertzel and Goertzel, 1978), and a long tradition of self-reflection on the part of novelists and poets who write for children and young people, mainly considering their childhoods (e.g. Dahl, 1984; Ahlberg, 2006) and/or their compositional practices (e.g. Le Guin, 2004; Morpurgo, 2006). Additionally, there is considerable research examining academic writers' identities (e.g. Ivanic, 1998; Lea and Steirer, 2011; Lillis, 2001; Lillis and Curry, 2010) and some material produced by writers who have been or still are teachers (and vice versa), reflecting upon the challenges and interplay involved (e.g. Spiro, 2007; Vakil, 2008). Indeed many well-known and respected writers, both novelists (e.g. David Lodge, Michael Morpurgo, Iris Murdoch, Maya Angelou, Philip Pullman), and poets (e.g. W.H. Auden, Tony Mitton, Robert Frost) have been teachers. There is however noticeably less research which explicitly employs an identity lens to consider the identity enactments and practices of professional writers from diverse domains. Within the current study, the perspectives of writers from three professional domains - novelists/poets, journalists/magazine columnists and academic writers were examined. A biographical stance was adopted in the interviews conducted and on this basis the multiplicity and diversity of their voices and identity enactments were examined.

The intention of the chapter is to give voice to these professional writers' perspectives in order to complement those offered elsewhere in the book and to explore possible insights related to the teaching of writing and the development of young writers. In order to do so it focuses upon data related to the writers' early reading practices and their reported experience of formal schooling.

The chapter commences by considering the challenge of developing young people's identities as writers in education, and then examines research into professional writers' identities. Then the research study's design and methodology is presented. Two research questions are explored:

- o What significant/critical ‘formal education’ memories do the professional writers recall/report?
- o What, if any, connections to early reading do the professional writers make?

Next the findings related to these questions are presented in turn and discussed. The chapter concludes by considering the ramifications for policy and practice.

Young writers’ identities

Young people, like adults, write to communicate, to make meaning, to sustain and negotiate relationships and to get things done; in the process they portray themselves in specific ways. As Ryan (2014, p. 130) observes ‘writing is a social performance’. Research suggests that from the earliest years, young children’s writing interests and identities are shaped by influential others, such as parents, peers and teachers (Dyson, 2009; Rowe, 2008). In particular teachers’ conceptions of writing and pedagogical practice frame, shape and often constrain the identity positions offered to young writers in school (Bourne, 2002; Bernstein, 2014). Drawing on a longitudinal study of adolescents’ school-based writing identities, Elf highlights the danger of teachers ascribing students a fixed writer identity at a particular point in time (see Chapter 12). People’s identities as writers are fluid, socially constructed and contextual. Indeed, research also reveals that the young, in seeking to exercise agency as authors, may take up or reject the roles on offer (Fisher, 2010; Ryan and Barton, 2014). As Rowe and Nietzel (2010) have shown, children’s underlying interests and orientations also influence the ways they seek to position themselves as writers and their writing choices.

In performative cultures in which accountability measures of young people’s (and teachers’) performance is closely monitored and assessed, the predominant focus is not on writers, but on writing as an assessable skill. Underpinned by autonomous not ideological models of literacy (Street, 1984), the policy imperatives in many educational systems around the world tend to foreground writing as a decontextualized product, not as situated social practice. In contrast, the research on which this chapter draws, adopts a sociocultural approach to learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) and literacy (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič, 2000). Such a perspective recognises that learning is an act of participation (Rogoff, 2003), and that a plurality of literacies exist across the different realms of life, home, work and school. It also recognizes the significance of identity in literacy practices. As an interdisciplinary research team (encompassing educationalists and sociolinguists), we recognise the existence of multiple identities or as Burgess and Ivanič (2010) describe it, a multifaceted identity which:

‘...is constructed in the interaction between a person, others, and their sociocultural context. It includes the “self” that a person brings to the act of writing, the “self” she constructs through the act of writing, and the way in which the writer is perceived by the reader(s) of the writing (232).

Nonetheless we are acutely aware that in formal schooling in the UK the prevailing emphasis remains on the production of the ‘expected standard’ of written text, and the requirement to ‘play the game called writing’ (Grainger, Gooch and Lambirth, 2003, p. 4). This shapes young people’s understandings of what it means to be a writer. A recent systematic review of teachers as writers further underscores the professional challenge of developing young writers (Cremin and Oliver, forthcoming). It reveals that teachers lack confidence as writers and have narrow ‘schoolled’ conceptions of writing. The kind of identity work they do

appears to obscure opportunities for acknowledging identity work around writing - both their own and that of their students. This constrains how teachers approach children and young people's writing.

Furthermore young people may have few opportunities to learn about writing through working with professional writers. School-based residencies and writing workshops can be inspiring experiences, although traditionally only novelists, poets and playwrights are involved. In England such projects are predominantly targeted at children aged 7-11 years in areas of relative affluence (The Warwick Report, 2015). For many young people therefore, what could be viewed as a cultural entitlement to work with a professional writer is effectively denied. Even those who do access such opportunities are unlikely to encounter a diverse range of writers. This may perpetuate teachers and students' perceptions of 'writers' which tend to be dominated by romantic notions of authorship, creativity and self-expression (Myhill and Wilson, 2012; Cremin and Baker, 2010). Despite the ubiquitous nature of writing in contemporary life, public notions of what it means to be a 'writer' arguably remain tethered to notions of 'creative' writers and primarily linked to novelists and poets.

In response to this context, the study sought to investigate the identities and composing practices of professional writers from diverse domains in the hope that their perspectives might inform and widen educational understanding of the lived experience of being a writer, and support the development of young writers and the teaching of writing.

Professional writers' identities

Whilst writing is central to much contemporary leisure and work (Lillis 2013), the significance of identity in writing has tended to be foregrounded only in relation to a particular, socially prestigious type of writing: literary writing. It has been explored in a number of ways by literary writers themselves (e.g. Heaney, 1990) and by their biographers and critics (e.g. Ben-Shir 2007). Far less attention has been given to the significance of identity for those engaging in a considerable amount of writing as part of their professional lives. This emphasis has often been premised on particular assumptions about the relationship between identity, writing and creativity, for example that 'scientific' writing is transactional (rather than creative) and that issues of identity (either as a scientist or a writer) are not therefore significant.

Research into the discursive construction of writers' identities and the 'socially available possibilities for selfhood' (Ivanič, 1998) outside of creative or literary writing has only recently been foregrounded. Studies in adult literacy education (Burgess and Ivanič, 2010:237), in the academy -of students and lecturers- (e.g. Ivanič, 1998; Lea and Stierer, 2011, Lillis and Curry 2010 and in work-based writing (e.g. Brandt, 1999; Lillis and Rai, 2011) are the exception in this regard. These complementary bodies of work, drawing on largely sociocultural perspectives, highlight the significance of identity in writing across all domains and across stages of experience and expertise. Identity is signalled as significant in a number of ways; the importance of imagining oneself as a writer in order to write effectively in particular domains (for example in Brandt's (1998) work on 'workaday writers' she illustrates how a policeman's imagining of himself as a film-script writer enables him to carry out his apparently factual reporting of arrests); the tensions around self and ascribed identities in writing (for example, student-writers explicitly masking particular aspects of their writing for fear of being ascribed by readers a particular ethnic identities/sensitivity) (Lillis 2001),

and multilingual scholars' concern at being ascribed 'novice' rather than 'expert' academic identities because of particular uses of language (Lillis and Curry 2010).

In the current study the aim was to explore the potential significance of identity as a dimension to writing across a range of domains and to explore how twelve writers from three discrete (although not completely distinct) domains of professional experience construed this significance- through their accounts of their journeys as writers and the importance attached to ascriptions of identities and how these shaped possibilities for writing. As Ben-Shir acknowledges:

...a narrator of an identity story, like a narrator of any story, maintains a central and active role as interpreter and editor, picking and choosing from among the endless elements of his life experience while at all times endeavouring to reconcile them to an a coherent and meaningful life story.

(Ben-Shir, 2007:190)

In telling their stories the professional writers were choosing how to represent themselves as they responded to the university-based researchers. Connecting to Clark and Ivanič's (1997) conception of the autobiographical self as one element of writer identity, the study recognised that writing is affected by writers' life histories and that in narrating their past lives as writers the study's participants were performing their identities in this context.

Methodology

A biographical approach was adopted and semi-structured interviews undertaken; these offered the writers an opportunity to reflect upon their histories as writers and to consider their approaches to composing. The current chapter attends to the first focus: the writers' identities as expressed and constructed in interview and focuses upon research questions which were perceived to have potential with reference to the educational challenge of fostering positive writer identities in the young. The focus is on their memories of formal education and the influence of childhood reading. The research team sought to achieve a diverse representation of professional writers and identified three broad categories of writers: novelists and poets; journalists and magazine columnists; and academic writers. It was recognised from the outset that this was a simplistic categorisation, but in recruiting four participants from each category, diversity across the sample was ensured. It was later established that each of the writers engaged in a very wide range of writing, well beyond their initial classification.

The writers

Highly experienced writers were recruited who had published widely and whose work was well known within their given primary domain. For example within the academic category only professors were invited, none of whom worked in university Education or English departments. Participants were recruited either via existing links between researchers and writers or through contact with publicly known writers. A combination of purposeful and convenience sampling (Merriam, 1988) was employed. It was perceived that these expert writers provided potentially rich cases from which we could 'learn the most' (Stake, 1995, p. 446). The study followed the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained and participants were apprised of their right to

withdraw at any time. They could choose assured anonymity (changed names) or disclosed identity - all but two agreed to be publicly identified (see Table 1.* denotes pseudonyms). Assurance of secure storage of data was given.

TABLE 2.1 THE TWELVE PROFESSIONAL WRITERS

Data collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews in contexts convenient to the writer. This encompassed university premises (5), a writer's home (3), place of work (2) and other locations (2). The in-depth interviews explored the writing practices they adopt, the choices they make whilst composing and their writer identity. Secondary data was also gathered; participants were invited to bring a piece of their writing that had been compositionally challenging in some way to the interview. These pieces provided a context for exploring participants' composing processes and their sense of self in relation to this 'problematic' writing. Interviews lasted between 45-110 minutes and were transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Data analysis

The process of analysing the interview data was inductive (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). The intention was to examine the interview data for dominant or key themes across the data set, and to give voice to unique perspectives which might be present in only one interview. As four researchers were involved in the process of thematic coding, a systematic analysis process was adopted to ensure consistency. The analytic programme NVivo was used. The process involved the following steps:

1. All researchers read and discussed two interviews and their respective views of represented themes.
2. All researchers independently coded the same interview, then discussed the coding, and definitions being attributed to their themes. At this point agreement was reached on common themes evident in the researchers' coding.
3. The remaining interviews were coded using the agreed themes but also generating new themes where appropriate.
4. With this initial phase of coding complete, the researchers met to discuss the themes, their definitions and the new themes. This led to a further revision of the coding and some initial re-organisation of the analysis into over-arching themes and sub-themes.
5. Each coder then reviewed their coding in the light of this revision.
6. Two of the researchers then undertook systematic checking of each theme and sub-theme, determining the appropriacy of the definition, and the accuracy of match of segments of the interview data to each theme and sub-theme (see Table 3 for an example of the coding and definitions within the Writer Identity theme and the life experience sub-theme).
7. The final analytic phase involved all researchers discussing the outcome of the systematic check and agreeing changes to be made.

The analysis led to three over-arching themes: *Purpose for Writing*, *Writing Choices*, and *Writer Identity*, each with their own sub-themes. Four sub-themes were identified for *Writer Identity*: life experience, sense of self as a writer, manifestations of self as a writer and conceptions of writing and being a writer. The first two each had multiple strands: the life experience sub-theme strands included: formal education, family and other adults, reading,

work experience, social class and context, and the sense of self as a writer sub-theme strands included, self-doubt, critical early memories, private/public, and multiple writer identities. The remaining sub-themes manifestations of self as a writer and conceptions of writing and being a writer were not divided into strands. This chapter examines two strands of the life experience sub-theme, namely formal education and reading (see Table 3).

TABLE 2.2 WRITER IDENTITY LIFE EXPERIENCE SUB-THEMES

Findings

This chapter draws from all twelve writers' identity stories. Examination of the life experience sub-theme, highlighted that the strand 'formal education' was most frequently mentioned and by each participant. Another frequently reported influence on their early journeys as writers was reading. It is recognised this dual focus represents a partial picture of the participants' multiple writer identities, however given the focus on the potential educational consequences of the data and the need to give voice to diverse perspectives; we confined the chapter's focus to these strands.

Memories of formal education

Narrating their lives and commenting upon the part played by education in shaping their interests and development as writers, the participants predominantly spoke about primary and secondary schooling. Only Tim Barraclough and Mal Peet mentioned university; Tim perceived the 'intensive' writing focus for scientists at Cambridge was challenging but supportive, and Mal recalled doing cartoons for the university paper which he saw as significant. Hilary Mantel observed that the kind of writer she became was shaped by what she described as a 'rather tortuous past with the education system'. Other challenges were also recounted:

- o *Well everything was set up almost to discourage me from being a writer, in that at no point during my education was imaginative writing privileged or welcome...I was unfortunate in having a particularly discouraging English teacher-(secondary) she was unenlightened and uninspired but she was also crushing. She thought it was her duty to crush you and she was just profoundly anti-originality. Hilary Mantel*
- o *When I was about ten I wrote a book of poems, a little book that I made and took to school to show to my teacher and he stuck a gold star on it, but I was very disappointed actually because I knew that he hadn't really read it properly ... he didn't have any real comments to make on it ...he wanted to reward it because he thought it was, you know impressive that I'd made this little book. But I actually wanted him to **read** the poems; I wanted to know what he thought of them. Jean Sprackland*
- o *At my primary school we were expected [to have] rather neat round handwriting ...for entry into a handwriting competition ... I found it rather difficult.... I remember the experience reduced me to tears Richard Carter*
- o *I know it is a terrible cliché, I did have a particular English teacher who hated me for three years and gave me a wretched time Mal Peet*

All the eight writers who narrated negative school experiences also noted positive memories which they perceived had supported their journeys as writers. Mal Peet, Hilary Mantel and

Jean Sprackland for example recalled teachers who offered encouraging, if sometimes transient, feedback. The teachers mentioned who were mainly primary professionals or secondary English or History teachers, were seen as highly influential. For example Hilary noted: 'I did have a very good History teacher and I wrote for her, it was for her I polished my style consciously'. Others also recalled encouraging individuals and incidents:

- o *I'd come top and he actually did this amazing thing for a schoolmaster in those days he walked to where I was sitting at the back of the class ... and said something like 'Well Peet I seem to have misunderstood you, I apologise' ... that was quite remarkable...and he was very, very encouraging and it was he who sort of started suggesting I was capable of university. Mal Peet*
- o *I had encouragement in my first year ...When I put in my 1st (English) essay she put 'This is well written'. When I put in my 2nd essay she put 'You write well' which is a much more specific statement. I think the first might have been an accident but the second was science. So I cherished that. However by the second term she'd taken up her red pen. I think they probably told her in the staff room, you know, that's not the way to keep control of them, tell them their mistakes. Hilary Mantel*
- o *I had a fantastic English teacher in my secondary school, and I owe him an enormous debt...he recognised that I was very, very interested in poetry and he taught me so much just by reading me poems and giving me poems to read and actually at one point giving me **his** poems to read and comment on...that really sort of moved things up a gear... as if we were equals.... Jean Sprackland*

Some writers, including William Shandlow, Juliette Towhidi and Geraldine McGaughrean, observed that their negative school experiences had made them more determined to succeed: through working harder, rebelling against the system and turning to writing outside school. In Geraldine's case, whilst she reported that her self-assurance as a writer was affected, she perceived her desire to write remained.

- o *I got told off by an English teacher ...who told me I was no good at writing ...I thought I'm not having this, this is no good, so I spent a lot of time reading, and reading good quality articles and looking at what makes a good sentence, what makes a bad sentence... I reacted cussedly to it and fixed it and I think that's what you should do. William Shandlow*
- o *It was kind of pretty emotionally barren... I did feel very trapped there and I sort of made a deal with myself that I would work incredibly hard and do very well and then never have to feel contained by anyone else's rules and regulations ever again . Juliette Towhidi*
- o *The school, having decided that I wasn't clever left me in no doubt that I was of very little use to them, it did give me a sense of the fact that, as my sister put it, 'the third one's always stupid' ...I took their word for it ... so I did writing as a private past-time. Geraldine McGaughrean*

In contrast, four writers did not narrate negative or difficult school experiences, Fiona Millar for example commented she did not remember doing much writing at school, although she recalled a teacher had suggested she take up journalism, that she 'loved writing stories' and

had had some published in the school magazine. This passion for narrative was commonly narrated in relation to reading and writing, although Richard Carter who reported seeing himself as a scientist from mid secondary school onwards, observed he ‘wasn’t the kind of child who wrote stories much’ and ‘there wasn’t a need for extended writing’ in his chosen science subjects. The writers who reported an interest in imaginative storying at home and school engaged in this in various ways: physically (for example Nigel Mason described playing historically-based games with friends at school and ‘libraries’ at home, as he noted: ‘I’d write little books and then my parents would have to come and get them out’); through drawing (for example Matthew Marder recounted ‘writing big long Narnia style things with drawings and maps and things’), through a sibling story writing club (which Geraldine McGaughrean participated in) and as part of ‘creative writing’ in school.

- o *We kind of created our own world, you know and it was very much that imagination, we had fairly long lunch breaks ... we did War Games, so it was very much a creative feel...you immersed yourself into different worlds.* Nigel Mason
- o *I used to like writing stories in my own time. I guess as a child, that’s an extension of your imagination. My motivation as a child was creative writing, stories and so on.* Tim Barraclough
- o *I wrote stories and diaries, what I was doing at school today, who was my best friend ... all the ordinary comings and goings and fallings out that young girls do, all the chronicles.* Jeni Harvey
- o *My teacher would say ‘today I want you to write about’ and I never really heard what she wanted me to write about because I was already off writing stories about horses, always horses, it was one of those periods of enjoyment - of making up stories.* Geraldine McGaughrean

The influence of reading on writing

Whilst a focus on education was explicit in questions in the interview, no questions related to the writers’ reading practices or preferences. Nonetheless these were often referred to, alongside the influence of listening to language. Most of the writers noted their pleasure in reading as a child. Mal Peet observed he was ‘forever reading and taking a keen interest in how things were written’, and Hilary Mantel that she had engaged in ‘a really, really intensive and earnest course of reading’. Jeni Harvey perceived her pleasure had been fostered by her parents and the space for independent reading at school, and Nigel Mason, who was likewise encouraged to read at home, reported that the school reading club and a teacher’s recommendations were influential. Other reading drivers and supports frequently mentioned included the library, aspirational parents and a desire to escape into imaginary worlds.

- o *I did become a reader from a very early age... not because I came from a bookish household but it was just that my father took me to the public library. My father disappeared from my life when I was ten, but by then I had thoroughly got the habit of reading and I remember some of the best times in my childhood were sitting with my father in a room, him reading silently, me reading silently.* Hilary Mantel

- o *My dad was a miner and later a lorry driver...He was not a great reader! My mum was kind of self-educated – she’s from the lower middle class really and was the source of the access to education, but it was a household really in the 60’s full of an aspiration to be cultural!... My mum encouraged me to read fiction older than I could read. Mathew Marder*
- o *When I was a child the imaginary world, through books and film was an escape...it was much nicer being in the world and the story than in the [real] world I was sort of forced to be in. Juliette Towhidi*

The potency of listening to the tunes and rhythms of language at home, school or church was often mentioned, for example Geraldine McGaughrean recalled the end-of-day story as ‘incredibly important’ as did Michael Marder, and Jean Sprackland spoke of being ‘completely mesmerised’ by her teacher’s reading of *The Wasteland*, and of the influence of religious language.

- o *Some of those old Methodist preachers were often amazing speakers...as a child I was usually bored sort of crawling about on the floor, I didn’t think I was listening, but nevertheless you hear and I think something about speech rhythms and the phrasing and the way that they spoke, sort of entered me like osmosis. Jean Sprackland*
- o *My mum often read to us...and in primary school one of our teachers read one of the most dramatic end chapters of Cronin’s ‘The Stars Look Down’ I can still remember it and he didn’t just do it once– he did it day after day until it was finished. ...it absolutely spellbound everybody! Mathew Marder*

Tim Barraclough reported reading factual books in his childhood more than fiction and did not refer to any perceived links between reading and writing; this was in contrast to other writers who narrated explicit connections between their reading and writing. Mal Peet expressed this succinctly by noting ‘Maybe a reader is merely a parked writer’. Unprompted, many named childhood books that they reported influenced their later writing, and Matthew Marder and Juliette Towhidi also named other media (e.g. film, TV dramas and documentaries).

- o *I read Frank Herbert’s Dune in a single day when I was twelve. I think I read Lord of the Rings not long after. I always liked big created worlds and some of the earliest things I then wrote as a kid fictionally were kind of an attempt to write soap - CS Lewis style fictional worlds ... I had good sources of inspiration - that time was full of culturally very rich drama and documentary: Ken Roach; Kathy Come Home; Kes. Mathew Marder*
- o *It wasn’t like we had the classics, the complete works of Dickens or anything like that. We had lots and lots of children’s books around, Roald Dahl, Dick King Smith, all the Enid Blytons, we were a household full of children’s books. I read all those, and decided to write as well. Juliette Towhidi*
- o *The writers that I avidly consumed when I was young were American mainly. ...I went sort of straight from Biggles to Raymond Chandler and John Steinbeck and....I’m all about the language you know (in current writing) it’s not the story it’s the language with me and the writers that I adore are linguistic conjurers. Mal Peet*

- o *The two books that profoundly changed things for me were Kidnapped and Jane Eyre... and the themes that I am working away at all my life were in Kidnapped.*
Hilary Mantel

Discussion

In talking about their life-histories and themselves as writers, the twelve professional writers, influenced by societal values and attitudes about what writing is, and who writers are (Brandt, 2000), were performing and enacting their ‘master narratives’ (Hammack, 2011) as writers. Reflecting upon their experience of formal education, the writers reported diverse constraints: a systemic lack of attention to and interest in imaginative writing, limited interest on the part of teachers in their writing and some difficult educational relationships. In addition specific adverse writing memories appeared salient in the life stories narrated. Despite these recollections most of the participants positioned themselves as having been child writers, albeit some acknowledged they did not recognise themselves fully as ‘writers’ at the time. Many narrated strategies they had employed in order to address the lack of support and active discouragement experienced. Some, such as Geraldine McGaughrean, chose to write at home-initially privately then later forming a writing club with her brother and sister- whilst others such as William Shandlow worked assiduously to improve his writing style for school. In so doing, however temporarily, they positively shaped their sense of self-esteem as writers. This shaping of negative experiences into ‘the material of positive identity’ to construct coherent life stories has also been noted by Day (2002, p. 132) in his examination of writers’ identities.

Affirmative educational feedback about their writing was frequently reported, occasions when teachers made them feel, as Geraldine McGaughrean observed, ‘that you actually had something to say’. In offering positive vignettes from schooling when the young writers’ skills were recognised (e.g. work was published in school magazines and praise was received), the professional writers primarily positioned themselves as successful school writers. The significance of childhood feedback on writing, both positive and negative, on writers’ identities has been documented in studies of teachers as writers (Cremin, 2006, McKinney and Giorgis, 2009), and shown to have diverse consequences. For some of the professional writers it appeared to enhance an emerging sense of self as a writer, promoting a desire to write. This desire seemed to be influenced for some by an interest in narrative world-creation, which in turn is likely to have been shaped by the stories they reported encountering in books, television and film. All reported being avid readers, a finding noted in previous studies (Gallo, 1994), although not all read fiction, several recalled the pleasure of being read to and listening to language. Many reported mapping out and making up stories at home and school. This marked pleasure in narrative writing has been noted in studies of primary-aged writers (Grainger et al., 2005), although teenagers tend to reflect more diversity (Myhill, 2005). It may be that the freedom to shape one’s own narrative and exert authorial agency is particularly motivating for young writers.

Drawing on their conception of the autobiographical self as one aspect of writer identity, Clark and Ivanic (1997) suggest that writers’ life histories and a sense of their roots influence their writing, even as they write. This was manifest with reference to the reported echoes and intersections between the writers’ early reading and later writing. Many noted the sea of ‘voices’ on which they still draw, for example, Hilary Mantel perceived the themes and language from *Kidnapped* and *Jane Eyre* remained influential, Mal Peet made connections

between his reading preferences and later attention to language, Nigel Mason connected his early passion for historical novels with his later history writing, and Mathew Marder and Juliette Towhidi noted connections between the social and cultural themes encountered in books and films and their later work in journalism and documentaries.

Conclusion

This study offers new insights about the perceived influence of formal education and early reading on the emerging identities of twelve professional writers. It reveals that writers from diverse domains recalled specific and significant memories of formal education, including: constraints and challenges; particular teachers; and feedback about their writing. In narrating these they reported their self-esteem as writers had been affected, as a consequence at the time some had written in defiance of negative experiences, others had written in search of receiving more positive affirmation. All persevered despite difficulties. The data indicate that their desire to write was partly influenced by a pleasure in reading and narrative world-creation (through play, drawing and writing). All but one of the writers reported a deep early pleasure in fiction, mainly but not exclusively found in books. For several these remembered texts were perceived to have had a long term impact on shaping their interests as writers – influencing their choice of themes and language regardless of the diverse domains in which they later worked. Whilst the writers commonly narrated a sense of an emerging writer identity in and through formal education, there was also considerable uniqueness and diversity; two science academics did not mention connections between early reading and later writing, this may have been due to the texts being significantly different in nature to those they now produce in contrast say to the novelists or poet. In addition, the influence of others, in school, home and the community, and the wider social and historical context on their development as writers was evident, alongside their different personal responses to circumstance.

Although as Gee (2000, p. 50) argues, the education system must avoid ‘reproducing the identities and practices of experts’, these writers’ perspectives on their childhood experiences of schooling and their pleasure in reading raise issues for consideration. For many of them imaginative writing was neither profiled nor valued in school. In the context of contemporary education in England, little appears to have changed; the emphasis on spelling, grammar and punctuation in national assessments effectively sidelines composition and effect. Additionally despite reading for pleasure being mandated, studies suggest teachers struggle to profile this, in part due to its non-assessed nature (Cremin et al., 2014). Yet as this research reveals, writers need opportunities to read and write stories; narrative is a crucial way of making sense of the world and appears to motivate young writers.

The professional writers’ narrated memories also reveal the uniqueness of their early journeys as writers, the socially situated nature of writing and the ways in which identities are heavily shaped by social experience. In many classrooms however the emphasis remains almost entirely upon ‘schooled writing’ with its attendant objectives and specified outcomes. Little or no attention is given to the emerging identities of young writers, to discussions about students’ reading and writing preferences and practices in different domains within or beyond school, nor their attitudes towards writing and being a writer. Young people’s development as writers should not be measured simply by their command of writing’s codes and conventions, without cognisance of their dispositions, attitudes and motivation. These are crucial to

effective practice since emotion and self-esteem are key catalysts in the process of becoming a writer and believing oneself to be a writer.

Drawing on the perspectives of respected professional writers, this study suggests that both more research and more work in school is needed to explore students' (and their teachers') histories and identities as writers, to understand the shaping influence of writers' early journeys and social experiences of learning to write and becoming writers. Additionally, we suggest a wider range of professional writers are involved in education, their voices offer lessons for us all.

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