Reflective Writing:

Journaling for Improved School Performance Through Student-Teacher Relationships

By

Katharine Wolff

A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Teaching, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND License.

Copyright by Katharine Wolff, April 2016
Abstract

This Master of Teaching Research Project is a qualitative study on the topic of using journals in the secondary school English classroom. The paper seeks to answer the question: In what ways do three Ontario public high school English teachers believe assigned journals help students succeed academically and personally? In answering this question, I relied on elements of case study research methodology, conducting three interviews with Ontario high school teachers who have used different types of journals for their students. My participants discussed the emotional benefits of journals, as well as their role in literacy development and literary criticism. They also discussed how journals fit into the school system as a whole and how gender affects the efficacy of journals. Overall, my research has shown journals to be an effective tool for building student-teacher relationships with adolescents, whether they are skilled writers or not. Therefore, if the teacher is comfortable with the idea of reading the personal journals of students and committed to reading and responding to them, journals are a worthwhile tool to introduce in the classroom.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge all of the teachers at Carleton Place High School that inspired me to pursue English and ultimately teaching as a career choice. It is my positive student-teacher relationships with these teachers that has inspired the study of journals as a tool to connect with adolescents. By the same token, I would like to thank my parents for supporting my educational journey and their aid in making it possible to travel back and forth to Toronto in order to complete my studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). My experiences at OISE have also informed my study, and I would like to thank my supervisor Arlo Kempf for his ongoing support and encouragement, my first year research professor Patrick Finnessy for helping to shape my research question, and my English curriculum professor Rob Simon for sharing his ideas about journals. In the second year of my program, I received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), which was hugely influential in allowing me to focus on my studies. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the importance of my animal companions for keeping me grounded and happy, especially my current horse, Gatsby. Many of my ideas for this study came directly from my reflective hours spent in the saddle.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to the Research Study</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background of the Researcher</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Frameworks</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Literacy Theory</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reader Response Theory</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Writing and Journal Theory</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Qualitative Research Theory</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Types</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Edited Journals</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Secret Journals</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teacher-Directed Journals</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Natural Shared Journals</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical Concerns 38
Gender and Journals 40
English as a Second Language Students and Journals 42
Mental Health and Writing 43
Self-Worth and Teenagers 44
Student-Teacher Relationships 45
Conclusion 46

3. METHODOLOGY 47

Introduction 47

Research Approach and Procedure 47

Instruments of Data Collection 49

Participants 50

1. Sampling Criteria 51

2. Sampling Procedures 52

3. Participant Biographies 53

Daisy 53

Myrtle 54

Nick 54

Data Collection and Analysis 55

Ethical Review Procedures 55

Methodological Strengths and Limitations 57

Conclusion 58
4. FINDINGS

Introduction

Theoretical Influences

1. Literacy and Writing Theory
2. Reader Response Theory

Emotional Benefits

1. Ethical Concerns

Structural Influences

Teaching and Administrative Influences

1. Teachers’ Perspectives of Adolescence
2. Administrators’ Impact on Teacher Independence

Student Influences

1. Gender

Conclusion

5. IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Key Findings

Implications

1. Broad
2. Personal

Recommendations
Reflective Writing:
Journaling for Improved School Performance Through Student-Teacher Relationships

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

One of the many challenges that secondary school teachers face involves finding an effective and meaningful way to teach their curriculum to adolescents who may be struggling with mental health issues and personal stress. Some adolescents within the school system are held back from succeeding at school due to their internal struggles involving their mental health and their self-perception (Kawachi and Berkman, 2001). In many cases, adolescents may struggle with their feelings and emotions without understanding why this is happening, thus preventing them from finding a way out of the predicament (Strunk, Sorter, Ossege, King, 2014, p. 367). This can diminish their sense of self-worth, which can in turn negatively affect school performance. I am interested in finding ways to help adolescents as they transition into adulthood, while still teaching the curriculum effectively and improving students’ literacy. As a teacher candidate, I hope to learn from this study and develop concrete teaching strategies that will allow me to help students effectively in my English classes.

In secondary school English classes, there is an opportunity to encourage students to write in a reflective manner, which may give students insight into their feelings and enable them to better understand the issues that they face. Student self-reflection, or metacognition, is a key part of the overall expectations in each of the four strands of the Ontario English curriculum, and journaling provides an outlet to fulfil some of these expectations (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007). Furthermore, journaling can lead to a better student-teacher relationship through positive, engaged teacher responses and comments on the assignment. The key benefit of this kind of writing is that “journals provide a place where a non-threatening dialogue between teacher and
student is possible” (Fulwiler, 1987, p. 6). The personal and individual attention may increase a student’s sense of self-worth and help them feel that their thoughts and opinions are important. Reflective writing can reveal to students that their teacher is willing to listen and cares for them, paving the way for a healthy and productive student-teacher relationship (O’Connor, 2011). In this paper, I intend to examine journaling as a method of both assisting students with their own personal struggles as well as a method of improving their grasp of the Ontario English curriculum.

This research project will be a qualitative study with elements of a case study approach based on the responses of three educators in Ontario secondary schools. As a qualitative research paper, I will be aiming to explore the issue of journaling for student success with the goal of gaining an in depth understanding using data analysis rather than seeking to create generalizable results (Creswell, 2013, p. 120).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study, first and foremost, is to discover ways in which I can become a more effective educator based on the shared experiences of expert teachers in Ontario school boards. In particular, I would like to learn teaching methods that will enable me to strengthen my students’ literacy as well as their sense of self-worth. As a future high school teacher, I know that I may have some students dealing with mental health issues, peer pressure, and the pressure to figure out what to do following the end of their high school career. These stress factors can have a direct impact on school performance and their ability to absorb key aspects of the curriculum. Therefore, as a teacher, I would like to find a way to help my students deal with these stressors in a way that can also increase their academic achievement.
In this study, I hope to investigate journaling as one potential method that can fulfill this goal. In studying this topic and publishing my results, I also hope to help other educators achieve their task of educating and supporting students. As an educator, I believe I am also a collaborator. Therefore, sharing my ideas and research with the broader community and with my fellow colleagues is a vital part of my teacher education. Due to the common elements of adolescent development that often result in mental health issues and stress, it is important for teachers to share methods of assisting students through their transition to adulthood. Similarly, I also hope to learn from my fellow educators and teacher candidates in the process of the study. As a teacher candidate, I am in an ideal position to learn many strategies from my teacher mentors and students during my time in graduate school. I would also like to learn about the challenges that journaling in class may create for both teachers and students, as well as how educators have dealt with these challenges. I hope to gain ideas and specific ways in which I can implement journaling in the classroom from my peers and colleagues. Throughout the process and completion of this study, I hope to learn how to use journals as an effective method of creating a positive and productive student-teacher relationship.

Research Question

The guiding question of this research project asks:

- In what ways do three Ontario public high school English teachers believe assigned journals help students succeed academically and personally?

Within this question, I seek to discover what it is specifically about journaling that can help adolescent students. In order to answer the guiding question, I must also seek out the answers to the following sub-questions:
• Does journal writing increase literacy or does poor literacy make this practice ineffective for some students?

• How does teacher response and engagement with students’ journals affect the student writers?

• How can journal assignments and assessment be created in order to maximize the benefits of the writing process?

In seeking out information for answering these questions, I hope to learn how I can use the practice in the classroom both as a valuable exercise in itself as well as a way to successfully achieve Ontario curriculum requirements.

Background of the Researcher

My interest in journaling is rooted in my own experiences as a secondary school student, as well as my experiences as a volunteer student teacher in high school English classes. In my final year of high school, my English teacher assigned a journaling project. We were to write 20 pages of journal entries over the span of a month, and then hand the entire package in to him to assess. This exercise was connected to a theme we were studying relating to Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*: self-reflection. Just as the protagonist had examined her own life in depth as a way of understanding her current self and relationships, we were invited to reflect on important moments in our lives and how that has shaped our sense of identity. We were given complete freedom on what to write about as long as it included some sort of reflection on our lives—he did not assign us specific topics. I quickly started writing and had completed the 20-page assignment in less than a week. I handed my journals in, and a few days later my teacher handed them back with many comments and questions written throughout. At the end of the journal, he invited me
to continue writing and hand them in again. I continued to write in this way for the rest of the semester, handing in a package of journals about every 2 weeks for my teacher to comment on. This process resulted in a written conversation between my teacher and me, which would not have taken place if I did not have the opportunity to communicate with him in writing.

I am quite introverted and was very quiet in high school. I did not like to speak up in class, and as such usually missed out on connecting with my teachers and my peers. I rarely engaged in thoughtful discussions during class, choosing instead to reflect silently. Having the opportunity to engage with my own thoughts as well as sharing these with my teacher in a relaxed, non-threatening scenario had a positive impact on my self-esteem and my studies. It is through critical self-reflection that I discovered my own drive to become an educator. In the process of self-reflection, I recorded many of my self-doubts about how I could possibly mesh my quiet personality with my career goals. Through the writing process, particularly through the written conversation with my teacher, I became more confident in myself and my abilities, which altered my negative mind-set about my ability to teach. A key part of the process were my teacher’s comments and encouragements, which often pushed me to further thinking and reflection. These comments helped me to understand myself better and created a positive student-teacher relationship, which in turn made me see my teacher as more approachable for curriculum based questions. Shortly after beginning the journals, I began to participate more in class because I knew he understood what a challenge that was for me, and he knew exactly when and where to push me as a result of his newfound knowledge of my personality. Having my teacher respond to the journal, therefore, was as important as the journaling process itself.

From this experience, I know that my journaling had a positive impact on me and helped me achieve academically and grow personally. I therefore begin this project with the underlying
assumption that journaling is a useful tool to use in the classroom. However, I also acknowledge that I only have access to my personal experiences and that all students learn differently. I am curious as to whether my own experiences reflect a common occurrence or if journaling only affects certain types of learners. I also wonder if it is particularly beneficial to those students who are introverted and do not communicate with others as often as the extroverted types of students, who may already connect with their teachers in this way. With this study, therefore, I hope to learn more about how journaling can impact other types of learners. Although my personal experiences have sparked my interest in the topic, I am careful to remember that it is also a singular experience and not necessarily a commonly shared one.

Limitations

Due to time constraints related to my graduation requirements, I will only be interviewing a limited number of educators for this project, and I will not be travelling outside of Ontario or school boards outside of the Greater Toronto Area or the Ottawa area. I am also unable to touch on mental health specifically due to the difficulty of finding teachers who have engaged in journals for mental health specifically and who have an in-depth knowledge of the psychology of mental health, though I will be asking some questions about mental health and journaling. The mental health component would be better suited to a study that focuses directly on students rather than on teachers’ perceptions of students.

Definitions

*Journals:* Most teachers who use journals in their classrooms will have a slightly different definition of the term. Nevertheless, there are a few common features. Journals must involve
REFLECTIVE WRITING

some personal reflection, though this reflection can be centred on either the self or on course materials or novels. Journals are usually not used to teach grammar or language rules, and are more about content than style. Specific types of journals will be addressed in chapter two of this study.

*Academic success:* The success I refer to includes student engagement with the curriculum and an increased grade or percentage level in subjects that involve literacy, such as English and history. Academic success is subjective from student to student, so it is not dependent on achieving a certain grade level but rather a general trend of improving grades and a deepened understanding of material through increased levels of literacy.

*Personal success:* This type of success refers to the deepening of a student-teacher relationship in a way that benefits students’ engagement with the class. It also refers to lessening student stress, poor mental health, and anxiety about high school or career paths. This is of course entirely subjective and can only be discussed in terms of teacher observations of student behaviour. An improved student-teacher relationship involves a more open dialogue, however, which will give teachers some insight into students’ sense of self-worth and their happiness, which is an important part of personal success.

**Overview**

This Master of Teaching Research Project consists of 5 chapters. In Chapter 1 of this study, I have introduced the topic, the purpose, and elaborated on my reasons for conducting this research project, including my background and related assumptions about the benefits of journals. In Chapter 2, I review the literature on this topic, including the use of reflective writing within the classroom and the role of writing more generally. I also discuss the many different types of
journals that teachers may introduce in their classrooms, as well as the particular benefits associated with those types. In Chapter 3, I provide the methodology and procedure I have used in this study, which includes information about the research participants and how I have collected my data. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the data gained from my participants according to theme in order to address the research question and sub-questions. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of the study as well as their implications, with further recommendations for practice and research. References and appendices follow at the end of the paper.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study explores the question: *in what ways do three Ontario public high school English teachers believe assigned journals help students succeed academically and personally?* In considering the implications of this question, it is important to locate it within the current literature of the topic. While there have been numerous inquiries into the topic of journals in schools, there is an absence of studies that investigate high school teachers’ perceptions of journaling’s benefits specifically, which is what this research project intends to address. I use theoretical frameworks, journal types, and various journal-specific benefits and challenges to organize this literature review.

Theoretical Frameworks

This research project will look at the topic of reflective writing using four theories: literacy theory, Reader Response theory, writing and journal theory, and qualitative research theory. These theories both influence the organization of my paper in terms of the themes I choose to focus on, as well as inform the types of questions that I will ask my participants.

1. Literacy Theory

   Literacy is a key element of this research project, as The Ontario English Curriculum for all secondary school grades stresses the importance of literacy for academic and personal growth. As my project is focused on English classroom specifically, it is important that my research is grounded in the curriculum requirements in order for it to remain relevant. The Ontario Curriculum states in the front matter that “Language development is central to students’ intellectual, social, cultural, and emotional growth and must be seen as a key component of the
curriculum” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 3). The English curriculum clearly prioritizes literacy in this statement, as well as the importance of “emotional growth.” One of the ways in which these two priorities can be combined is through reflective writing, which can be developed as a skill through the use of personal student journals in schools. Additionally, the Ontario curriculum stresses the importance of metacognition throughout the document, which is also possible to achieve through the use of reflective writing practices. In each of the four strands—oral communication, reading, writing, and media studies—students are required to reflect on their own thought processes. This curriculum requirement is naturally inherent in the assignment of personal student journals, establishing the importance of literacy and reflection in one holistic teaching practice.

In Literacy in Theory and Practice, Brian V. Street (1995) looks at literacy in terms of autonomy, abstraction and how thought processes are positively affected by the ability to write one’s thoughts instead of just speaking them. In this academic, research based book, Street looks at various studies on literacy and critiques their ideas. A key argument that he makes is that literacy can establish autonomy rather than hegemony by allowing individuals to express their thoughts in a way that the larger community can understand while simultaneously separating themselves from it (Street, p. 18). One of the justifications for “compulsory schooling,” he argues, is that students are not homogenous even though they are all learning the same curriculum (Street, p. 19). Through literacy, students can express themselves in unique ways, as “language and thought change” when using the written word (Street, p. 20). Street also argues that literacy encourages a “high level of abstraction because words act as signs that stand for something rather than being the thing itself” (Street, p. 21). Because all students understand the code of signs differently, literacy becomes a source of “cognitive difference” within a
homogenous school system (Street, p. 23). The goal of literacy education is therefore not to make everyone speak and write in the same way, but to allow students to hone their skills in order to express themselves authentically as individuals. Street’s focus on individuality makes his work useful in the study of personal student journals, because journaling is a method that allows adolescents to develop literacy skills and a unique style to express their authentic selves.

Joanne Larson and Jackie Marsh (2005) discuss a more practical approach to literacy in *Making Literacy Real: Theories and Practice for Learning and Teaching*. They acknowledge that literacy is “something people do” (p. 10). The authors focus on several different theories of literacy, including “New Literacy Theory,” which, in contrast to Street’s ideas, focuses on social groups and social rules rather than individuals (Larson & Marsh, p. 19). Rather than each individual using language in their own codes, New Literacy Theory looks at each community as having a code system (Larson & Marsh, p. 19). Literacy is therefore grounded in what people choose to do with it and the purpose it serves, which supports the idea that students who write a journal and have a teacher respond in writing will develop literacy skills that serve a social purpose. Having a grounded purpose for literacy that also establishes classroom community leads to more effective writing and communication. At the core of this view of literacy is the idea that teachers can act as “real” writers and do not need to be professional authors in order to model writing for students (Larson & Marsh, p. 21). Students cannot learn literacy simply by reading what others have written, but should see their teachers write as well (Larson & Marsh, p. 22). Furthermore, when students see that their teacher also writes, they feel less like the teacher is forcing them to do something; instead, it becomes a shared experience. This theory supports journals as a social act between student and teacher through written language, which achieves social literacy development.
2. Reader Response Theory

Another theoretical approach that I will be using is the literary theory of Reader Response Theory. In Deborah Appleman’s (2009) Critical Encounters in High School English, she explains that literacy is grounded in an ability to understand Reader Response Theory. Appleman explains that Reader Response Theory is frequently used in secondary school English classes as a way of accessing literary texts (p. 32). Using this literary theory, students locate what they find most interesting in a text in order to personally respond to it. Reader Response Theory “has made the enterprise of literature teaching more relevant, immediate, and important. It has forced us to rethink what we do when we teach literature, why we do it, and whom we do it for” (Appleman, p. 35). Reader Response Theory often relies on the process of writing in order to locate one’s feelings about a text, as the process of writing can confirm a reader’s genuine feelings by getting it out of the brain and onto the page. Literacy and literary understanding therefore go hand-in-hand. Furthermore, as Patricia Harkin (2005) notes, Reader Response privileges a reader’s emotions as a way of creating meaning (p. 413). Developing and encouraging the expression of emotions rather than forcing students to keep them hidden while reading can be very empowering in terms of creating a feeling of student self-worth (Harkin, p. 417). Reader Response Theory can therefore assist students in developing confidence in their opinions and emotional responses, which is often also what journal assignments seek to achieve. In this way, the literary theory and journals can be used to reach the same goal of student engagement and empowerment in a way that is easy to teach and readily accessible to students (Harkin, p. 417).

The prevalence of Reader Response Theory in high school supports the introduction of journaling in the classroom as well, as it is important for students to understand themselves first in order to connect to texts personally and respond genuinely. Because Reader Response Theory
reflective writing relies on the individual, being capable of exploring oneself is a key to successful reading. In this way, reading literature and writing journals share the same goal, as “the aim of many progressive educators is to use literature as a vehicle for self-exploration and expression” (Appleman, p. 6). Furthermore, Appleman notes that teachers found themselves “considering whether a particular text was teachable by the degree to which it might invoke personal responses from our students” (p. 36). Journals can also assist teachers in this regard, as they will allow teachers to have a better understanding of their students and what novels or other texts might be most relevant for them. Teachers want “students to read literature to gain insight into their own lives,” and journals will allow them to fulfil this goal (Appleman, 2009, p. 37). Appleman’s book is more focused on case studies and practices rather than academic theory and research, and this focus will provide a practical base to ground different theories of journaling.

3. Writing and Journal Theory

Writing and journaling are, of course, directly linked to each other and often rely on the same concepts. Peter Elbow (1998) is one of the top names in the field of writing theory for his strong support of free writing in schools as a learning tool. Key to his theory is the idea that one must “keep on writing, even if the writing is terrible,” which he introduces in his book *Writing Without Teachers* (Elbow, p. xv). For Elbow, the process of writing is what allows good writing to develop. It is important not to analyse writing in the moment, but rather to just write so that thoughts can come out in order to analyse later, after the initial writing stage is complete (Elbow, p. xv). Elbow’s academic and personal text is important to my study because this drive to free-write for academic purposes is closely tied to personal writing. Elbow explains that he learnt to free-write out of an emotional need to “pour out all my feelings and thoughts onto page after page—just ‘blurting’ onto the page and losing all awareness of writing . . . This was my real
introduction to freewriting: making nonstop, non-censored writing a deep part of me” (Elbow, p. xv-xvi). Inherent in Elbow’s work is the tension between the writing that students learn in school and the kind of writing that happens on a personal level with no guidance. He notes that “students can learn without teachers even though teachers cannot teach without students. The deepest dependency is not of students upon teachers, but of teachers upon students” (Elbow, p. xviii).

Based on this conclusion, it is therefore a teacher’s duty to respond to student needs. By providing a space for students to explore personal writing and sometimes giving them the option not to share their writing, teachers can enable their students to experience the kind of genuine personal writing for which Elbow advocates. This does not necessarily have to happen as a solely independent process, so teachers still have a place in his system of writing (Elbow, p. xxvii).

Elbow’s views on free-writing and the importance it has on the development of ideas and writing skills establishes the basis for my ideas regarding personal reflective writing for students.

Christopher Clark and Robert Yinger’s (1981) paper “Reflective Journal Writing: Theory and Practice” is an older study of journal writing that remains relevant today for its ideas about the role of writing in the development of a sense of self. The authors begin their paper with a discussion of writing theory in general before looking at journals in particular, and it complements Elbow’s work in several ways. Similar to Elbow, the authors believe that the process of writing itself is important rather than just the content, and that content is reliant on the process: “Writing forces people to think in ways that clarify and modify their ideas. In short, people learn from writing” (Clark & Yinger, p. 2). In part, this relationship between ideas and writing is grounded in the idea that “one learns by putting events into shape through language, and that writing helps people understand the subject at hand (Clark & Yinger, p. 3). Another way in which writing benefits the idea process is by using “three modes of representation: doing it
(the enactive mode); making a picture or image of it (the iconic mode); or symbolizing it, as in language (the symbolic mode)” (Clark & Yinger, p. 3). These three modes involve the hand, mind, and eye, and writing is able to engage all modes simultaneously. This holistic view of writing provides support for the process as a means to access one’s identity, which is especially important for adolescents and their particular stage of development.

Another key way in which writing helps to develop ideas is through the cyclical nature of the writing process. Unlike the spoken word, writing allows for “self-provided feedback” (Clark & Yinger, p. 6). This feedback is possible because “what has just been written is immediately available for re-reading, evaluation, and revision” (Clark & Yinger, p. 6). Although this might initially seem to contradict Elbow’s idea of free-writing because of the “evaluation” that can inhibit the act of writing just to get it all out, the evaluation can also be postponed to a later time when the writing is complete, or even cross over to a new writing piece altogether. The cyclical nature of writing does not necessarily need to happen for every piece or simultaneously; this way, writing can still be produced naturally. What is important about the process is at one point asking, “Is this what I really think and feel?” in order to achieve the goal of learning about oneself. (Clark & Yinger, p. 6). This question is vital for any kind of writing in secondary school, whether it is a literary essay or a personal journal. By learning the skill in a journal, students will be more adept at it in their academic writing.

Clark and Yinger’s views on writing are grounded in the idea of literacy being primarily a social process, similar to the views of Larson and Marsh. They argue that learning “requires establishing connections and relationships; people learn as they relate new information to what they already know. The act of writing requires this same kind of connecting and organizing” (Clark & Yinger, p. 7). In this way, writing acts as a method of learning, and this learning can be
shared with others. After sharing, the process of writing can be started again to delve further into issues and to create a cyclical system of learning. While writing already involves “manipulation, reflection, and deliberation” in itself, when performed socially it doubles the effect. (Clark & Yinger, p. 7).

After discussing writing in general, Clark and Yinger analyse personal writing specifically. Their premise is that learning is inherently a personal process because “every learner seeks to understand in terms that make sense to him/her; learning is a quest for personal meaning” (Clark & Yinger, p. 8). If this is the goal of learning, personal writing should play an important role in English classes. Furthermore, they argue that “people do not deal directly with the world but construct reality as they present personally the meaning of events” (Clark & Yinger, p. 8). In order to understand the world around them, therefore, students also need to know themselves first so that they know their personal perspective and how that influences their views. Self-understanding will ultimately lead to a better understanding of their world, as “People are often unaware of how much they know about the world, a specific situation, or themselves, until they take the time to think about and make explicit this knowledge” (Clark & Yinger, p. 10).

This explicit quality is important to producing new meaning, because:

By writing out what they know and by juxtaposing this knowledge to create new connections, new relations and structures come into being and new knowledge is created.

This same process may also allow one to see gaps or inconsistencies in one’s knowledge, which in turn may promote further learning and reorganization. (Clark & Yinger, p. 11)

Due to the potential learning benefits that come with having an understanding of oneself, personal writing proves to be very useful for teachers in a variety of disciplines, not just for English teachers.
In addition to the academic benefits of personal writing, there is also an interpersonal benefit. Reflective writing “promotes an awareness and possible clarification of another important aspect of inner life—feelings and emotions” (Clark & Yinger, p. 11). The ability for students to access their inner lives comes not only from the act of simply reflecting, but the act of reflecting combined with the writing process. Reflecting while speaking does not produce the same effect as writing reflectively, because “writing forms a gateway to feelings and emotions through the symbolic function of words. Words carry personal meaning as well as conventional meaning,” which are informed by past experiences (Clark & Yinger, p. 11). Writing journals is a particularly useful medium for learning about past experiences explicitly, as the past tends to be the topic that students naturally gravitate towards. They often think back to their childhood for things to write about, choosing events that had a particular impact on them or the people around them. This kind of reflection allows them not only to understand themselves better, but also allows the teacher to understand his or her students better.

Perhaps most central to Clark and Yinger’s views on journals is that the “focus on personal thoughts, feelings, and reflections, puts writers into a position to learn at least four important things about themselves: (1) what they know, (2) what they feel, (3) what they do (and how they do it), and (4) why they do it” (p. 10). These four goals of personal writing are important both for learning about the world and learning about oneself. Clark and Yinger believe that it is possible for journals to do these things effectively because, “Without the threat of criticism by an external audience, writers can be free to pay attention to and explore their feelings” (p. 12). While I agree with the idea that sometimes students should write journals that are just for them and will never be shown to anyone, I also believe that journals can achieve these benefits while still being read consistently by a teacher. What is important is how the teacher
evaluates the work. The evaluation should not involve any criticism about the writing itself or the student will lose the liberating feeling that is so characteristic of journals. Instead, teachers should provide written conversations about the topic the student is writing about. In order to achieve writing criticism, Clark and Yinger recommend pairing journals with follow up essay writing and reflection pieces, which can then be used to critique a student’s writing skills. I do not believe explicit follow up assignments are necessary, as the act of writing journals and the act of writing academically are inherently linked because of the practice of literacy. Ultimately, a student will want to write in a way that the teacher can understand in his or her journal, and this will naturally lead towards improved literacy without an explicit assignment being made. Therefore, I do not agree with the authors’ conviction that the explicit assignment must happen, but do agree that it can be beneficial.

Clark and Yinger present one more potential benefit of writing journals, and that is differentiation. Because writing is a self-paced activity, it therefore naturally assists educators in differentiating their lessons that involve writing. The authors argue that writing better matches the pace of learning than speaking does for some learners (p. 9). For this same reason, the authors advocate for the use of journals in both teacher education and practice. They point out that teachers are learners of themselves and the more they know about themselves, the more effective they will be in the classroom. They suggest introducing journaling for teachers in teacher education programs as a reflective practice, hoping that they will be maintained beyond the faculty. In this way, journals have a double effect of helping teachers, who can then model the journaling practice when they implement it in their classrooms, thus helping students access the benefits of journal writing.
4. Qualitative Research Theory

As a research project involving elements of case study methodology, my paper also relies on qualitative research theory. John Creswell (2013) defines qualitative research as “ever-changing,” which makes it difficult to pin down to a straightforward concept (p. 43). However, all qualitative research seems to prioritize the researcher and the process as being equally important to the findings. Creswell introduces some common features of qualitative research, such as natural setting, the researcher as key, having multiple methods, engaging in complex reasoning, looking closely at participants’ meanings, and being reflexive (p. 46). These defining characteristics will shape and inform my own research, particularly being reflexive, as it is central to both my paper, my personality, and my topic of journal writing. Creswell’s book is academic and practical, and I will use it to frame my paper and provide guidance for different sections, particularly regarding methodology.

Journal Types

The topic of journals is very broad, and in the school context the term journal is used for a variety of different assignments. Although my particular focus is on natural shared journals, a variety of journals may be used by teachers for different perceived benefits to academic success. As a result, I will be looking at a few different variations of journals that may be used in order to more meaningfully understand and interpret my participants’ use of such journals. The journals I will be talking about include edited journals, secret journals, teacher-directed journals, and natural shared journals, though there are also other types of journals beyond these four.
1. Edited journals

Edited journals are those that are polished with the intent of showing a teacher and having a teacher critique the writing and style specifically. These journals may start off as self-reflective pieces that arise naturally or from a teacher-directed prompt. In either case, the student writes an initial journal and then goes back to edit it for the teacher, or writes a secondary assignment such as an essay based around the initial journal. An advocate of this type of journal is Peter Elbow. Peter Elbow wrote an academic article with Jennifer Clarke (1987) entitled “Desert Island Discourse: The Benefits of Ignoring Audience.” Elbow and Clarke argue that students should never have to show a teacher their initial journal, because “when students have to write to someone they find intimidating (and of course they often experience teachers as intimidating), they often start thinking wholly defensively” (p. 19). The feeling of being defensive is of course prohibitive to the writing process and defeats the purpose of journal writing as a process that will enable students to better understand themselves. Instead of writing for themselves, “As [students] write down each thought or sentence, they think of nothing else but how the intended reader will criticize or object to it” (Clarke & Elbow, p. 19).

In another article, “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking,” Elbow pushes this idea further by pointing out the benefits of establishing a journal as an “evaluation free zone” (Elbow, 1993, p. 197). He believes that getting students to write their initial thoughts and share them in a space with no evaluation, or a place where they are assured a pre-determined grade in a contract system, will help students write more authentically from the heart instead of writing for their teacher (p. 197). Elbow discourages students from self editing this work as well, as this also takes away from the authenticity. Instead, he asks students to write more and more, so the student’s ideas are pushed further naturally instead of through revision. Instead of evaluating this journal
assignment, Elbow’s students will return to their ideas at a later time and write again, and only then will the teacher be invited in as an evaluator, when the student has become more confident in their ideas (p. 198).

In both articles, the fear of a teacher’s red pen is the issue at hand, but I would argue that it is not always the case and that Clarke and Elbow are too broad in their statement that students will think of “nothing else” (p. 19). If there is a bad student-teacher relationship that leads students to fear their teacher, this fear-based scenario may indeed be the result. However, if the student and teacher have a good relationship, students may trust that their teacher will not critique their personal ideas or writing within journals. Nevertheless, I find their point to be valid for scenarios when students are focused on their teacher’s negative comments.

As a solution to the fear issue, Elbow and Clarke recommend that teachers get their students to write for themselves first, and then if they need to share it, they should edit the piece to suit the particular audience (p. 20). In other words, the authors do not want students to write for their teacher, but they do want them to edit for their teacher. The ability to edit their writing for a particular audience is certainly a useful skill for students to learn, and I believe it is likely to assist them with the development of literacy skills and, ultimately, help them achieve academic success. Elbow and Clark support their points with case studies and academic references, which all make a strong case for edited journals. However, they also reiterate that the initial journals themselves are equally powerful: “the voice that emerges when students ignore audience is sometimes odd or idiosyncratic in some way, but usually it is stronger” (Clarke & Elbow, p. 25). The acknowledgment of the power of the initial journal seems to support teacher access to the original journal if the relationship between student and teacher is a positive one. I therefore would argue that teachers should work hard to ensure they get their students to the point where
they can ignore the fact that the teacher is reading because they trust the teacher to be kind to their genuine thoughts and their “idiosyncratic” voices.

Clarke and Elbow go on to explain that teachers often claim that “adolescents have nothing to write about. They are too young,” and therefore they believe that journals are not particularly useful for secondary school. However, Elbow and Clarke suggest that rather than having nothing to write about, the issue is really that students “lack practice” in how to reflect in “desert island mode” (p. 28). The reason journals fail for some students, therefore, is not because journaling is not useful, but because the students have not been shown how to journal usefully and purposefully. The authors believe that a teacher’s goal should be to “impart to all our students . . . the capacity to engage in extended and productive thinking that doesn’t depend on audience prompts or social stimuli” (Clarke & Elbow, p. 29). When used without prompts, journaling will impart the “value of writing to make meaning to oneself, not just to others,” making a strong case for edited journals (Clarke & Elbow, p. 32).

2. Secret Journals

Closely linked to the idea that teachers should only read edited journals and not the primary journal itself is the assignment of secret or private journals. These journals are assigned by a teacher with the agreement that the teacher might check how many pages a student has written, but will not read the content of the journals. A proponent of this kind of journal is Ross M. Burkhardt (2003). In his practical book *Writing for Real: Strategies for Engaging Adolescent Writers*, Burkhardt discusses the various writing assignments he has assigned to his students in secondary school. For one assignment, the students had to write a letter to themselves (p. 151). The students were required to write 10 pages about themselves, but he notes that most students did double or even triple that amount. There were 6 prompts involved in this assignment. He
began the assignment by telling his students that they would all get a B grade for submitting 10 pages, and would get a higher grade if they handed in more than 10 journals (p. 152). He promised that he would not read what they had written, but only count the pages. My concern with this is that students may not really be reflecting genuinely because they are conscious of needing to reach a certain number of pages. It also problematically prioritizes quantity over content, which is not the usual objective in English classes. In my opinion, this weakens the strength of his argument substantially. That being said, he claims that the assignment was a great success anyway, as is demonstrated by how much the students wrote and that they voted it to be the best assignment of the year (p. 157). The reason his students enjoyed the assignment so much, he claims, is because adolescents are inherently narcissistic. While this may be true, it seems quite negative and does not strengthen his argument, because he does not discuss the potential benefits of this reflection in developing adolescents’ sense of self to become something more than just narcissistic.

Once the students had written the journals, Burkhardt kept them and gave them back to students at graduation four years later. Despite never having read them, many students wanted to share with their teacher, both at the initial writing stage and at graduation. This student-driven desire to share with the teacher implies to me that the students were able to write genuinely without thinking about their audience, and that they are not scared of their teacher’s opinion, which contrasts with Elbow and Clarke’s perspective. In any case, the desire does not strengthen the case for secret journals or edited journals, but rather for sharing journals in order to build a better relationship with the teacher. Therefore, while I agree that teachers should encourage students to keep a journal for themselves, I do not believe it should be assigned as course work
because of the difficulty with evaluating this type of writing for anything more than the final page count.

3. Teacher-Directed Journals

Burkhardt also discusses teacher-directed journals in his book Writing for Real. Teacher-directed journals are assignments that are governed by strict rules about topic and format, and often take grammar into account when grading. These journals are frequently connected to a literary text in the case of English classes, and involve responses to the text on a daily or weekly basis. In this way, teacher-directed journals are closely linked to Reader Response Theory. In Burkhardt’s case, he starts the assignment with a list of rules and specifies exactly how he wants the journal entries to be written (p. 93). These kinds of journals often lead to essays later on, and are intended to allow students to respond to a text personally in order to find their interest in the story and support their beliefs with textual evidence. These journals are also very useful for fulfilling the curriculum requirements of metacognition, as students can be encouraged to reflect explicitly on their thought process for other assignments or texts (p. 95). However, the risk of these prompts demanding explicit reflection is that the student focuses on what they think the teacher wants to hear rather than writing their genuine thoughts and feelings. When the prompt is teacher directed, there is more of a risk of the fear that Elbow and Clarke seek to avoid with edited journals. This will result in false, token metacognition. A solution to this problem might be to create a combination assignment of teacher-directed journals and natural journals, which will allow students to receive the benefits of both.

Elizabeth Davis (2003) believes that prompted journal topics are necessary in order to teach students how to reflect properly (p. 91). In contrast to the fear that students may reflect only what they think the teacher wants to hear if they are given prompts, Davis believes that students
will not reflect authentically unless they are explicitly told how to reflect (p. 92). In order for reflection to be effective, it needs to produce new knowledge rather than just repeating what both the student and the teacher already know (p. 93). Davis’ article is largely research based and her focus on knowledge incorporation suggests that teacher-directed journal assignments can increase academic success. She believes journals are particularly useful because they are one of the only assignments that students are given which is explicitly metacognitive in nature (p. 95). Due to the explicit request for metacognitive thinking, Davis argues that prompts should be specific and that teachers should edit journals along the way in order to make students better thinkers and reflectors (p. 99). Furthermore, Davis invites students to pair off and share their journals with each other before presenting them to the teacher (p. 109) and she also has a very specific marking system in place that encourages and rewards metacognition in a way that she hopes will avoid the issue of “false” reflecting (p. 111). In her study, however, student-based research revealed that prompts should not be too specific in order to encourage greater critical thinking from the student (p. 129). These results then beg the question if having no prompts or very broad prompts would result in even greater critical thinking.

4. Natural Shared Journals

A natural journal is entirely student driven. Instead of having assigned topics, the teacher invites students to write on whatever topic interests them. They are free to write about anything they choose as long as they are reflective. These journals are not secret or private, but are instead shared with a teacher who then reads and comments on them. Scott Abrams (2000) promotes this type of journal in his book *Using Journals for Reluctant Writers: Building Portfolios for Middle and High School Students*. Abrams is a teacher at an alternative school for teenagers who are at risk, and his book is largely based on his personal experiences. Abrams views journals as
particularly useful for his students: “these journal topics can help teachers meet certain critical needs of high-risk students” (p. 1). There are two reasons he identifies that explain why journals are useful. First, they “open a private dialogue between student and teacher,” and second, they “improve the use of writing among students as a means of communication” (p. 1). These two reasons prioritize mental health and literacy as the main benefits of writing. Natural journals are particularly beneficial because “A private journal entry, with honest responses, can provide the basis for personal dialogue between teenager and adult, a condition not present in the lives of many students” (Abrams, p. 2). The “private” component of the journal is vital for genuine dialogue that matters to the student and the teacher. It ensures that there are no expectations of content for the student, which may result in the student only writing what the teacher wants to hear. By not establishing an expectation for content, the student must instead find content that matters to him or her, not the teacher. In order to achieve the best “personal dialogue,” Abrams suggests that teachers respond to journals quickly and personally, and never use red pen or criticize an entry (p. 2).

In terms of improving literacy, the student-teacher relationship is paramount in making journals impactful. Abrams reminds readers that “many students don’t like to use writing as a means of expression, so encouragement and building trust are key components to a successful use of journals” (p. 2). Trust, then, is vital to achieving meaningful literacy as well. Abrams explains that this has to do with the audience of a journal, which is why natural journals must be shared in order to be effective:

One of the keys to increasing a student’s desire to communicate effectively in writing is to increase the importance of the audience. Many students who shut down completely when a term paper is required, will eagerly write a letter to a friend. The desire to spell and to
use grammar correctly becomes important because the need to communicate effectively is much greater. If the teacher, through the use of journal dialogue, can become an important audience, the student will attempt to become a better writer and communicate more clearly. (p. 3)

Abrams suggests that the teacher has a responsibility to become someone that the student enjoys writing to, which explains why it is important not to criticize personal writing. He suggests that teachers should not be correcting grammar, word choice or sentence structure in a journal, as this will be counter intuitive to improving literacy through personal journals. If a teacher wants to do this, he or she should assign a follow up assignment that connects to a topic they chose, but should remain separate from the journal itself (Abrams, p. 4). Journals can help teachers develop assignments as well, as “Journal entries can help a teacher discover what motivates each student” (Abrams, p. 3). Finding out what students’ interests are will further help teachers develop meaningful student literacy through other, more formally evaluated and structured assignments.

John S. O’Connor (2011) is another teacher who uses natural shared journals in his classroom. O’Connor’s *This Time it’s Personal* is a practical guide to using journal assignments in high school classrooms. In contrast to Abrams, O’Connor is a teacher in an elite school. These two books therefore offer evidence that journals work for both high academic achievers and at-risk youth. O’Connor argues that journaling can be used to develop effective differentiated instruction (p. 3). A common way of achieving differentiation is to get to know one’s students on a personal level. However, O’Connor points out that this task can be overwhelming: “The multiplicity of stories is dizzying—each of my five classes deserves a story of its own; so too do each of my 125 students” (p. 3). Despite this difficulty in teaching, he argues that most teachers still wish to achieve this goal in order “to claim any understanding of the most basic questions
teachers ask themselves: Who am I teaching? What is happening in my classroom?” (p. 3). O’Connor is especially interested in this personal element: “I would assign only papers from which I too could learn. What I was especially interested in was learning about my students as people . . . In other words, I wanted to become a student of my students” (p. 12). In this way, journaling can also act as a classroom management tool as the students and the teacher get to know one another and develop a more effective student-teacher relationship.

O’Connor believes journaling to be especially effective at achieving this goal of teaching because it involves storytelling (p. 8). If teachers try to engage in storytelling without having students write, “the odds are not with every student getting a fair share of lines” (O’Connor, p. 8). For this reason, although most teachers associate journals with lower elementary grade levels, O’Connor believes that personal writing should be a part of high school English classes in particular (p. 11). He believes that these kinds of journals will also help students develop more genuine literacy skills, as the fact that students are discouraged from using “I” in writing often makes them write artificially (O’Connor, p. 12). Because using “I” is a new skill for many high school students, O’Connor also suggests being very careful when grading journals. O’Connor claims that he tries to treat his students “like professional writers. In writing marginal notes, I try to limit myself to positive comments and questions” (p. 19). He also stresses the importance of responding personally as “a fellow human being—with words rather than a letter grade” (p. 19). Jana Staton (1987) also privileges natural journals and stresses the importance of creating dialogue with comments rather than criticizing a student’s work. In “The Power of Responding in Dialogue Journals,” Staton explains that commentary in journals can become a conversation and is powerful in creating student-teacher relationships (p. 47). A response to a journal can be more empowering to a student than a spoken conversation because it demands and ensures that the
teacher listens to the student first (Staton, p. 47). Having a teacher listen to a student can increase the student’s self-confidence and feeling of self-worth. Developing this kind of dialogue can help students with their reading and writing ability, as well as help them to develop oral communication skills as they learn more about effective and positive dialogue in a journal (Staton, p. 51). The journal can also be used to discuss literature later on, as the student develops trust with the teacher and is therefore more likely to be honest about their opinions (Staton, p. 52). Because of the importance of developing a relationship in order to improve school performance, Staton also stresses the importance of making journals private between student and teacher and not forcing students to read each other’s journals or reading anything aloud to the class (p. 51). In this way, the journal becomes a safe space for students in the same way that administrators try to make the entire school community a safe space. Because the journal is only between two people, it is much easier to create a genuinely safe space that may be able to help those who feel bullied or misunderstood by the larger school community. In this way, the natural shared journal becomes an ideal space to improve students’ mental health.

While Staton discusses how journals can start on a personal level and then become a way to talk about literature later on, the opposite can also be a possibility. Nancie Atwell (1998) writes about the value of a “dining room table” conversation about literature, which is an authentic way in which people discuss their favourite books or interesting things they have read (p. 31-32). Atwell enjoys having authentic discussions about books with her students in this way, and when she began to think about writing, she wanted to do something that would emulate this oral discussion among friends or family (p. 35). Atwell ultimately decided to provide her students with a notebook, which began with a letter addressed to the students inviting them to begin a dialogue with her about literature (p. 41). Atwell “suspected their written responses to books
would go deeper than their talk—that writing would give them time to consider their thinking and that thoughts captured would spark new insights” (p. 41). Atwell’s suspicions turned out to be correct, and she believes this has a lot to do with the fact that she responded to students in kind, ultimately exchanging “thousands of pages of letters” with students, and the ideas discussed are wildly different for each student (p. 41). In this way, she is able to create a “literary relationship” with her students, which has kept them engaged in reading and writing (p. 43). As students got used to the writing process, their letters became more personal, though they always used literature as the basis of this discussion, helping them to develop literary analysis skills as well as personal relationship-building skills.

Linda Christensen (2009) also uses natural shared journals to discuss literature while still engaging in personal dialogue with her students. Christensen’s book *Teaching for Joy and Justice* emphasizes the importance of teachers’ attitudes about students prior to introducing the journaling exercise. In her introduction, she explains that “When I begin my work with the belief that all students can write and that they have something important to say, I build writers by illuminating their gifts instead of burying them” (p. 4). This attitude ensures an authentic desire to read what students write and to value their thoughts as legitimate responses to the big questions that literature raises. Christensen often introduces journals when discussing difficult topics such as slavery, which allows students to discuss their personal responses and emotions in response to some of the things they read about, while Christensen provides comments in return that echo their emotions (p. 190). The idea of sharing in this emotional dialogue about literature can create a deeper student-teacher relationship because of the vulnerability of the teacher, and the trust of the student. Christensen uses what students write in their journals as discussion prompts in class, which invites a deeper discussion because the students have the chance to
further reflect on the thoughts they had initially introduced in their journals (p. 175).

Furthermore, students reflect again when they return to their journals later on, with even more thoughts to express. This particular type of journaling exercise thus provides ample opportunities to experience metacognition.

**Ethical Concerns**

Due to the personal nature of all types of journals, there are some valid ethical concerns, which may dissuade some teachers from trying to use them in their classrooms despite the potential benefits that journals have been shown to offer. It is therefore important to discuss potential ethical concerns that teachers may have and establish some preventative measures to avoid these issues.

Toby Fulwiler (1987), the editor of *The Journal Book*, first discusses the personal nature of journals. He begins by explaining that “The language of journals will look a lot like speech written down” (Fulwiler, p. 2). The “speech” element of journals may scare some teachers off because they may feel that they would not be comfortable speaking to a student about some of the things that they are writing down. Nevertheless, journals also invite useful thought processes like observations, questions, speculation, self-awareness, digression, synthesis and information (Fulwiler, p. 3). The value of these elements in a journal may be worth the risk of developing a written conversation with a student. When using “their own natural voices,” students are more likely to express themselves honestly and take risks with their thoughts (Fulwiler, p. 5). The reason that students take more risks is dependent on the way teachers respond to journals. Fulwiler claims that, “in many cases the journals provide a place where a non-threatening dialogue between teacher and student is possible” (p. 6). Similar to O’Connor and Abrams,
Fulwiler suggests that teachers read journals, but “neither correct them for spelling nor grade them for ideas. Instead, they respond personally and positively to selected entries” (p. 6). However, it is the lack of a letter grade that may lead students to write about things that might become an ethical concern for teachers:

Students often write about things more private and intimate than teachers are comfortable with—things that more properly belong in personal diaries than in school journals. The problem for teachers is how to encourage students to write personally and frankly about subjects they care about without, at the same time, invading their personal lives.

(Fulwiler, p. 5)

Fulwiler’s solution to this issue is to discuss it with students and ensure that teachers set limits on topics they may not be comfortable with reading, while doing so in a gentle way rather than critically.

Abrams’ solution to this ethical problem is to give students an option to identify certain journal entries that they would prefer their teacher not to read with a symbol (p. 2). While this protects the student, the teacher may still end up reading things they would prefer not to read because the student may feel no hesitation with sharing something with a teacher, while the teacher might believe it to be inappropriate. In addition, the student may not trust that the teacher will not read the entry, which may limit their writing. Abrams also suggests being open to students about the fact that certain topics will always be an issue if they are included in the journals. He tells teachers to “Make sure [students] know there are certain topics like suicide or abuse that you must report” (Abrams, p. 2). Having this conversation before giving out the assignment will ensure that no issues arise with respect to students’ trust in relation to privacy
and journaling, especially if the teacher had previously promised never to share the journal with anyone else.

O’Connor takes a different route in dealing with ethical concerns. For him, it would be an ethical concern that the sharing of journals is one-sided. In order to avoid feeling like he is being overly inquisitive about students’ personal lives and personal thoughts, he also shares journal entries when he assigns them: “I write all the assignments with my classes . . . I try to model my willingness to share personal stories” (O’Connor, p. 12). Sharing journals can also show students what he expects, so he can model a type of journal that is ethically satisfying to him, avoiding topics he would not be comfortable sharing with his students or having his students share with him. For some teachers, however, this may not satisfy the ethical concern they have that they are becoming too personal with a student.

Although there are certain limitations on journals that are a legal issue, such as suicide and abuse, the personal ethical aspects of journals must be determined by each individual teacher. It is important to have limitations in mind and be open and direct with students about expectations that concern ethical issues. Ultimately, if teachers feel uncomfortable with the task, they should not assign it.

**Gender and Journals**

In looking at the effectiveness of journals for academic success and literacy, it is important to consider gender differences. Traditionally, diaries and journals have long been associated with girls. Mellinee Lesley’s (2012) book *Invisible Girls: At Risk Adolescent Girls’ Writing Within and Beyond School* talks explicitly about the relationship between gender and literacy, and how journals can be used to help young women academically and emotionally.
Lesley is a teacher writing about personal experiences, but the book is heavily research based. The book only covers girls because Lesley was teaching a girls’ group, but many of the issues covered seemed to be equally applicable to young males. She prioritizes the role of identity in literacy, which is a factor that other authors have not engaged in (Lesley, p. 16). She further links literacy and academic writing to adolescent agency (Lesley, p. 17). Lesley runs a writing group connected to the school and within it, but not in classrooms. Nevertheless, the journals affect their literacy, which impacts their ability to perform academically in their curriculum courses. The fact that Lesley is getting students to write outside of class allows her a bit more freedom, which may limit the transferability of her research and ideas into the classroom due to ethical concerns. Her students wrote about some things that would be deemed completely inappropriate for a classroom, which raises concerns about ethics and professional boundaries. Vital to the project is Lesley’s students’ trust in her, which underpins the entire book and seems to me to be the factor that is most important to the girls’ success.

There are fewer sources available concerning boys and journal writing, which my research paper will examine during the data collection stage. Frank Pajares and Giovanni Valiante (1999) wrote about boys’ perceptions of their writing in an academic quantitative study entitled “Grade Level and Gender Differences in the Writing Self-Beliefs of Middle School Students.” The researchers found that, although the boys and girls were writing with similar skill, the boys believed their writing to be worse than the girls (Pajares & Valiante, p. 390). Success, they believe, is at least in part related to students’ perceptions of their skills, and it is therefore paramount to increase boys’ positive self-beliefs in order to improve their writing (Pajares & Valiante, p. 391). Effective journal writing might be a way to get boys to believe they are better at writing through the personal teacher responses that can build their confidence and encourage
them to write. Boys also tend to consider writing in terms of how much value it has for them, which is an idea echoed by Scott Abrams, who believes that students would prefer to write something personal to a friend than they would an essay (p. 3).

**English as a Second Language Students and Journals**

There is little research regarding the efficacy of journals for students who are English language learners (ELL) or are learning English as a second language (ESL). Richard Orem’s (2001) research into the topic includes only adult ESL students, where the student-teacher relationship can be quite different and has different ethical concerns associated with it. Nevertheless, his research can be extended to high school ESL education. Orem advocates for a journal that focuses on structural writing and correcting grammar (p. 73). The journal becomes a form of assessment that is both “for” and “of” learning (Manitoba Education, 2015). However, at the same time, Orem notes that communication and not complete perfection and correction is the goal of shared journals in ESL classes (p. 73). By having a dialogue with students, corrections are made through modelling. The teacher responds to the student by using the correct form of the language, so students will learn by reading these comments (p. 74). By not over-correcting the journals, the students are more likely to gain the “cathartic” benefit from the exercise (p. 75).

A concern I have with introducing journals to ESL and ELL students is that their grasp of the language may make writing impossible or frustrating, which may make the journal more of a burden rather than a benefit. The Ministry of Education in Manitoba offers a solution to this problem by suggesting that, “if a student desires, they should be able to write in their own language and translate some or all of it to their teacher” (Manitoba Education, 2012, p. 46). This strategy of letting students write in their own language helps students to avoid the frustration of
trying to express themselves in an unknown language. Translating after the expression helps students experience the cathartic release first while still inviting communication between the student and teacher. This document is primarily concerned with ESL students who are also refugees, so the authors note that

> It is not generally helpful for teachers to probe or request students to share their stories of personal traumatic events in class or in private. Students generally appreciate others’ interest about them, their cultures, and their background. The sharing of personal experiences and perspectives is welcomed; however, it must be clear that the students’ right to privacy is respected and they must not feel compelled or required to share or reveal anything about their background and past. (Manitoba Education, p. 46)

While this advice is meant to apply to refugee students, the sentiment should apply to all students regardless of their background. Sharing stories in the journal should never be forced—although there are clear benefits to sharing, it must always be left up to the student to decide if they trust their teacher enough to write their feelings and personal experiences or not.

**Mental Health and Writing**

In the field of psychology, writing and mental health have long been seen to go hand-in-hand. Writing therapy is often used for patients struggling with mental health issues. Judith Pizarro (2004) studies writing therapy as a tool in treating those who have experienced a traumatic event. Writing therapy improves health, reduces stress, increases positive thinking, and can introduce people to coping mechanisms (Pizarro, p. 5). Pizarro conducts and references quantitative studies in order to demonstrate the benefits of writing (p. 6). Writing therapy is shown to be effective, but it could also have some negative side effects for certain people. In her
study, some participants reported that they felt anxiety during and after the writing process (Pizarro, p. 6).

For teachers, this information may give insight into how to effectively use journals for a class. It is important to monitor students as they write in their journals, both to determine whether they are benefitting from the exercise, and to see if students are feeling anxiety about their writing. In some cases, teachers may decide not to have some students write. As with any lesson or assignment, teachers should keep differentiated instruction in mind. For some students, the benefits to mental health from writing may not be achieved and so students should be asked to do a different activity. All students learn differently, so it is important to note that journals may not always lead to academic success or improved mental health for students. Furthermore, teachers do not practice psychology, so they should be mindful about how much they ask their students to do and be careful not to try and become a therapist in commenting on journals and personal writing. If a teacher is concerned, they should discuss the issue with the student in question.

Self-worth and Teenagers

It is a common belief that adolescence is a particularly turbulent time of child development. One of the reasons for this difficulty is due to changing perceptions of self-worth that teenagers hold about themselves. Sheila Williams and Rob McGee (1990) study adolescent self-perception in terms of competencies. The authors found that boys and girls had different perceptions of what they were competent at doing or being, with boys generally feeling more positive about themselves and their skills (p. 326). Due to the difference between the genders, the authors then decided to investigate what helps teenagers determine their sense of self-worth. In a
questionnaire, Williams and McGee determined that boys’ perceptions of themselves were highly influenced by school attachment (p. 331). The aspects of self that teenagers scored the highest in correlated with school support, and this correlation was higher for boys (Williams & McGee, p. 332). This study may support the use of journals in schools as a way of building greater school attachment. Journals can also assist students with developing more positive self-perceptions because of the personal teacher support that goes with it. Journal assignments can also assist teachers in getting students to identify their feelings regarding their self-perception and self-worth. Reflecting on these aspects of self can help students identify changes they may need to make in order to develop a more positive outlook about themselves. Additionally, the teacher will be able to provide specific support regarding students’ individual perceptions.

**Student-Teacher Relationships**

Underlying many of these topics is the importance of healthy and productive student-teacher relationships. Positive student-teacher relationships can provide a supportive foundation for academic and personal success for teenagers. Jacqueline Hilary Blackmore (2013) believes that building these personal connections with students will encourage students to participate more in class and take academic risks because they feel cared for by their teachers (p. 2). Blackmore’s research based qualitative study asks teachers’ about their perceptions of students’ academic success following the development of a student-teacher relationship (p. 4). Her study stresses the importance of integrating social, academic, and emotional education together in schools, which all filters down through a positive student-teacher relationship (Blackmore, p. 5). A perceived positive teacher-student relationship also leads to increased self-esteem, linking back to Williams’ and McGee’s study on self-perceptions (Blackmore, p. 6). Blackmore stresses the
difficulty that many teachers face with developing this relationship, however. Many teachers feel pressure to fulfil curriculum requirements and cannot take time to develop personal relationships with students (Blackmore, p. 1). By writing journals, teachers may be able to find more time to write the personal comments when they are not constrained by school hours, instead being able to comment from home. Nevertheless, it is a risk that teachers will find journals too draining on their time as well, so teachers must exercise caution in ensuring that they do not spread themselves too thin and take care of their own mental wellbeing. This research paper will include the importance of student-teacher relationships in investigating teachers’ beliefs about how journals can be used to support students academically and personally.

Conclusion

By answering the question: in what ways do three Ontario public high school English teachers believe assigned journals help students succeed academically and personally? My research paper will combine the various ideas that I have presented here in the literature review with data gained from my participants. Although the research suggests overwhelming support for using journals in schools, none have looked at different teachers’ perceptions of the benefits of journals in terms of the effect they might have on students’ academic success and emotional well being.
Chapter 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss my research methodology for my Master of Teaching Research Project. I begin by discussing my research approach and methods of data collection from my participants. I also introduce my methods of selecting participants as well as provide a brief biography of those I have selected. Following the introduction of my participants, I discuss my methods of analysing the data, ethical procedures, and the strengths and limitations of my research methodology. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a summary and preview of chapter four.

Research Approach and Procedure

In order to answer the question: in what ways do three Ontario public high school English teachers believe assigned journals help students succeed academically and personally? I must engage in a qualitative research with elements of case study methodology. Qualitative research methodology involves a review of the literature, as was conducted in chapter two, as well as a large amount of reflection on the part of the researcher (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). Because my research is largely about the importance of self-reflection through writing, qualitative research methodology ties into my personal interests and research question nicely. For my research project, I reviewed past and current literature on journal writing for students followed by conducting semi-structured interviews with three high school teachers. The case study methodology of qualitative research in particular seemed best suited to this task because I know from my own experience that, in order to understand the benefits of journaling, it is best to look
at a few cases in great depth rather than looking at multiple cases with less depth. Although my research project was limited in size, meaning that I could not engage in a full case study analysis, the case study elements I used still enabled me to hear the personal reflections of the interviewees, which is very important for a research question about reflection and writing. By hearing the personal stories of my participants, I gained a better understanding of the nuances involved in journals that make them such a beneficial tool for adolescents.

My research question as well as my research methodology is very focused on personal responses, both from my participants and myself. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998) explain that qualitative research directly involves researchers who “relish the interplay between themselves and the data” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 5). Strauss and Corbin also stress the importance of researchers using “their own experiences when analysing materials because they realize that these become the foundations for making comparisons and discovering properties and dimensions” (p. 5). Therefore, I have been quite explicit about how my personal experience as a high school student who was assigned a journaling assessment has influenced my interview questions and my literature review. A qualitative approach allows me to use this experience to my advantage rather than try to eliminate or ignore it, as a quantitative study would. Qualitative research methodology encourages researchers to “recognize the tendency toward bias” and use this to inform the study (Strauss & Corbin, p. 7). This particular method also functions on flexibility and a sensitivity to both “the words and actions of the respondents” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 7). As a student of the humanities, I strongly value the subtleties of language, so it is important to me that my research methodology allows me to investigate these nuances in depth. For these reasons, I decided to embrace the case study model.
Instruments of Data Collection

The primary instruments of data collection I use in this study are semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews can be defined as a “conversation with a purpose” (Miles & Gilbert, 2005, p. 65). Jeremy Miles and Paul Gilbert explain that semi-structured interviews allow greater freedom in conversation and “change substantially between participants” (p. 65). Due to the importance of reflection and personal experience involved in my research question, semi-structured interviews are the best form of data collection because of this freedom. In order to accurately assess my participants’ views on journaling, my interviews need to be free flowing so that my participants can take the conversation in the direction that best suits his or her understanding of the assessment practice. One very important aspect of the semi-structured interview is that my participants can lead the conversation in a direction that I potentially missed in my own experiences and literature review, thus giving me greater insight into the topic. As Miles and Gilbert explain, these types of interviews are ideal for answering the question “why” instead of more statistical questions such as “how much” or “how many,” making them ideal for a qualitative research study in the field of humanities education (p. 66).

Due to the nature of my topic, which stresses the value of reflective writing, it seems counter intuitive to force my participants to meet me face-to-face. Instead, I will give teachers the option to either engage in a written interview through email, or to meet me in person while I record their responses using my phone and laptop computer. All participants will be given the opportunity to read their transcribed interviews and have the chance to reflect on this or add additional information through email. Participants may also request a follow up face-to-face interview if they desire.
My interviews began with some simple questions about my participants’ teaching experience in order to establish rapport before moving on to the set topic of journaling exercises for high school students. Some of my earlier questions include: *How many years have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching at this school, and is there anything about this school that makes your teaching experience unique? What made you decide to become a high school teacher?* These questions are also heavily focused on biographical details of my participants, which allows me to provide brief biographies within my research paper. After these biographical questions, I began asking about my participants’ personal experiences with journal writing, their definitions of journaling, and whether they have any theoretical knowledge that has informed their use journals for adolescent students. Andreas Witzel explains that one of the difficulties of interviewing participants in a case study is balancing one’s own theoretical knowledge of the topic with the participants’ own experiences (Witzel, 2000, p. 5). Witzel suggests always making it clear that the interviewee is the expert on the subject so that they become increasingly confident in their own views as the interview is conducted (p. 5). Therefore, it is important that I minimize my own explicit knowledge of the subject in order to get the most honest answers from my participants. I did this by using encouraging body language and asking follow up questions based on my participants’ answers to my questions.

**Participants**

In this section, I introduce my methods of selecting participants through specific criteria as well as how I recruited my participants. I also included brief biographies of my participants based on the initial information gathered during my interviews.
1. Sampling Criteria

In selecting my participants for this research study, I had certain criteria that needed to be met. These include:

- A minimum of 3 years of teaching experience
- Must teach high school students, preferably with the majority of classes in the English department
- Must have assigned journals in their class for all students at least once

Each of my criteria is chosen in order to gain the most knowledge about my topic. Teachers need to have a minimum of three years of experience because my participants must be able to make comparisons between their years of teaching when they have and have not used journals for their classrooms. While it is possible that teachers with only two years of experience are able to make this comparison, it is more likely that teachers with three years of experience have been able to compare their classes. Furthermore, the first year of teaching is often one of trial and error, which may alter the how the students have responded to journals if the teacher used journals in their first year of teaching. Therefore, my data will be more reliable if teachers are not basing their answers solely on their experiences in their initial year of teaching.

My participants must also be teaching high school students rather than elementary students. Journals are more commonly assigned to elementary students than high school students, and I am particularly interested in the topic of journals for the adolescent stage of development. Within my research project, I hope to understand why journaling is a useful tool not just for elementary students, but for teenagers, so it is important that my participants are knowledgeable about this age group in particular. I also wanted to ensure that I interview teachers who use journals for English classes in particular in order to discuss possible connections to Reader
Response theory, literature, and reflections inspired by narratives. It would be most helpful to talk to English teachers, as they would have some knowledge of Reader Response theory already and have a greater understanding of the cathartic aspect of reflective writing.

Finally, my participants must have assigned journals to their entire class at least once. Some teachers may use journals only for particular students as an alternative or extra credit assignment. While this may lead to some insightful discussions, I am interested in discussing how various different types of students have responded to the journaling assignment. I also intend to discuss how different learners have benefitted from journaling in unique ways. I will not be able to ask these questions if the teacher has not used journals as an exercise for the entire class and has been able to compare how students who are strong or weak writers, or male and female, have responded to the task.

2. Sampling Procedures and Recruitment

As discussed by Michelle Byrne (2001), all qualitative sampling must start with a focus established through the purpose of the study, which will inform the sampling methods (p. 494). For a more in depth study, it would be important to use maximum variation sampling, which would allow me to better generalize the findings because it would include participants who are experts in different subject areas, participants of different genders, ages, and racial groups, as well as including different schools and districts (Byrne, p. 497). Creswell outlines various different types of sampling, but for the purpose of this study I have used criterion convenient sampling (p. 158). Convenience sampling offers the least amount of generalized results, but due to the limited amount of time for this study, it is the most logical way of gaining participants early enough that I will be able to complete my study before the deadline established by my program (Creswell, p. 158). I decided that I would only use more more purposeful sampling if I
had more than 3 participants volunteer to be interviewed. In this event, I would have been able to ensure more variation based sampling (Creswell, p. 158). However, this was not the case as I only had 3 people volunteer to be participants in this study through convenience sampling.

In order to recruit my participants using convenience sampling, I relied on existing contacts and networks first and foremost. I have connections within Toronto as well as Ottawa and the surrounding area, which allowed me to search for teachers who met my sampling criteria established previously. I also have connections through my peers at OISE, and therefore asked my peers and professors if they knew of any teachers who met my criteria. I also looked for professional development workshops that related to my topic so that I could locate ideal participants. In every instance, I provided my own information rather than requesting contact information of teachers in order to abide by ethical procedures and to ensure that none of my participants felt pressured to take part in my study. Ultimately, using these methods I was able to find willing participants who volunteered their time to allow me to interview them regarding the topic of journals.

3. Participant Biographies

I conducted three interviews for this project and provided them with literary pseudonyms from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

*Daisy*

The first teacher I interviewed, Daisy, is a high school English and history teacher in a downtown Toronto school. Daisy has been a teacher for 5 years at this school, and is a graduate of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) Master of Teaching program. Daisy is still working on Long Term Occasional contracts rather than permanent contracts. However, she has been called back every year to the same school, which speaks to her expertise and abilities as
an educator. Daisy has taught English and drama at various different grades and levels, but this year she is mostly working with grade 9 and 10 students. Daisy has additional qualifications in special education and English as a Second Language students, which is important because the school itself has a high population of ESL students. She developed a passion for working with underprivileged youth at an early age and particularly enjoys making connections with teenagers.

**Myrtle**

My second teacher, Myrtle, is also a graduate of OISE and has 12 years of teaching experience at the high school level. She has experience in both private and public schools, and has been a permanent public school teacher in Toronto since 2006. She has experience in a variety of subjects within the humanities. Her current school has very low literacy levels, has a high percentage of students from a low socio-economic background, and has a poor pass rate for the OSSLT. The school is also very diverse, with a high number of African-Canadian students (70%). Two thirds of the school are also considered high needs or at risk students. Myrtle opted to do a written interview with me rather than a face-to-face interview.

**Nick**

My third teacher, Nick, teaches in a rural high school. He has been teaching for around 18 years, and has been at the same school for 15 years. The school’s population is not overly motivated, and many students go directly into the workplace rather than to college or university. The school also has a poor pass rate for the OSSLT in comparison to the rest of the province, and has a high population of students in the Locally Developed stream. The school does not have much diversity in terms of racial background, and has a very small ESL population. Nick also opted to do a written interview with me.
Data Collection and Analysis

After conducting my interviews, which I recorded using GarageBand and Audio Memos or through Google Docs if written, I transcribed them myself. After transcribing the interviews, I coded them each individually after reading through them one or two times first. I based my coding on my research questions and my literature review using different coloured highlighting and marginal notations. As I coded, I also added further codes based on the interview itself that were not located within my literature review draft. I colour coded these key words based on where I saw connections between codes, and then used these connections to come up with general themes. I used coding to “winnow” down the data into useable chunks, as described by Creswell (p. 184). I also used charts and tables to organize my data in a way that allowed me to draw findings from it in a logical manner. I highlighted the most important quotations and began identifying themes within the individual interviews by making personal notes as I read through my transcripts. After collecting the themes, I consolidated them into categories so that I can use information gathered during the literature review process to establish my own findings based on my qualitative case studies. This method helped me find patterns both within the interview itself as well as between the interview and my literature review (Creswell, p. 199). I also paid special attention to null data. What my participants did not discuss in my interviews was as important as what they did say, and I used my literature review to find meaning behind what was missing in my transcripts.

Ethical Review Procedures

During all stages of my research study, I followed the approved ethical review procedures established by the Master of Teaching program. Participants each signed a copy of my consent
letter prior to beginning their interviews (Appendix A). My letter provides an overview of the study, addresses ethical aspects, and outlines the expectations of participation: a written or recorded interview. During the interview, my participants will be able to refrain from answering any question and will have the right to withdraw from the study or interview at any time. My study involves minimal risks, as it is possible that some of my questions may result in an emotional response by my interviewee, which may make them feel vulnerable and uncomfortable. This risk is present in any study, as all interviews involve a “human interaction in the interview [that] affects the interviewees, and the knowledge produced by an interview inquiry affects our understanding of the human condition” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 62). While this interaction can be extremely beneficial to both parties, it necessarily involves risk as well. In order to minimize this risk, I will remind them of their right to withdraw or refrain from answering questions throughout the interview. Creswell also discusses the hierarchical concerns between the interviewer and the interviewee, which can be addressed by being aware of how my body language is presented and how I understand my interviewee’s body language (p. 60). I will evaluate my interviewee’s comfort level throughout the interview to maintain an ethical interaction.

Following the interview, the audio was transferred from my password protected phone to my password protected laptop. I transcribed the interviews in a password protected document, and all copies will be destroyed after 5 years. After I have finished transcribing the interviews, my participants will have the opportunity to review them upon request as well as clarify or retract and statements they made before I conduct the data analysis stage of the research study. They will also have the opportunity to provide a follow up reflection of the interview if they wish. After analysing the data and writing about my findings, I only referred to my participants by
pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity and withdrew any identifying markers relating to their identities, schools, or students.

**Methodological Strengths and Limitations**

One of the strengths of this study is its attention to teachers’ experiences. Mary Beth Llorens explains that few teachers “conceive of research as the appropriate tool to address their personal classroom concerns. Some teachers thought that these were not the questions that real research was meant to address and inform” (Llorens, 1994, p. 5). This may be because many educational studies focus on the students alone, but my study gives a voice to what teachers see and experience in their classrooms, while also reflecting on what they see in their students based on their own practice. My participants will also have access to my research and literature review, helping them to see how research can enlighten real teaching practice. Furthermore, by interviewing a few teachers for up to an hour using a semi-structured format, I am able to gain more depth than I would have if I had asked multiple teachers to respond in a survey format.

Another strength of this study is the benefit it provides to teachers themselves. By interviewing my participants and asking them questions about their experiences with journaling exercises, my participants will have an opportunity to be reflective and think carefully about the theory behind their practice. This time to reflect may in turn alter their way of teaching in a way that benefits their students because it is performed in a more purposeful and informed manner.

Nevertheless, the fact that my study only involves teachers and not students may also be seen as a limitation. Due to the limited amount of time as well as the ethical guidelines established by the Master of Teaching program, it was not possible to interview students who have used journals in their classes. I was also unable to observe classes who write journals during
school hours. Another limitation of my study is the number of teachers I was able to interview. Due to my geographical location and limited network of connections, I was not able to draw on a large group of teachers to interview. I also did not have much time to interview and produce findings for my study, which meant that I had to limit the number or participants I included. Due to this small number of participants and my reliance on convenience sampling, my findings cannot be generalized to the experience of teachers more broadly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an overview of my methodology, which includes the use of semi-structured interviews in a qualitative case study. I provided some information on my participants, including how I selected my interviewees using specific criteria, how I found my participants, and a brief biography of my selected teachers. I also explained my data collection process as well as how I analysed the data after the interview process was over. I explained some potential limitations and strengths of this methodology and reviewed some of the ethical procedures taken during this study relating to my methodology. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings of this research paper.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter summarizes and analyses the data I have collected from my three participants about journaling in the high school English classroom. I have organized my findings into themes rather than by participant, as there were several patterns found when coding my three interviews. I have chosen to focus on five themes that emerged from my data: Theoretical Influences, Emotional Benefits, Structural Influences, Teaching and Administrative Influences, and Student Influences. Within each theme, I look at how my three participants responded and where they converge and differ in their opinions.

Theoretical Influences

When I began thinking about this study, one of the first things I looked at was the theory behind journal writing, thinking about writing theory, literacy, and Reader Response literary theory in particular. It is my bias as a current student invested in studies in education that my participants would have an understanding of these theories or other theories that influence their decision. In reality, the teachers I interviewed were not consciously aware of how these theories influenced the way they chose to use journals in the classroom. Nevertheless, these theories were relevant and evident in the way that the teachers described why they use journals. Their answers strengthened the arguments of these theories in relation to journals, therefore, because my participants discussed the theoretical approaches without being aware that they were even doing it.
1. Literacy and Writing Theory

Daisy is the participant who most recently graduated from university and had graduated from the Master of Teaching program itself, so it makes sense that she was the most aware of how theory impacts her teacher practice, as it is still fairly fresh in her mind. She had graduated from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) only five years ago and has continued to work with theory, as she is interested in returning to graduate work at a later date.

Daisy’s school has a high population of ESL students, which has impacted her perspective of literacy theory. As I have discussed in chapter two, one of the theories about literacy is that it is a method of expressing self through the use of signs. The goal is not to create homogenous speakers and writers, but rather to allow students to develop an authentic and authoritative voice. Daisy notes that this concept is sometimes in conflict with what she calls the “old ESL philosophy” that enforces strict rules about only using the English language in the classroom. Daisy prefers to allow students to work with their own language as well as English as a form of collaborative literacy. Although she did not refer to this as theory, it has a clear impact on her decision to prioritize journal writing and general writing activities in her classroom. Daisy also considers writing to be a social process; a key part of literacy theory. At the beginning of the year, she writes a letter to her students about what she did over the summer holidays, and then she asks the students to write her a letter back. Within her initial letter, she asks students questions in a way that mimics the way people communicate, whether online, in person, or through long distance letters. The students respond to these questions in writing, and often ask her questions in return when they write their letters back to her. In turn, Daisy writes answers to these questions in her written commentary—all three of my participants engaged in a written dialogue with students in this way. Starting the year in this way establishes writing as a social,
shared experience. Students also begin the year with a task that immediately asks them to identify themselves through language. Similar to the way that people identify themselves by the clothes they wear, their make-up, or their hair-style, students must choose their language carefully in order to best express their real selves to their new teacher. Again, this is not backed up by an explicit knowledge of literacy theory, but nonetheless puts the theory into practice.

Similarly, Myrtle views writing journals as important because of the role of identity in writing, which is part of literacy theory. She notes that, even though her school is not particularly academically focused and has a very poor pass rate for the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, all of her students “will one day be writers in a professional capacity or just write a personal blog or social media account. They will have to respond to the world through written communication.” Myrtle’s idea seems to be focused on the idea that literacy is an expression of self. Furthermore, she is arguing that every student needs to practice writing no matter what path they choose to follow in life. Using this concept, it makes sense that journals would be the medium of choice for developing writers because they rely directly on self-expressions. Students are required to write their opinions for an audience in a way that the audience can understand. This requirement necessarily means that students need to write with a voice of authority, while still allowing for an individual and personal voice. The freedom to use personal voice is key both for the social aspect of writing and the idea that literacy is not meant to create homogeneity. At the same time, Myrtle’s emphasis on the importance of writing reflects the fact that standard English is the language of power, and therefore it is important to teach students that how they express themselves in writing has a huge impact on how other people will interpret their identities. Journaling about themselves in such an explicit is therefore a good exercise to get students to practice developing voice while simultaneously creating authority and identity for
themselves. Although journaling is not typically considered to be “useful” or “important” writing in terms of literacy skill development, Myrtle notes that “The more a student is exposed to and enabled to write in all forms, the more the writing process for other works is helped.” For all of my participants, this seemed to be the key relationship between literacy and journal writing in the high school English classroom.

Nick approaches literacy theory and journaling in a slightly different way, though still centering on the social aspect of the theory. Like the other teachers, Nick engages in a written dialogue with his students. While Daisy writes a letter to her students and then gets them to write a letter back, Nick encourages his students to write an interview with themselves. The students pick the questions that they would like to be asked, and then they respond. This creates a social dialogue within the individual student, while still focusing on the fact that literacy is about identity-creation. Nick uses quotations to express the purpose behind his journaling assignments, including this quotation from Flannery O’Connor: “I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.” This idea echoes the idea that writing is about identity, but Nick’s conception is unique in that it emphasizes the social interaction that occurs internally within students when they write. Literacy is an expression of self, but writing specifically becomes a process of self-discovery in a way that is different than merely speaking. The writing process naturally lends authority to identity in its permanence.

Given the importance that all of my participants have placed on the written word and the benefits that journal writing provides in terms of literacy development, it also makes sense that poor literacy skills can be a hindrance to journal writing. Both Nick and Daisy note that this is not so much an issue of access, however, but rather an issue of students’ internalization of their own writing skills. Students who have poor writing skills often resist the concept of the journal
initially because they perceive themselves to be bad writers who therefore do not enjoy writing. Nevertheless, once these students begin writing and embrace the process, my participants found that they receive the same benefits as do those with strong writing skills. The difficulty therefore lies not in the writing itself, but in somehow convincing the student to take risks. This task is particularly difficult for Daisy because of the high ESL population, as she notes that there is a learning curve where students need to develop the vocabulary and understand the task before they can actually engage in it and see benefits from it. Furthermore, the students who recently immigrated to Canada often struggle with the social aspect of literacy because they do not always understand the cultural references and language jokes that are usually very cultural-based. Not understanding these social aspects of language can sometimes lead students to withdraw further and avoid written interactions, which only serves to mitigate the problem. Therefore, literacy can sometimes be seen as a barricade to journaling, so the assignment needs to be done carefully in order to avoid ostracizing students and making them feel as though they cannot access a social identity rather than encouraging them to create one.

2. **Reader Response Theory**

While my three participants did not refer to specific aspects of literacy or writing theory, their answers reflected a clear understanding of the theory and influenced their work anyway. The same is true of Reader Response theory. In my own understanding of journal writing in the classroom, I also see Reader Response theory as a key aspect of why the journals work particularly well in the secondary level English classroom in literature studies. However, my participants did not seem very aware of how this particular theory and journaling intersect. Nevertheless, all three of my participants’ responses reflected a clear connection between the theory and their practice despite not having an explicit understanding of where they intersect.
Perhaps the clearest connection between Reader Response and journal writing is found in Daisy’s particular journal assignment. Daisy gets her students to read Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and then write their own journal following the same outline and format as the main character in the book. In effect, they are tasked with writing diaries that reflects their own “absolutely true” identities. Similarly, the idea behind Reader Response is almost entirely focused on the concept of identity, arguing that readers create textual meaning through their own identity and understanding of self and their lived experiences.

Daisy recounts one story of a student who decided to write “The Absolutely True Diary of a Kid with Asperger’s,” echoing the novel he had just read but using it to reflect his own identity. It is clear from his decision to write about the topic that he was using his own identity as an outsider and someone that people label in order to make meaning out of the novel itself. Being able to write his story in the journal fosters that understanding and legitimizes using personal experience and identity in order to understand literature. It also connects to the social aspect of journaling and literacy theory, as he clearly had a deep interpersonal connection with Daisy in order to feel comfortable sharing his “absolutely true” self with her. Daisy further notes that a lot of the journal writing tasks she assigns are about identity, which really works for secondary classrooms because adolescence is a period of identity-seeking. Combining Nick’s idea of developing an understanding of self through the act of writing with Daisy’s emphasis on identity, it is clear that writing down stories will help in the understanding of literature using the lens of Reader Response. She notes that she emphasizes “making connections” as a way of beginning literary analysis, which incorporates the question: “how does my experience compare to the character’s experience?” Journal activities are a prime opportunity to allow students to explore
their own experiences prior to reading a text so that they have something concrete in mind to refer to when they are asked to connect to the text.

Journaling can also be a good way of determining students’ interests and learning about their identities to determine what kinds of stories they are going to be able to connect to through the reading of their identities they create in their journals. Daisy chose *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* in part because she recognized that many of the students in her applied class consider themselves to be outsiders and labelled as the “stupid kids” in the school. The main character reflects this sense of being labelled by others, and many of the students did focus on this in their own interpretations of the text. They used ideas from their own identities, which they further explored and developed in their journals, in order to connect to the text. She finds that writing and reading are deeply connected in this way throughout her course, and using that to inform her teaching choices further develops that bond and naturally encourages Reader Response theory, even when not explicitly taught.

Myrtle also uses journals as a place to explore literature and reflect on it personally. The journals provide a safe place to explore personal connections to the text without necessarily having to worry about following all of the rules of literary study. This safe space also encourages reading literature through the lens of Reader Response, but it is used as a jumping off point in this case for a deeper analysis later on. Myrtle refers to these kinds of journals as a “backdrop” or a space for brainstorming that begins with a focus on the reader rather than a focus on the text. Nick also views the journal as this kind of safe space for processing ideas, and hopes not to read the journals as a teacher so much as a “fellow human being.” This concept fosters the idea of the journal as a space for exploring rather than a space of judgement, which again naturally encourages students to write about a personal connection to texts rather than a formal one. Nick
also considers this to be a life long skill that is more important than formal literary analysis because it is the process that teaches students how to connect to texts that lasts, not the product. He further connects this concept to the Flannery O’Connor quotation he uses as the inspiration to his journaling assignment. While he denies using reader response theory as a guide to his use of journals explicitly, it nonetheless underlies his own personal theories about why journals are useful for students. All three of my participants also focused on identity specifically, and as identity is the key that grounds Reader Response theory, the journaling process is inevitably helpful for this kind of literary analysis.

**Emotional Benefits**

Although my participants were not explicit about the connection between theory and practice in regards to theory, they were very aware of the emotional benefits of journals and how that influences their implementation in the classroom. For Daisy and Nick, this understanding of the emotional benefits of journaling comes from their own experiences of writing therapeutically as well as their general understanding of what it means to be an adolescent. Both of them had kept a journal as children and therefore had first hand experience with the emotional benefits that writing provided for them.

Daisy grew up in a high-risk area for students and started working with adolescents at an early age. Her focus was on transitioning from school into the outside world and building up general life skills. Her focus on developing the necessities to survive in the outside environment reflects itself in her emphasis on using journals as a way to develop a positive student-teacher bond. Daisy also particularly enjoys working with students who have behavioural challenges or exceptionalities, and chooses to focus on relationships with these students rather than purely the
academic side of teaching. Daisy is also very focused on ways to build up the confidence of English as a Second Language students because of the high population at her school. For all of these types of students, the most important thing for Daisy is creating effective interpersonal relationships that helps the student to build self-confidence rather than feel negatively about themselves. Until the students feel self-confidence, the rest of the skills learned in English class do not become very useful.

In order to build this self-confidence, Daisy ensures that she respects students’ stories and their backgrounds. For her ESL students, this involves allowing them to share their first language with her through writing exercises and journals, where students write in their language on one side and write in English on the other side, addressing cultural differences. This is similar to the method favoured by the Manitoba Ministry of Education that I introduced in chapter two. All journals validate student voice, but this particular emphasis on language and cultural difference validates student voices that are not typically seen as “dominant” or even appropriate inside the English classroom. This validation goes a long way in creating a bond that helps students to feel safe and confident at Daisy’s school.

Students also learn academic skills through the emotionally beneficial process of journaling in terms of literacy. Daisy notes that, for grade nines in particular, students tend to be very stressed about the literacy test. Students worry about what to write and how they will possibly write an essay in the short time period allowed. Daisy likes to give these students brief, five-minute writing tasks in order to show them how easily they can get a paragraph written in a short span of time, which helps to build their confidence in their ability to write under pressure. This task only works based on a feeling of trust and respect developed over time with the teacher. One method of doing this is through a shared sense of giving. Daisy and Nick in particular
emphasize the importance of sharing their own stories before asking students about their stories. How much one is willing to share with students is a deeply personal choice, and it is up to the individual teacher to determine how and what they share. For example, while Daisy is happy to share a letter with her students about what she did over the summer, her teacher candidate was shocked at how personal it was and explained that she would never share that with students. This contrast in opinions reveals journaling to be a very personal activity that can not be prescriptive. If a teacher is uncomfortable with the task, it would be unwise to ask students to share personal stories as it creates a classroom of hypocrisy. Comfort in sharing should also not be “faked,” as students can easily identify when a teacher is being honest or genuine. Therefore, trying to use journals without taking risks yourself can actually backfire and harm the student-teacher relationship rather than foster it.

For more difficult students, the journal can become a place to build rapport if the teacher is willing to give and take with the student rather than just expecting the student to give. Students are used to writing assignments for teachers, but it can change the dynamic when students also see that their teacher is producing work for them as well. This is especially true when a teacher replies to a question that a student asks in a journal. This simple action reverses the typical student-teacher exchange, which can go a long way in building a working relationship with a student that can be used in other situations to encourage them to write an assignment.

Both Nick and Daisy consider the journal to be a place for exploring identity. Nick also uses a quotation to explain this part of his journal philosophy: “The unexamined life is not worth living,” from Socrates. He believes that journals are particularly effective because everyone has a story to tell, and the teacher is in an ideal position to listen to these stories. This relationship becomes the key to building an effective and meaningful interpersonal bond that benefits the
student in terms of self worth and mental health. Nick says that he often reads journals that centre on student stress and personal issues, and in return he encourages these students to “live in the present,” as many students “get caught up in either the past or the future (and often both) so I do try to redirect their focus to the now.” The decision to get students focusing on their present can help with mental health issues and encourage students to reflect positively, moving on from events that caused them stress or grief in the past. He also notes that it “is a big deal for a teenager (or any individual) to write openly to a teacher (another person) and I never underestimate the bravery and courage a writer takes to share their life with me.” The fact that Nick uses the word “writer” to describe his students in this context speaks volumes about the emotional benefits of the journaling relationship. Student voices are validated and their stories are looked at as legitimate pieces of writing rather than just as an assignment. This attitude is put into action in the way that Nick responds to student writing and encourages them to believe in their own voices. Nick explains that he never uses journals as a place to correct writing, but rather comments to say “yes, I hear what you are saying.” This type of comment encourages students to open up to him more, which in turn furthers the student-teacher relationship.

The growth of identity occurs in part because students recognize through the journaling process that their voice matters in the classroom, and therefore they need to learn how to develop and express that voice. Daisy notes that this functions as a kind of restorative process for some students, which is more important than the academic side of the writing. It also needs to happen first, before any academic work can truly be achieved. Self-discovery and forming an identity is very important in improving mental health, and Daisy connects this explicitly to anti-discriminatory education. Students learn about identity creation through the experience of journaling, which may help them understand other people more now that they have had time to
explore the self in detail. This is especially true of Daisy’s student with Asperger’s and the applied students who feel that they are outsiders in a school. Writing can often help them understand their relationships to other people, and experience something positive when they share their true identity with a teacher and build a good relationship with another human being as a reward. For students who have considered themselves too “stupid” to write and resist writing, the journal process can also prevent them from constantly putting themselves down by claiming “I can’t do it.” Both Nick and Daisy referred to resistant writers and how extreme the benefits can be for these individuals in particular when they see that they can write and share with another person. It is well worth it to push these students in particular to try the journal activity, even though it is especially hard work to get them to start. Resistance is the biggest barrier to journaling benefits that both Daisy and Nick identified.

In contrast to Nick and Daisy’s approach, Myrtle takes on a decidedly more independent method of using journals in the classroom. Although she uses personal journals just like the other teachers, she does not read all journals and does not provide extensive comments on those she does read, as she feels this can stifle the process. If the teacher comments a lot, the student starts to write for the teacher rather than for themselves. Therefore, in order to get students to realize the benefits of metacognition, she encourages self-discovery through writing without much teacher input. In this way, the love of writing will grow more organically and the benefits will continue even after the audience of the teacher is gone. She also hopes that this method will help the more resistant writers, as students will truly recognize that writing mechanics do not matter in this process if their teacher is not reading it. Nevertheless, she also recognizes the value in reading the occasional journal and having that one-on-one written conversation with a student, and she views this as a trust-building exercise. She will often stick to light-hearted topics for
these conversations so as not to push students beyond their comfort level in regards to what kinds of things they are willing to share. She asks for more depth later on, but again, she is not necessarily going to read these—the depth is for the student’s own benefit only. She also models by writing about topics similar to the students.

1. Ethical Concerns

Although my participants noted clear emotional benefits as a result of journaling, they also acknowledged the ethical concerns associated with this kind of task, especially as journaling is so focused on student-teacher relationships. This was not really a concern for Myrtle, as she has a more distant approach to the journals and asks for less personal responses. For Daisy and Nick, however, who discussed the role of risk-taking and the importance of honesty in communicating, this does bring up some ethical concerns in terms of the teacher’s role in the classroom. Daisy openly states that the journals are not just a place to build literacy skills, but are also a space for students to work through issues and talk about personal things happening in their lives that they would like to share. She makes it clear to her students that she will be reading whatever they submit in detail. This is a way to remind students that she is maintaining a teacher role, which may impact what students decide to write about. While some students have a good sense of the boundaries or what they can and cannot write to their teachers about, other students go too far and write about things that teachers would feel uncomfortable with. This becomes a concern of professionalism for the teacher, who needs to choose how to engage with the issues in an appropriate manner. There is a balancing act between honesty and appropriateness, but Daisy only addresses this issue explicitly if an issue arises rather than talking about it before asking students to write. It makes sense not to bring it up first in case students self-edit too much and therefore do not gain the true benefits of journaling.
There is also a concern with privacy and trust that the teacher is not going to share what the students have written. Because journals are so much a product of shared trust between the student and teacher, any breech of trust in terms of who reads the journals can harm the relationship beyond repair. This becomes a big concern for students who share things that the teacher has a duty to report. Daisy recounted stories of times when her students would write about very dark things, but when discussing these with the student, it becomes clear that it is just a creative technique. One of the ways that Daisy minimizes the issue of honesty for students is by allowing them to be creative in their journals if they are uncomfortable with being upfront about their personal lives. Students can talk about issues through other characters or examples in this way, and they still get the benefit of sharing something with the teacher and the validation of writer voice that Nick values. None of my participants have ever had to report on a student or break the trust of a student by sharing a journal entry with someone else. This seems to have more to do with personal choice rather than any hard and fast rules, however. Myrtle notes that her colleague once had to submit a journal to the administrative staff because it was “overtly violent and misogynistic.” Again, it appears to come down to individual teacher comfort levels with what they accept students to share with them. What one teacher finds appropriate, another teacher may view as unacceptable. Only things such as suicide or abuse come with hard and fast rules. Reminding students of this duty to report may be useful, but most high school students are well aware of this fact. My participants believe the benefits outweigh the risks and consequences that journal writing brings to the classroom.

**Structural Influences**

Before students and teachers are able to realize the benefits of journals, they must find a way to integrate them into the curriculum. The grade level and subject, and even the literature
that students are studying can influence the kinds of journals that teachers assign. This decision will in turn have an impact on what kinds of benefits the journal provides.

Daisy likes to structure her journaling assignments around literature, but in the beginning of her course the assignments are more independent. The letter at the beginning of the year, for example, is not connected to the curriculum. Nevertheless, the emphasis on identity is a theme that runs throughout the grade nine course. The letter therefore provides some structure to the course and helps tie things together for the students. This structure is especially important for grade nine students who will need to adjust to the high school experience.

Following the initial letter, Daisy often uses free-writing exercises to begin the year. This type of journal is unique because it does not allow for much time to think. Instead, students are given a topic and have to write immediately. This type of writing benefits her resistant writers who often complain that they have nothing to write about. By not allowing time to think, students are put on a level playing field so that the exercise is not about what you say, but how you say it. For students who do not see themselves as writers, this exercise is helpful because writing style does not matter. Free-writing serves to get students’ thoughts onto paper as they come, with no attention to style or sentence structure. Again, this helps all students to start from the same point. It does not matter if you are a “good” writer or a “poor” writer—the exercise is only about transferring what is on students’ minds onto the page.

This type of writing exercise has both benefits and challenges for ESL students. For students who struggle to choose the right word for what they are feeling or trying to express, the exercise can become quite frustrating. However, Daisy is not strict about the use of English in the class, so ESL students could use a word from their own language in place of the English one. For both ESL students and struggling writers, this exercise can serve to boost confidence. For
students who claim that they cannot write a whole paragraph, the fast pace of free-writing can emphasize what is possible. Having this type of writing at the beginning of the year is helpful for setting the tone of the class and encouraging students to take risks and trust in themselves. These skills become important for the other journaling assignments later in the term.

As students begin to discuss literature, Daisy uses prompts to get students to reflect personally and make connections to the text. Again, Daisy finds this especially beneficial for ESL students in order to learn about cultural references. By asking students to connect to a text personally and emphasizing the cultural aspects, students can write about their own identity. At the same time, it also helps recently immigrated students understand Canadian culture and can build a relationship between student and teacher through shared experiences. When students discuss their own culture in comparison to the literature, they share a part of their identity with the teacher. Having this experience validated can help the student feel connected to their teacher.

Daisy also uses a book of journal prompts, *642 Things to Write About*, in order to encourage students to get into a class routine. Daisy likes to have students come into the class and know that they will be writing something that day. The journal prompts are often fun and short exercises in order to get students thinking positively about writing. One of the goals of assigning these prompts is to get them “convinced” into reading and writing instead of experiencing writer’s block. This helps to get students motivated and ready for the main journaling task of Daisy’s class, which is directly connected to literature. The students write 10 journals, one for each chapter chosen by the student of Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. This novel also includes lots of illustrations, so Daisy allows her students to use this fictional journal as a model. Students are able to write and draw, which allows for some natural, student-driven differentiated instruction. Daisy also gets the students to read Sean Covey’s *The 7
Habits of Highly Effective Teens. This book helps students with creative and reflective writing. Students have to write about habits they have that they like and dislike, again making connections to what they read as a jumping off point for their own writing. These are high interest texts specifically chosen for her students because of their readability and relevance to grade nines.

In order to maximize the benefits of these journals, the way they are marked is very important. Despite the fact that her journals are directly linked to literature, Daisy never marks it with a “reading rubric” even though she is asking students to connect to the text. At the same time, both texts are used to scaffold the writing process, and students need to understand the book in order to write. Instead, Daisy assesses how students visualize the drawings and connect them to their own stories. She also assesses if the students have fully explained themselves as a writing skill that is transferable to more literary writing. Daisy tries to make the journals as independent of literature skills as possible because she finds that, as the year progresses, it is difficult to separate writing from reading comprehension in the English classroom. For students who struggle with comprehension, the English course can sometimes be a disservice because students are marked poorly even if the writing is well done. With the journals, Daisy tries not to mark students down for comprehension issues so that these types of students can have a writing mark independent of the literature.

Above all, Daisy stresses that she is not rigid in her use of journals. The students and the time have an impact on what works or does not work in the classroom, so while her journals may work well for her students this year, this may not always be the case. She is willing to change her assessment practices and assignments to suit the students she has before her. In this way, her assignments do not become dated. She is even willing to part from journaling altogether if it no longer provides benefits for the students, so she is consistently reflecting on her practice.
Myrtle’s journal assignments are similar to Daisy’s initial journals. The journals are rarely the final product for students, but instead act as a brainstorming space for later products. Like Daisy, she also uses them to establish class routine and as a “minds on” activity. They are also often connected to literacy, especially in the intermediate grades in order to prepare them for the Ontario literacy test. For her senior classes, the journal functions more independently so that students can develop the skills of brainstorming and further developing ideas in writing as a pre-writing exercise for essays.

Myrtle does not like to read all of the journals because she perceives a lot of shame associated with writing. Students become very self-conscious about how they write, so students get more benefit from the writing process if they do not have an audience and instead know that they are only doing it for themselves. Myrtle explains that this encourages “participation rather than perfection so as to get the juices flowing and worry about the mechanics later.” This process is especially useful for students with low literacy. By writing their ideas first, they develop a more authentic voice because they are not trying to write their ideas and write formally at the same time. Instead, the process can be divided up into two steps in order to make it easier for the students. Despite this fact, many students still become frustrated initially when faced with a blank page. It takes a lot of time to build the skills, and it is important for the teacher to be persistent until the students adjust to the journaling process. Students may not see the benefits for a few weeks when the journals are initially introduced. When Myrtle does read journals, she does not edit much, but instead saves this for polished pieces. If the teacher edits the journals, which are meant to be the students’ space, the students will again go back to being too self-conscious about their writing skills, which ruins the process and undermines the benefits.
Unlike Myrtle and Daisy, Nick’s journals are usually assigned as homework rather than completed in class. They are sometimes connected to literature, but more often this is to discuss theme rather than explicitly tying the writing to the text. Students are welcome to reflect on literature while writing their journals if they wish, but there is no explicit requirement or even prompt to do this. The journals are meant to be a complete break from structured writing tasks about literature, so he often introduces them half way through the year rather than at the very beginning. Like the others, he does not pay attention to the way students write, but rather what is written in order to validate student voice. Nevertheless, he notes that the more one writes, the more literate one becomes, even if the student is not being graded on writing specifically. There is a natural development of writing when the student trusts the teacher and wants to share with him. In order to express the ideas they wish to share, the student recognizes that the writing must be clear enough for Nick to understand. This ties into Nick’s philosophy that the journals should not be written or assessed with the teacher in mind. Instead, they are meant to be shared from one human being to another, without the power dynamic of student to teacher in mind. Ignoring this dynamic helps students to develop skills they can use later in life when students graduate, as Nick often uses this type of journal in grade twelve. Through self-reflection disconnected from literature and from the strict structured writing that students are used to, students become “more compassionate, self-reflective, and intelligent.” Despite being an English teacher passionate about literature, Nick sees the skill of self-reflection as being far more important than any literary skills he teaches.

Nick only uses journal prompts occasionally for students who struggle with self-reflection in the present. Nick believes that students receive the most benefit from journals when they focus on what is happening in their lives now rather than what has happened in the past or what will
happen in the future. Grade twelve students tend to be especially focused on the future when they write in their journals, so Nick redirects them occasionally to the present. This is usually the only structural support he offers to his students, as he likes the journals to be very self-directed. This method helps to naturally differentiate instruction, as students are free to complete the journaling assignment however they wish, including with pictures, poetry, free-writing, or more structured writing. Nick will only direct students to try something else if he perceives that this would benefit the students—it is very individualized. For the most part, however, he wants the students to write and discover their own style and benefits.

Although the structure varies between all of my participants, the benefits that my participants identified are comparable. At the same time, the benefits are slightly different for each structural choice. There is no way to achieve all the benefits with just one choice, so the best way to maximize benefits is also to maximize structural choices. Trying different types of journals throughout the year may be best for students, but it is important to acknowledge the demand that each journal places on the students as well. Some types of journals require a large amount of risk-taking and trust in the teacher, so it would be unwise to assign this immediately at the beginning of the year. Instead, it is important to develop some trust first in order for the student to feel comfortable with the risks. Journaling assignments are best assigned incrementally so that the structure of the assignments helps students write rather than deters them by asking for too much too soon. The most important structural influence of journals, therefore, is reflective teacher practice. The teacher must reflect on the amount of risk students are taking, what they are willing to share, and the benefits they are getting in return.
Teaching and Administrative Influences

The structure of journals has a big influence on benefits, and the teachers’ own personal choices and administration impacts these structural choices. Both Nick and Daisy wrote journals when they were teenagers, which has an impact on the type of journals that they assign and the benefits they believe journals have for students.

1. Teachers’ Perspectives of Adolescence

The decision to assign journals or not, or any type of personal unstructured writing, is very dependent on how the teacher perceives teenagers. Daisy explains that she has had a lot of experience working with troubled youth and has developed a focus on life skills as a result of her experiences. For Daisy and Nick, the benefits of journaling are part of life skill development. Daisy has worked in community outreach programs in high risk areas, which provides a unique experience that has made Daisy especially interested in helping students with special needs. She also has a very strong belief that mental well being is important for students, and her journaling tasks are meant to reflect this personal value. One way of helping students with their mental health is through building positive interpersonal relationships, which can be achieved through shared journals. The drive to connect with students in meaningful ways is what made Daisy decide to become a teacher, so it makes sense that this emphasis has carried through into her teaching career.

Daisy is often quite open with her students, and is very understanding of when students claim that they are just having a bad day. She acknowledges that on some days, it may be better for students to just sit quietly rather than force them to write. The fact that Daisy allows them to sit quietly reflects a respect for students and a de-emphasis on the power relationship of student
versus teacher. She explains that flexibility is very important to her, and the fact that she includes unstructured writing in her course also reflects that.

Daisy also particularly enjoys watching students grow, and finds that there is always a huge change in grade nine students from the beginning of the year to the end. She believes the journals provide an exploratory space for students and allows Daisy to be a part of the growing process with her students. The drive to help students change also makes her particularly drawn to students with behavioural challenges. She acknowledges that helping these students is frequently frustrating or unsuccessful, but the journals provide a place for her to work on it. She also notes that her practice is continuously changing and that it has taken years to develop the writing routine she has with her classes now. Daisy really enjoys the planning side of teaching and developing a vision for the year. Because Daisy enjoys planning and relies heavily on routine, it makes sense that she also focuses on establishing writing routines for her students as a way of preventing disruptive behaviour at the start of class. This explains why journaling is performed in class, in contrast to Nick’s journals which are assigned outside of class.

All three of my participants noted the importance of metacognition in journal writing. Metacognition is part of every strand in the Ontario English curriculum, but how students and teachers interpret this piece varies widely. For my participants, journal writing seemed like the perfect opportunity to develop metacognitive skills. In this way, they were able to use the curriculum to support the implementation of a unique long-term assignment not found in the curriculum itself. Daisy notes the challenge of maintaining journal writing throughout the whole year when report card time arrives. By explicitly connecting journals to metacognition, it is easier to maintain unstructured writing as part of the course. Nevertheless, it still represents a challenge
because of how limited time is and the number of things one has to accomplish in the span of a semester.

Both Nick and Daisy assign very personal journals and respond in kind with personal details of their own lives. This decision seems to arise out of their obvious respect for teenagers and their dislike of the strict power dynamic between students and teachers. However, they also emphasize that it is a personal choice of how much they are willing to share. They emphasize that this is an individual choice and cannot be decided by an outside source, which may explain the reason that journals are usually not assigned department wide. Because of the personal aspect of journals, they also suggest starting small and not diving right into a big, long term journal assignment until you know what you are willing and unwilling to share with students. This also helps to provide some rules for students, who often find comfort in having a lot of freedom, but tend to like some clear boundaries as well.

Teachers must also decide what they are willing to assign in terms of work load. The journals require a lot of time and commitment to evaluate, so it is important that the teacher believe in the process and the benefits in order to make the time for marking. Because Daisy and Nick enjoy the journaling process so much, neither of them struggle to find time to read journals. Nick notes that reading journals is far more enjoyable than marking essays, and he has never found it difficult to comment on a student’s journals. This fact emphasizes that his priorities are about relationships and life skills more than structured literary writing. Above all, he wants the journals to be a safe space for students to examine the issues that affect their lives, which is what he used his journal for when he himself was 12 years old. He wants to keep the journals personal and informal in an attempt to make the journals as authentic as possible, despite the fact that he as a teacher is still the one assigning them. The connections he makes with students is the most
meaningful part of the journaling process for him. He still recalls specific interactions he had with students throughout the journals and moments when he was able to use information learned through the journals in order to connect with students in other parts of the course. He believes that every student has a story to tell, and he wants to provide the students with a space to share this story. This above all is the goal of his journal assignments.

Myrtle’s journals are more directly linked with other aspects of the curriculum and are less personal overall. This direct tie-in to the rest of the course makes it easier to maintain journal writing through the whole term. They are also purely for formative assessment until students are asked to edit a few entries toward the end of the year, which then act as a summative assessment practice. These decisions reflect Myrtle’s desire to get students to connect personally with the material more than connect personally with her, which provides a different kind of benefit for the students. Her journals are also designed to develop “a love of putting thoughts out there” because she recognizes that general writing is a part of many different careers, while literary analysis and literary-structured writing are only specific to a small number of careers. Myrtle began her education career with more of a focus on history and museum studies. This background creates a focus on developing interest between her students and the work that they are studying rather than just focusing on developing a good relationship between student and teacher. This is what Myrtle is comfortable with, and thus creates an effective journal process because students recognize her comfort and the journals thus function as a safe space for students. In this way, it matters less what form or structure the journals take, and more on what matters to the teacher in order to create an assignment that they are passionate about. Once the teacher is able to express his or her passion through the assignment, students are more willing to try it out. Daisy and Nick note that this still requires the teacher to be persistent, however. This persistence is part of the expression
of the teacher’s passion for the journals, as students see how much their teachers care about the assignment through how much they are willing to push the student to try it out.

2. Administrators’ Impact on Teacher Independence

Of course, the teacher is not working with their students in a vacuum, so they must also acknowledge the impact of the department and the school as a whole on how they incorporate journals. The school environment has a big impact on what individual teachers can and cannot do in their classrooms. Daisy explains that when she first came to her school, she did not use journals because the department is a very collaborative environment. The department head believes that it is very important that all new teachers to the department are given the course outline and binders full of assignments rather than having to make up all of their own work in the first year. Daisy notes that, even if she had not had all of this given to her in her first year, she would be unlikely to assign journals because of the stress of teaching everything in the curriculum. As the years pass, however, the teacher gets a little more freedom and can negotiate what they want to teach. After having been at the same school for a few years, teachers also have fewer people watching them, thus allowing them more freedom to develop their own style. This is also a matter of confidence, as the teacher needs to develop the confidence to teach something on their own that the rest of the department would not necessarily partake in. Teachers become more self-assured and feel less of a need to follow exactly what their department head provides them with.

Daisy also notes that journals are very flexible and therefore can be introduced in ways that align with the department’s requests, while still allowing teachers to use them for their own purposes. For example, if a department says that there can be no creative writing in the course, the journals can provide an outlet for students who want to do creative writing, even though it is
not assigned directly. Using journals to frame the course can also provide teachers with a bit of independence and create a unique teacher persona so that you are not doing exactly the same thing as every other teacher in the department.

Because the department and administration can have such a large impact on what teachers are allowed to assign to their classes, teachers often assign journals when they have more experience. Nick has been in the same English department for fifteen years, and so even though the rest of the department does not use journals, he has complete freedom to use them in his own classroom because the administration and other teachers trust him to teach the curriculum in addition to the journal exercises he assigns. Nick’s seniority may provide him with some additional confidence and explain why he feels so comfortable assigning such personal writing. In contrast, Myrtle has worked in several different schools and does not have a permanent position yet. She is more limited in what she can and cannot do because she is a newcomer to the department, which often means that her assignments must be approved by the department head. This may explain why her journals are less personal and why they function as more of a background support for bigger summative assessments later on. As a formative form of assessment, they are also less likely to be looked at closely by the department head. This is not to say that the journals would be disapproved of, but as they are not directly a part of the curriculum, it is harder to implement them in the initial years of teaching.

In Daisy’s school, the department often comes up with the overall theme of the course together. All teachers are required to follow this theme in their classes, but because journals are so variable and open to interpretation, the journals can be used in almost any way and are adaptable to a variety of different themes. The administration will also sometimes bring in themes or new trends for the department to follow, such as skills based learning. Again, the
journals can usually be adapted to suit many of these themes in order to suit the administrator’s needs while still allowing the teacher freedom to create a safe writing space for students’ unstructured writing.

In terms of the ethical challenges that journals present, teachers do need to be careful that they are not doing anything that their department or administration explicitly tells them not to do. For the most part, this is common sense for teachers, such as duty to report suicidal thoughts or abuse. However, each school is different and teachers need to be aware of their particular school’s rules before implementing journals in order to avoid getting into trouble. Rules about evaluation are especially important, as the teacher cannot break the rules established in the Ontario Ministry’s *Growing Success* document when assessing students’ journals. Maintaining the journals as purely a type of formative assessment may be useful for teachers, therefore, in order to avoid the task backfiring and causing issues rather than developing a good student-teacher relationship. Knowing the school’s general level of comfort with the role of the student-teacher relationship is also beneficial, as some administrators will be more comfortable than others. It is not just about the teacher’s comfort with how much personal information to share, therefore. The general opinion of the school or even the community is also important. While there are concrete boundaries established for the student-teacher relationship, other aspects are more blurred, so the teacher must be careful not to overstep in the relationship and always maintain professionalism. Again, this is something that has to be developed over time, which may prevent teachers from using journals in the initial years of their career until they have established their own personal set of guidelines informed by their school and fellow teachers.
Student Influences

As with any teaching tool, journals will work best for certain students, but not all students. Each of my participants had a unique student body at their school that has an impact on what kinds of benefits the journals will hold for students. As with all assignment practices, differentiation or universal design needs to take place in order to benefit as many students as possible. There are also opportunities for scaffolding or accommodations that can be made for students in order to help them with the journaling process.

Daisy’s student body is primarily in ESL and junior applied grades, as this is the group of students that she most enjoys working with. As these students typically have low literacy, asking them to write journals may not be very beneficial if they are given with no additional guidance. This is why she usually starts with smaller writing tasks and works up to a bigger journaling task later in the term. At Daisy’s school, the ESL program has also been cut, which means individual teachers are more responsible for helping ESL students. Word recognition is often an issue for these students, so even just understanding what is being asked can be difficult. She prefers her classes to have mixed levels of ESL so that students can help each other in cases when Daisy does not know how to explain something to a student. This provides a unique additional benefit to journaling in this context, as it helps students develop more interpersonal relationships. Instead of only developing a relationship between student and teacher, these students can develop connections to each other through sharing language and ideas.

Daisy likes to use very short writing prompts for her students, but for ESL students who struggle with writing and vocabulary, these short exercises can turn into class long activities. While they are still as beneficial as they were when very short, the writing prompts can become a detriment to students because time is taken away from curriculum-specific assignments or
activities. Daisy tackles this problem in two different ways depending on the task. For some prompts, Daisy will give them vocabulary ahead of time in order to help them complete the assignment quickly. For other tasks, she will not give them vocabulary but will instead use the journal prompt as a tie-in to the lesson that follows in order to use the journal as a scaffolding tool for the lesson. She will use the journal to develop the vocabulary required for the lesson. This way, the extra time it takes to journal detracts less from lesson.

Two thirds of the students at Myrtle’s school are considered “high-risk,” so it takes a longer time to build trust between the student and the teacher. Myrtle likes to keep the journals very light hearted initially so that the students see the journal as something fun rather than yet another assignment. Teachers can ask for more later on once they have had a chance to use the journal as a way to communicate with the student individually. Although Nick’s students are not considered to be “high risk” in the same way, they are still generally unmotivated and not interested in academic pursuits. Nevertheless, he finds that all teenagers have a story to tell that they would like to be heard. He believes the action of writing and sharing with another human being to be a very brave action, and so he likes to reward students who take that risk. He recounts the story of one student who opened up to him about a treat that her pet liked. In response, he went and found the treat and shared them with the student when he returned the journals. This developed a personal connection between student and teacher, and emphasized the power of the journaling process.

Daisy and Nick find that personal shared journals are particularly beneficial to grade nine and grade twelve students. Both of these grades are overshadowed by transition and change, so students benefit from taking time to reflect on these changes and the challenges they present. Daisy also finds that many adolescents can feel overwhelmed and feel that they are facing
difficulty, and it can be quite helpful to share this with an adult that they can trust in. It is particularly helpful for students to share these with teachers, especially in semestered high schools, because the relationship with the teacher is short. Students can tell a teacher something and not feel as awkward as if they had told a parent, as the parent would then know this knowledge for the rest of their lives. Knowing that the relationship with a teacher will end may make some students be more honest. At the same time, if a student comes to trust their teacher, the student may choose to continue to stay in touch with the teacher beyond graduation, which Nick has experienced a few times when he gets his grade twelve students to write journals. Because these students are so focused on transitioning, whether transitioning into or out of high school, journals with no prompts may be most beneficial so that students are free to write about whatever is on their mind.

During high school, students are often searching for their sense of identity, which will then inform decisions about what they will do and where they will go after high school. Daisy connects identity to literature through connecting students to characters’ identities, but the journal alone also functions as a place for developing one’s own identity no matter what form it takes. For students who are in a “challenging authority” phase, the journal can provide a space for the student to talk about that. It provides a place to work through frustrations, taking on a restorative role in the students’ lives. It can also give the teacher a window of opportunity to find a way to reach that particular student.

Another issue that can impact the benefits of journaling is IEPs that suggest that the student is better off typing rather than writing. In some cases, a computer is not available in the classroom for these students. As Daisy notes, even in classes that have computers, they often take so long to start up that it is not worth it to write the journal prompt out, as it takes longer to open
the computer file than it does to actually type out the response. For students who have their own laptops and if they are reliable, Daisy has no problem with them typing the response rather than writing. Nick also agrees that whether the journal is typed or written, the benefits remain the same. For cases where the computers take a long time to start, however, Daisy will encourage students to write by hand instead. For students with fine motor problems, this presents a challenge as it will often lead them to resist the exercise altogether. Daisy usually talks to these students individually and encourages them to just write something and not necessarily use full sentences. Like Nick, she is much more focused on the idea rather than how it is written, and metacognition can be achieved without full sentences or proper grammar. Nevertheless, it is a struggle to get students with low literacy to write, even though Nick points out that these are the types of students who would most benefit from the exercise. Myrtle’s experience reveals that this resistance usually comes from a fear of getting it just right in the classroom, so if students believe that they cannot write, they are more likely to avoid it all together. Emphasizing to students that their literacy level does not matter is therefore key in providing benefits to students.

Daisy’s journals are directly linked to two texts that she chose specifically for her grade nine classes because they are high interest and relevant to her classes, especially the applied students who feel as if they are the outsiders in the school. Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* includes sex, drugs, and other controversial moments, which makes it appealing to high school students in particular. At the same time, the reading level and the graphic art makes it appeal to a younger audience, so it is accessible for a wide variety of students. She is not attached to this book alone, however. In previous years, she has used Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* because of the popular movie release. She is willing to use any book that will engage her students, and she is equally willing to part from the book when it stops being
relevant for them. Students’ interests are often shaped by the events that surround them, so it is important for teachers to be aware of popular culture, especially as it relates to literature.

Similarly, Nick frequently uses newspaper articles as reflective writing prompts. This helps model engagement with the world, but it also involves ongoing work for the teacher. Understanding students’ interests has a direct impact on the benefits that the journal provides, however, so the long term work is worth it.

1. Gender

Traditionally, diaries or journals are seen as very feminine pursuits, and each of my participants identified a gender difference when it comes to the benefits that students receive from journal assignments. Nevertheless, students of any gender will benefit from the exercise, but it is often more difficult to get male students to try the journal process.

Daisy notes that it is difficult to get boys to read or write, but that many of her students already keep a diary, even the boys. The boys are far less likely to admit to keeping a journal or diary, especially in front of their peers. Daisy also notes that many of the boys type their journals rather than write them, so it is helpful to keep this option available for students. In her experience, boys tend to write their journals more creatively instead of just writing about their lives. They will often write stories or connect what they are reading to their writing. The biggest challenge for Daisy, therefore, is not getting boys to see the benefits of journaling, but rather to get them to stop being so vocal about their dislike for the assignment. She thinks that boys are more vocal than girls just because of the stereotype that girls keep journals or diaries, and boys do not. She remembers that boys often say “I can’t do this, or this is stupid, I can’t write. And then they’re done. Not doing it, head on the table.” Because male students tend to try and express to their peers that they are “above” writing a diary, the teacher’s biggest challenge is finding an
entry way in. This is one of the reasons that she connects the journal to a controversial book like *The Absolutely True Diary*, because boys are more engaged with the text and want to connect with it more. Furthermore, the novel’s protagonist is a boy keeping a diary, so it helps to get boys past the complaint that diaries are only for girls.

The problem is less about gender and more about self-worth for Daisy. Every time the boys complain about the diary and claim they have nothing to write about, they are “putting themselves down.” Their complaints therefore become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Low self-worth becomes the biggest barrier, not gender. In order to tackle this particular issue, Daisy uses sarcasm, as she finds this works best with male students. Once the students who claim “I can’t do it” have completed a writing exercise, no matter how small, she hands it back and tells them, “well, now you’ve lied to me so what now?” This sarcasm helps to develop a good student-teacher relationship and get the boys to be more willing to try again on the next task. Overall, however, Daisy believes that there is less of a gender difference than people believe. When she asks individual students about why they do not want to do a journal, students of any gender will often say the same things. The girls are often just as hesitant about writing, but instead of complaining, they will be silent about it because there is often some shame in not being able to think of something to write. She also believes that a lot of it has to do with the class dynamic, which changes year to year. Furthermore, she has more experience with boys because there are usually more boys than girls in the applied classes that she teaches.

Myrtle also notes that there is a gender difference when it comes to journaling, but she believes that male students actually benefit more from the journals than boys do. While girls are more willing to begin the journaling process than boys are, the boys are able to use the journal more as an outlet. The reason for this is because girls “tend to communicate orally more readily
before journaling so boys use it as an outlet more.” This argument does assume that boys are less likely to communicate orally, so this might be less of a gender issue and more of an issue of extroversion versus introversion. Students who are naturally introverts will be more likely to use a journal as an outlet for sharing their opinions with another person, which they may be less likely to do orally. This is not necessarily because they do not want to share their thoughts, but may just be because they need more time to process and are uncomfortable with having to think of something to say on the spot.

Nick has had less success with convincing boys to write honestly about themselves in the journal. Being a male himself, Nick can model journal writing and often tells his students that he started journaling as a teenager and continues to do so today. This may be enough to convince some students, but many others remain unconvinced. He also notes that females tend to open up more willingly and find it easier to be honest immediately, whereas it can take males longer to trust him. Nick recalls a male student last year who claimed that his “course was slanted to girls because of the journals. ‘I don't write diaries.’ I told him that examining who you are is gender neutral and is the bravest thing you can do in a high school class. He wasn't convinced.”

Although Nick was unsuccessful in convincing this student, it is interesting that this particular complaint mirrors Daisy’s experience of male students’ complaints. The claim that “I can’t” or “I don’t” again goes back to self-worth, which may point to a larger issue within the school system and how boys learn. The claim that diaries are gendered also reflects a desire to express masculinity in stereotypical ways, which is equally problematic in terms of gender dichotomies.
Conclusion

Every teacher will use journals in a slightly different context. Based on my findings, this is the way that journals must be used—there is no one size fits all strategy for using journals in schools. Each type of journal works best for certain types of students. In order for journaling to work for students, the teacher needs to be continuously reflective and comfortable with the task he or she decides to pursue. The individual teacher plays the biggest role in determining the success of journals. The teacher’s theoretical beliefs have an impact on what role he or she believes that journals should play in the classroom. Writing theory, literacy theory, and Reader Response theory are common threads that often underlie the decision to use journals in the classroom, even if teachers are not explicitly aware of the fact that their opinions and practices tie into these theories.

Journals also provide many emotional benefits to students depending on the type. When the teacher assigns journals and how much honesty and trust the teacher asks for determines the success of the journals, so teachers need to think intentionally about how they tie journals into the rest of their course. It also appears to be a good idea to ask for a variety of different kinds of journal responses in order to maximize the emotional benefits that they provide, as different students will connect with different types of assignments. No matter what kind of journal the teacher uses, however, there are always some ethical concerns that go along with the assignment. The teacher needs to weigh the benefits with the concerns and decide what they are comfortable with sharing with students before assigning the journal and wading into areas the teacher would rather avoid. Above all, it is important that the teacher remain professional even when connecting personally with students.
The emotional and academic benefits that journals provide vary depending on the structure the journals take, whether the teacher connects it to literature, provides prompts, redirection, or lets journals occur naturally. Each form will work for some students and not for others. What the teacher decides to mark, read, and how they respond will also affect the success of journals, and again requires continuous reflective practice. Therefore, it makes sense that teachers’ experience and beliefs play a large role in the success of journals. The teachers’ past experiences with journals often determines the type of journal that they assign. However, teachers are not located in a vacuum—the culture of the school and the role of the department and the administrators also determines what kinds of journals are assigned and how much the teacher can rely on them. For many teachers, using journals in the initial years of teaching may not be possible until they have earned the trust and respect of their fellow teachers and administrators.

Finally, the types of students that the teacher has in their classrooms will also determine the success of journals. ESL students, high-risk, low literacy students, and the gender of students all influence the impact of journals. Each of these student groups present a different challenge for the teacher, and the teacher needs to be persistent in working to reach these students and trust in the journal. In this way, each of the themes are interconnected. As a teacher you cannot choose to focus on just one aspect alone. Journals are a holistic practice and many factors need to be considered at once in order to make them an effective classroom practice. When journals are looked at in this way, the benefits for many different types of students become clear. In turn, the journals may also be able to provide some benefits for teachers in similar ways.
Chapter 5: IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of my research project, beginning with a summary of the key findings. I discuss the implications in terms of why this research matters to the educational community as well as for my own personal teaching philosophy. Finally, I make recommendations for teachers and suggest possible areas for further research in the topic of journaling, followed by my concluding comments.

Key Findings

Analysing my interviews and research into this topic, it has become clear that journaling has a legitimate place in the English secondary classroom, but only in classrooms where the teacher is committed and comfortable with the task. There are many different kinds of journals, and the type that the teacher chooses to use will have different benefits for different students. Working from a theoretical background can therefore be useful in terms of developing a style that will aid students in their understanding of literature, or develop their literacy depending on what theory one is working from. The theory that the teacher uses will, in turn, affect the structural form that the journal takes. The structure will then inform the emotional and academic benefits that the journals can provide for students. There are some ethical concerns associated with journaling, so the teacher needs to be prepared for that risk prior to assigning the journals and establish a firm, professionally-conscious sense of what is appropriate for students to share. If the teacher feels uncomfortable with the task, the students will not receive the assignment’s potential benefits. Journals cannot be forced upon a teacher for this reason—it is a personal assignment and must be adopted as such.
The particular students in the class also have an impact on the success of the journaling task. It is important for the teacher to know the students in the class, though the journals can also help the teacher understand students in this way. My participants identified a gender difference in terms of how readily boys accept the task of journaling, though male students benefit equally once they do adopt the task. It is up to the teacher to get his or her students invested in the task so that the students can access the various benefits that journals provide, both in terms of literacy and their personal well-being.

Implications

1. Broad

As I have found in my own anecdotal experiences with journals, the research I have completed, and in the interviews with my participants, journals are very personal so it is difficult to apply broad implications. Nevertheless, it would still be useful for educators in the field to have a conversation about journals, because journals are so rarely talked about in secondary school educational circles. English departments in high schools could benefit from having a discussion about the ethical concerns associated with journals so that teachers are more comfortable assigning them in their classrooms. Based on the interviews, the benefits of journals apply to students whether they have strong or weak literacy, and whether they are English as a Second Language students or not. In order to receive these benefits, the journals will need to be differentiated, which seems to come down to a teacher’s personal efforts rather than something that can be prescribed broadly. The implications of this research project therefore invite more teachers to feel comfortable introducing journals in their classrooms despite potential ethical issues they may raise, as they are just another potential tool for reaching all students. As long as
the individual teachers and their colleagues have a clear understanding of the boundaries associated with effective student-teacher relationships, the journals can be introduced without worrying about these concerns.

Each of my participants remarked that theory did not really have an impact on their decision to use journals in the classroom. As I discovered, however, they all applied theoretical knowledge to their different journaling and teaching philosophies anyway. This result was unexpected, but begs the question whether theoretical knowledge really matters if teachers are using it in practice anyway. The other way of looking at it, however, is that the theory is so implicit to good educational practice that effective teachers are applying it unknowingly. It is further possible that the theoretical background has become so ingrained in these teachers’ practices that they have forgotten it was ever an independent theory to begin with. Nevertheless, I believe that, based on the responses from my participants, it is helpful for beginning teachers to reflect on theory and their practice in order to consider why a particular method or assignment is effective. A more seasoned teacher may be able to do this subconsciously, but a newer teacher may need to reflect on the theory more explicitly and consistently.

2. Personal

I began this research project with the assumption that journals are a great tool to use for high school students based on my own personal experiences, but I assumed that the benefits I received from the task were fairly unique to me and may not be broadly applied to the class as a whole. I was especially concerned that the benefits I received from the journals were due to my academic interests, introspective nature, and my prior love of writing. However, my research has shown that journals are beneficial regardless of the student’s literacy as long as the student can be convinced to complete the task. This is perhaps the most important piece of information I have
gained from this project: if I want the journals to be a part of my future classes, I need to work to “sell” them to my students, especially boys with low literacy or ESL students. Teacher commitment, therefore, is the key that makes the journals truly effective for students. I had assumed that the students with poor literacy would not benefit from journaling, but my research and interviews have confirmed that it is possible to use journals for a variety of different learners if the teacher is willing to go work harder at introducing them.

As a researcher, I have also gained an understanding of the value of qualitative research through the completion of this paper. At the start of this project, I questioned the validity of only talking to two or three teachers as the basis of my analysis. However, I gained a thorough understanding of individual teacher practice through closely analysing the practice of a few educators. It was also very helpful to interview seasoned teachers about a shared passion we have for personal, reflective writing. In addition, for subjective topics such as education and journaling, a quantitative study would not reveal such useful information. I received more information than I had expected from this process, and this has led me to place greater value on qualitative research.

**Recommendations**

As I have stated in my previous chapters, the decision to use journals in the classroom must necessarily be a very personal choice. If the teacher is not comfortable with the idea of introducing journals, the process will lose its value for both the teacher and students. Nevertheless, it would be useful if journaling were included as a suggestion in the Ontario English curriculum documents, as I believe that many high school English teachers may not consider journals simply because they are usually seen more as a tool for elementary teachers.
With some dedicated teaching efforts, however, the journals can become a sophisticated source of improved literacy and an effective student-teacher relationship builder. By having it included as a suggestion in the curriculum, it allows teachers to opt in only if they feel comfortable with the level of sharing that journals require, while providing a new idea for teachers who may not have thought to use journals previously.

A more personal recommendation that would be helpful to include with the suggestion of journaling in the curriculum would be to start slowly. As my participants have noted, journals may be difficult to include at the start of one’s teaching career. This is in part due to the amount of trust needed from administrative staff that the teacher is aware of how much he or she should be sharing with students in order not to overstep the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, the first few years of teaching are often very stressful, as teachers struggle with finding ways to include all of the curriculum expectations in their teaching. After this initial time period, teachers are often better at addressing all of the expectations and have more time to prepare additional activities such as journals.

Broadly, journaling could also be addressed in an ethics and professionalism course during initial teacher education programs in order to introduce teachers to the benefits and ways of minimizing the professional ethical concerns. It may also be useful to have a professional development workshop introducing journaling to English departments as a whole. If introduced to a group of teachers in a school, those who are interested in them can opt to include journals in their classroom, while it provides the rest of the English department with knowledge of exactly what the journals entail. This information may help prevent misunderstandings related to the professionalism of student-teacher relationships. This activity is deeply personal and needs to
remain a personal choice in order to work, but it would be useful if it was talked about as an option more broadly.

**Areas for Further Research**

Due to the limitations of the length of my program and the requirements established for this research project, my research question and breadth were necessarily restricted. I decided to focus on the benefits of journals for students, mainly highlighting literacy, literary theory, and student-teacher relationships. Nevertheless, this research raised interesting questions for me that would be interesting research pursuits on their own. In my conversation with Nick, upon reflecting on a particular student’s journals, he noted that he “still vividly recalls her thoughts and insights” and that he “gets as much out of the journaling process as the student.” After hearing him discuss this experience, I began to wonder if a similar study could be done investigating the benefits that journals provide for teachers. Teacher burnout seems to be a common problem in the public school system, but hearing both Nick and Daisy discuss the most significant journals that they had encountered in their teaching history, it became clear that the journals provided some mental health value for both parties involved. The journals seemed to provide the teachers with a sense of purpose and the sense that they made a significant difference in an individual student’s life. This observation makes sense considering the value that journals provide in terms of developing an effective student-teacher relationship. A better relationship will likely benefit teachers as much as they benefit the students. Further research could therefore be conducted investigating whether journaling practices can help to prevent or counteract teacher burnout in some cases. There seems to be an emotional or mental benefit that students receive through
writing a journal, and there may be a parallel benefit for teachers that comes through the process of reading and responding to those journals.

Another potential area for further study is the role of journal writing for teachers. As noted in my literature review and in Daisy’s responses, some teachers model journal writing by writing responses to the same topics as the students at the same time. For more free-writing types of journals, the teacher could model for students by keeping a personal journal of their own in order to reflect on their teaching and outside life. It would be interesting to research whether teachers receive the same benefits as adolescents from this practice or not.

Through my conversations with teachers about literacy theory and literary theories, I have also become quite interested in the retention of theory in teacher practice. This interest does not necessarily need to align with the topic of journaling, and it would be worthwhile to look at the role of teaching experience in the explicit retention of education-related theory. Researching the practices of “expert teachers” may produce an interesting correlation in terms of theory and how theoretical concepts may have been absorbed by expert teachers implicitly over time.

**Concluding Comments**

This research study highlights the potential benefits of personal, reflective writing for high school students. This research is therefore primarily useful for secondary school English teachers who have the opportunity to introduce journals to their classes. In particular, my study emphasizes the importance of the student-teacher relationship in terms of academic performance and student well-being. Within my literature review, I discovered that journals can work for a variety of different students, whether academically inclined or considered “at-risk.” Teachers also bring their own personality into the journal assignment, which is a key element of the success of
journals. Furthermore, teachers each seem to develop a distinct definition of “journal,” which then influences the role of the journal itself.

My participants’ interview responses reveal that journals are useful tools for all students, regardless of gender or literacy level, though these differences can make it more difficult in terms of student engagement with journals. The role of teacher engagement with student writing is also equally important in terms of the success of journals, and having a conversation in writing with the student using the journals is key for creating an effective student-teacher relationship. Assessment practices should therefore reflect this priority, with less emphasis on the quality of writing and more focus on the content and creating meaningful connections with students. Due to the risks associated with student-teacher relationships that cross boundaries, it is important to discuss journal assignments in initial teacher education programs. Another option is to introduce reflective writing in English department based professional development. In this way, teachers who want to use journals within their classes can ensure that the rest of the school and administration understand the task and what the student-teacher relationship entails.

Throughout the process of writing this research project, especially when engaging in one-on-one discussions with teachers, it became clear that journals can also be beneficial for the teacher. Because the focus on journals tends to be about building relationships with students, this makes sense, as the teacher feels more of a direct impact on the student’s life. For this reason, further research can be conducted looking into the role of journal reading and writing for teacher well-being.

Most of the research and my participants agree that the journals are not the place to mark students’ grammar or writing skills, but should rather be used to encourage students to develop their own voice. Over time, this will help students with their literacy as they become better
writers through their interest in sharing their life with their teacher in a way that the teacher can
easily and clearly understand. Key to the success of the journals, therefore, and the success of the
student in the school system overall, is creating a meaningful connection with another human
being: their teacher. Journals both create this relationship and rely upon it, making them a useful
tool to introduce in the high school context.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ___________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying reflective journal writing in order to answer the question: In what ways do three Ontario public high school English teachers believe assigned journals help students succeed academically and personally? for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor and research supervisor who is providing support for the process this year is Arlo Kempf. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40-60 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.
The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Wolff

613-899-0080

Katharine.wolff@mail.utoronto.ca

Research Supervisor’s Name: __________________________________________

Phone #: ______________________ Email: ______________________
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Katharine Wolff and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ________________________________________

Name (printed): ________________________________

Date: __________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

Questions:

Section One: Background Information

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What did you study at university?
3. What subjects do you currently teach, and what have you taught in the past?
4. What made you decide to become a high school teacher?
5. How long have you been teaching at this particular school, and is there anything about this school that makes your teaching experience unique?
6. Can you describe the students at this school? The diversity and socioeconomic status of the students?

Section Two: Teacher Practice

7. What kinds of journals do you use for your students? How would you define your journals?
8. How long have you been using journals in your classes?
9. How do you incorporate journals in your teaching?
10. What is your goal in implementing journals into your classes?
11. Have there been any challenges in implementing journals into your classroom?
Section Three: Teacher Beliefs and Values

12. Do you connect any literary theory to your journaling assignment, or do you believe it supports the development of literary theory (e.g. Reader Response through the development of identity)?

13. Have you noticed a connection between literacy and the success of journals in the classroom?

14. Has journaling been helpful in terms of literacy development, or has literacy been a hindrance in the effectiveness of journals?

15. What kind of feedback do you provide to students on their journals?

16. What impact does your feedback have on students and how does it alter their future journals?

Section Four: Next Steps and Challenges

17. Is it challenging to manage the volume of writing when assigning journals? What assessment practices do you use to deal with this challenge?

18. What assessment practice do you believe most maximizes journaling benefits and student engagement?

19. Have there been any unexpected challenges when using journals for students? (e.g. from admin, student, or personal perspective)

20. What advice would you give to a beginning teacher looking to include journal writing in their classroom?