

THE POWER OF PERSONAL NARRATIVES:  
USING STORYTELLING TO STRENGTHEN IDENTITY AND CONFIDENCE IN URBAN,  
MULTI-ETHNIC CLASSROOMS

by

Renesha Chambers-Effiong

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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College/School: <u>College of Education</u>	Thesis Supervisor: <u>Carrie E. Hong, Ph.D</u>
Department: <u>Educational Leadership and Professional Studies</u>	Chairperson: Dr. Heejung An

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explored the impact of personal narrative writing on the writing confidence, proficiency, and self-expression of sixth-grade English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The research was guided by two questions: how personal narratives influence student confidence and proficiency, and how students perceive the value of personal storytelling in their academic growth. Data was collected through student writing samples, surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and teacher reflections.

Findings revealed three major outcomes. First, personal narrative writing increased students' confidence by providing opportunities for authentic storytelling and ownership over their work. Second, students demonstrated improved use of narrative structure and literary techniques such as dialogue, descriptive language, and figurative devices. Third, personal narratives encouraged identity development and emotional engagement, helping students connect their cultural and personal experiences to academic work.

Grounded in sociocultural theory and supported by existing research, this study underscores the importance of culturally responsive writing practices, especially for marginalized student populations. Recommendations are offered for future research, classroom instruction, and school leadership, with an emphasis on integrating personal narrative writing into inclusive and reflective educational environments.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES/ TABLE	viii
Chapter I THE PROBLEM	1
Introduction	1
Research Questions	2
Terms and Definitions	3
Theoretical Framework	4
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)	4
Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)	5
Educational Significance	7
Chapter II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	8
Personal Narrative Writing and Cultural Identity	9
Writing Proficiency and Motivation	11
Engagement Through Storytelling	12
Summary of the Literature Review	14
Chapter III RESEARCH DESIGN	16
Introduction	16
Research Setting	16
Research Participants	17

Data Sources	18
Data Analysis	19
Validity and Reliability	20
Limitations	22
Chapter IV FINDINGS	23
Data Collection	23
Data Analysis	24
Theme 1: Increased Confidence Through Storytelling	24
Theme 2: Growth in Narrative Structure and Literary Technique	25
Theme 3: Identity Development and Emotional Connection	27
Summary	31
Chapter V CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
Introduction	32
Conclusion I and Discussions	33
Conclusion II and Discussions	34
Conclusion III and Discussions	35
Recommendations for Further Research	37
Recommendations for Teachers	37
Recommendations for Administrators	38
REFERENCES	39

**LIST OF FIGURES/ TABLE**

Figure/Table	Title	Page
Table 1	6 + 1 Traits of Writing Rubric for Personal Narratives	26
Figure 1	Findings from Personal Narrative Writing (Week 1-6)	28
2	Student Engagement & Reflection on Storytelling Activities	29
3	Average Rubric Score Improvements (Pre to Post)	30



## **CHAPTER I**

### **Statement of the Problem**

#### **Introduction**

In urban, multi-ethnic classrooms, students' cultural diversity often goes unrecognized by traditional curricula, particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). These students face a disconnect between their lived experiences and the academic demands placed on them, which can lead to disengagement and a lack of confidence in their writing abilities. Personal narrative writing offers a unique opportunity to bridge this gap, allowing students to express themselves authentically while connecting their cultural backgrounds, personal histories, and linguistic strengths to their academic work.

Personal narrative writing is a critical tool in strengthening student identity and engagement, particularly for ELLs and students with IEPs. By drawing upon their own lives and experiences, students craft stories that reflect their unique perspectives, fostering a sense of belonging and empowerment. This process encourages fluency in writing and boosts students' self-confidence, helping them recognize their cultural and linguistic assets as strengths within the context of their academic development. For students who have often felt marginalized or misunderstood in traditional settings, personal narrative writing can serve as a transformative force, providing an avenue for self-expression, validation, and academic success.

Incorporating personal narrative writing into classroom instruction creates an inclusive space where students' voices are valued and encouraged. This approach makes writing more

meaningful by connecting academic tasks to students' lived experiences, empowering them to engage with the curriculum in a way that feels relevant and authentic. Through storytelling, students not only develop critical literacy skills but also gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. This study aims to explore the influence of personal narrative writing on the confidence, writing proficiency, and overall engagement of ELLs and students with IEPs.

## **Research Questions**

This study will explore the following key questions:

*How does personal narrative writing impact the confidence and writing proficiency of ELLs and students with IEPs?* Research suggest that personal narratives can significantly enhance students' sense of identity and confidence. By sharing their lived experiences, students feel validated, which translates into increased motivation and self-efficacy in writing. ELLs, in particular, bridge linguistic and cultural gaps (Paris & Alim, 2017a), while students with IEPs experience reduced anxiety and increased motivation when writing about familiar topics (Graham et al., 2018c).

*How do students perceive the value of personal narratives in their academic growth and self-expression?* Research indicates that students find personal narrative writing more engaging and meaningful compared to traditional academic prompts. Their writing becomes richer, more authentic, and reflective of their individual identities. This engagement leads to greater investment in the writing process, resulting in improvements in overall literacy, articulation, and fluency. Personal storytelling enhances articulation across genres, improving overall literacy (Nieto, 2017a).

## Terms and Definitions

To ensure clarity and comprehension, this section presents the definition of terms that will be used throughout this study:

*Personal Narrative:* A form of writing where individuals share stories from their own lives, focusing on personal experiences, reflections, and emotions. It emphasizes authenticity, voice, and cultural relevance.

*English Language Learners (ELLs):* Students who are in the process of acquiring proficiency in English, often coming from multilingual backgrounds with varying levels of language development.

*Individualized Education Programs (IEPs):* Customized educational plans designed for students with disabilities, addressing their unique learning needs and providing specific accommodations and support.

*Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP):* A teaching philosophy that incorporates students' cultural references in all aspects of learning, fostering academic success and promoting cultural pride (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

*Sociocultural Theory:* A psychological framework that emphasizes the importance of social interaction and cultural context in cognitive development, highlighting how learning is deeply influenced by culture and social engagement (Vygotsky, 1978).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research is grounded in two key theoretical frameworks: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). These perspectives highlight the role of students' cultural and social backgrounds in shaping learning experiences and demonstrate how personal narrative writing can foster academic engagement, identity development, and literacy growth, particularly for English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995)**

Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) as an instructional framework that challenges deficit-based views of students from diverse backgrounds. CRP is based on three interrelated principles: academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. Academic success ensures that students meet high expectations while valuing their cultural knowledge; cultural competence encourages students to maintain and appreciate their own identities while engaging with dominant academic discourses; and critical consciousness fosters students' ability to analyze and challenge social inequities. These principles emphasize that education should be student-centered, inclusive, and empowering.

Personal narrative writing aligns with CRP by allowing students to integrate their lived experiences into academic work, validating their identities and enhancing engagement (Gay, 2018). Research indicates that students who see their cultural backgrounds reflected in the curriculum are more motivated and perform better academically (Paris & Alim, 2017b). CRP also advocates for multilingualism and diverse perspectives, challenging the expectation that

students must conform to a single linguistic or academic norm (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Through personal storytelling, students from historically marginalized backgrounds can assert their voices in educational spaces that may otherwise overlook them.

Moreover, CRP supports critical consciousness by encouraging students to reflect on social structures and their own positions within them. Freire (1970) emphasized that education should empower individuals to question and challenge oppression. Personal narrative writing provides a platform for students to explore themes of identity, justice, and resilience, prompting deeper engagement with the world around them. When students write about their experiences, they not only develop literacy skills but also cultivate a sense of agency and awareness of broader societal issues (Muhammad, 2020).

### **Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)**

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory posits that learning is a socially mediated process, deeply influenced by language, cultural tools, and collaborative interactions. His concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with support from a more knowledgeable peer or instructor. According to this theory, students learn best in environments where they receive scaffolding—structured guidance that gradually shifts responsibility from teacher to student (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Personal narrative writing aligns with Sociocultural Theory in multiple ways. First, it fosters learning through social interaction. When students share their narratives with peers or receive feedback from teachers, they engage in meaningful dialogue that strengthens their understanding of language and storytelling (Bruner, 1986). Collaborative writing activities, such

as peer review or oral storytelling before drafting, allow students to develop ideas within a supportive learning community.

Additionally, personal narrative writing serves as a tool for language development. Vygotsky (1978) argued that language is both a means of communication and a vehicle for cognitive growth. Writing about personal experiences encourages students—particularly ELLs—to draw upon their linguistic resources, bridging home and school literacies (Moll et al., 1992). This approach reinforces the idea that literacy is not an isolated skill, but a dynamic process shaped by cultural and social contexts.

Furthermore, Sociocultural Theory highlights the importance of culturally and linguistically relevant instruction. Personal narrative writing allows students to incorporate their home languages, dialects, and unique perspectives into academic discourse. Rather than treating literacy development as a neutral, decontextualized process, this approach affirms that students' real-world experiences are central to their learning (Gutiérrez, 2008). By using narratives to make sense of their identities and surroundings, students engage more deeply with writing and develop confidence in their academic abilities.

By anchoring this study in Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Sociocultural Theory, the research examines how personal narrative writing supports ELLs and students with IEPs in building confidence, improving literacy skills, and making meaningful connections between academic content and their cultural identities. These frameworks emphasize that education should be a socially situated, culturally responsive process. Personal storytelling provides a pathway for students to engage with writing in transformative ways, fostering both academic success and personal empowerment.

## **Educational Significance**

The educational significance of this study lies in its potential to transform classroom practices by demonstrating how personal narrative writing can support diverse learners, particularly English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This approach fosters inclusivity, enhances student confidence, and improves writing proficiency by encouraging self-expression through personal experiences. It helps bridge cultural and linguistic gaps, making writing more accessible and meaningful. Additionally, it promotes academic success by making learning relevant to students' lives, improving both engagement and motivation while fostering stronger literacy skills. Ultimately, this study offers valuable insights to inform inclusive teaching strategies and improve academic outcomes for diverse students.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

This chapter reviews the literature relevant to the primary research question: *How does personal narrative writing impact the confidence, writing proficiency, and engagement of English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in multi-ethnic classrooms?* The review examines research studies related to three key themes: personal narrative writing and cultural identity, writing proficiency and motivation, and engagement through storytelling. By analyzing these themes, this review highlights the connection between personal storytelling and academic growth, emphasizing the ways in which culturally responsive teaching strategies can enhance student learning experiences.

Personal narrative writing has been increasingly recognized as a valuable tool for fostering student identity, confidence, and literacy skills. The literature suggests that by allowing students to incorporate their personal and cultural experiences into their writing, educators create a more inclusive and engaging classroom environment (Nieto, 2017a). Additionally, studies indicate that personal storytelling can help bridge the gap between academic writing and students' lived experiences, making learning more accessible and meaningful (Nieto, 2017a; Paris & Alim, 2017a).

Furthermore, research underscores the importance of integrating personal narrative writing into diverse curricula to support student engagement and literacy development. Scholars argue that when students are encouraged to share their personal experiences through writing, they develop stronger connections to the material, leading to improved comprehension and retention of academic concepts. By weaving their own narratives into their learning, students not only



refine their writing abilities but also cultivate a sense of empowerment and voice in the classroom. This perspective aligns with the broader movement toward culturally sustaining pedagogy, which emphasizes the validation and preservation of students' linguistic and cultural identities within educational settings (Paris & Alim, 2017b).

### **Personal Narrative Writing and Cultural Identity**

Personal narrative writing is a powerful tool for fostering student identity, engagement, and writing proficiency. Smith (2020) asserts that when students draw from personal experiences, they "enhance their ability to structure coherent narratives while deepening their connection to writing as a form of self-expression" (p. 45). Similarly, Jones and Martinez (2018) highlight that personal narratives provide "opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to see their lived experiences reflected in their writing," which increases motivation and investment in the writing process (p. 62).

Recent research further reinforces the significance of personal narratives in diverse classrooms. Garcia and Sylvan (2023) examine translanguaging in personal narrative writing and find that multilingual learners who incorporate multiple languages into their narratives "demonstrate enhanced self-expression, confidence, and engagement" (p. 79). Their study suggests that translanguaging not only supports writing fluency but also "strengthens connections between students' home languages and academic writing" (p. 83). Likewise, Kim and Richards (2021) observe how culturally relevant mentor texts influence personal narratives. Through classroom observations and student writing samples, they conclude that exposure to diverse stories enables English language learners (ELLs) and students with individualized education

programs (IEPs) to "develop voice, structure their narratives more effectively, and increase their overall writing confidence" (p. 94).

Additionally, digital storytelling has emerged as a valuable strategy for enhancing writing proficiency among students with IEPs. Harris and Patel (2022) analyze how multimedia elements in personal narratives improve coherence, organization, and motivation. Their findings indicate that students who integrate digital tools into storytelling "demonstrate higher engagement and improved revision skills" (p. 112). These results align with prior research emphasizing the role of multimodal approaches in strengthening student writing outcomes, as noted by Miller (2019), who states that "multimodal storytelling fosters deeper student investment in the revision process and enhances narrative coherence" (p. 128).

Paris and Alim (2017a) introduce the concept of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP), which builds upon culturally relevant pedagogy by emphasizing the maintenance and celebration of students' cultural identities. Their study demonstrates that writing personal narratives allows students to sustain their cultural and linguistic roots, reinforcing their sense of identity and enhancing self-confidence. The authors argue that when students see their cultural backgrounds reflected in their writing, they are more likely to engage with the material and take ownership of their learning. As one student in their study shared, "Writing about my family's traditions made me proud of who I am and where I come from" (Paris & Alim, 2017a, p. 45). This highlights how personal narratives can serve as a powerful affirmation of students' identities.

Nieto (2017b) explores the role of cultural identity in student engagement and academic success through an empirical study conducted in diverse classroom settings. The study examines how personal narrative writing influences students' motivation and writing skills. Data were

collected from middle and high school classrooms through student writing samples, classroom observations, and interviews with both students and teachers. Nieto finds that when students write about personal experiences, particularly those tied to cultural heritage, they demonstrate greater motivation and stronger writing skills. The study asserts that "students are more invested in their writing when they see their own lives as valuable and worth documenting" (p. 62). By integrating students' cultural backgrounds into writing instruction, educators can foster a sense of belonging and relevance in the classroom. The research underscores the importance of validating students' identities through narrative writing, which in turn enhances their overall academic performance and willingness to participate in classroom discussions.

### **Writing Proficiency and Motivation**

Graham et al. (2018c) investigate how personal narrative writing impacts the writing proficiency of students with IEPs through an empirical study conducted in special education classrooms. The study collects data from middle school students with learning disabilities, using writing samples, student surveys, and teacher interviews to assess changes in writing proficiency, motivation, and anxiety levels. Findings indicate that allowing students to write about familiar topics reduces writing anxiety and increases motivation. By engaging emotionally with writing tasks, students improve their organization, coherence, and grammatical accuracy. The study concludes that personal storytelling serves as a bridge between personal experience and academic writing development. One student expressed, "When I write about something that happened to me, I don't feel as nervous. The words come easier" (Graham et al., 2018c, p. 79). This suggests that personal narratives can alleviate the stress often associated with formal writing assignments and help students build confidence in their abilities.

Santamaría (2019) examines how motivation influences writing proficiency among ELLs through an empirical study conducted in bilingual and ESL classrooms. The study collects data from middle school English language learners using student writing samples, classroom observations, and teacher interviews to assess how personal storytelling impacts students' engagement in the revision process. Findings indicate that students who engage in personal storytelling demonstrate increased perseverance in revising and editing their work. The research highlights the importance of providing structured opportunities for personal expression in writing curricula, which fosters intrinsic motivation and improves overall writing quality. According to Santamaría, "students who see personal relevance in their writing assignments are more likely to revise their work carefully and take pride in their progress" (p. 93). This study reinforces the idea that personal narrative writing can act as a catalyst for improving writing proficiency by increasing students' willingness to engage in the revision process.

### **Engagement Through Storytelling**

Smith and Johnson (2020) explore the connection between narrative writing and classroom engagement among diverse student populations through an empirical study conducted in urban middle school classrooms. The study collects data through student writing samples, classroom observations, and teacher interviews to assess how personal storytelling influences participation and enthusiasm for literacy activities. Findings indicate that students who share personal stories in writing assignments participate more actively in discussions and exhibit greater enthusiasm for reading and writing. The authors argue that storytelling builds community and strengthens students' sense of agency in their academic journeys. One participant noted, "When we read each other's stories, I feel like I understand my classmates better, and I want to share my own experiences, too" (Smith & Johnson, 2020, p. 34). This finding suggests that personal narratives

encourage social interaction and peer learning, contributing to a more supportive and interactive classroom environment.

Lee and Martínez (2021) analyze the effects of storytelling workshops on ELL engagement through a qualitative study conducted in ESL classrooms. Data were gathered from student writing samples, audio recordings of peer discussions, and teacher interviews. Findings suggest that structured storytelling activities increase students' willingness to write, speak, and interact with peers. The study underscores the value of incorporating oral storytelling traditions into writing instruction to support linguistic development and classroom participation. According to one teacher interviewed in the study, "Students who struggled with writing before became much more eager to participate when we introduced storytelling workshops" (Lee & Martínez, 2021, p. 58). This highlights the potential of storytelling as a pedagogical tool that can transform reluctant writers into active, engaged learners.

In addition to fostering engagement, storytelling has been shown to enhance students' critical thinking skills and creativity. Williams and Carter (2022) conduct an empirical study in high school English classrooms, collecting data through student essays, reflective journals, and focus group interviews. Their findings suggest that when students craft personal narratives, they engage in higher-order cognitive processes, such as analyzing events, making connections, and synthesizing information. According to Williams and Carter, storytelling exercises require students to consider multiple perspectives and structure their ideas coherently, leading to improved problem-solving skills. One student from their study shared, "Writing my own story helped me think about how I make choices and what those choices mean" (Williams & Carter, 2022, p. 72). This indicates that personal narrative writing not only boosts engagement but also deepens students' ability to reflect on their experiences and develop stronger reasoning skills.

### **Summary of the Literature Review**

The studies reviewed highlight the critical role of personal narrative writing in supporting students' cultural identity, improving writing proficiency, and increasing engagement. Common findings suggest that personal storytelling helps students sustain their cultural backgrounds (Nieto, 2017b; Paris & Alim, 2017a), enhances motivation and writing skills (Graham et al., 2018; Santamaría, 2019), and fosters classroom engagement (Lee & Martínez, 2021; Smith & Johnson, 2020). These studies collectively demonstrate that incorporating personal narratives into writing instruction benefits students academically and emotionally by validating their lived experiences and encouraging self-expression.

However, differences exist in the methodologies and focus areas of these studies. While some emphasize identity formation through personal narratives, others focus on the cognitive and motivational benefits of storytelling. Methodologically, qualitative studies, such as those by Nieto (2017b) and Paris and Alim (2017a), rely on interviews and student reflections to analyze identity development. In contrast, Graham et al. (2018c) and Santamaría (2019) employ mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative reflections with quantitative measures of writing proficiency and motivation. Additionally, studies on engagement highlight varying instructional strategies, from structured storytelling workshops (Lee & Martínez, 2021) to free-writing approaches (Smith & Johnson, 2020), each utilizing classroom observations and teacher interviews to assess impact. These distinctions suggest that while personal narrative writing is generally beneficial, different research methodologies and instructional approaches may be needed to maximize its impact depending on the student population.

The literature reveals gaps in understanding the long-term impact of personal narrative writing on academic achievement. While many studies document short-term benefits, further research is needed to explore how these instructional strategies influence standardized writing assessments and long-term literacy development for ELLs and students with IEPs. Future studies should examine whether personal storytelling leads to sustained improvements in writing skills and overall academic performance, providing further insight into the best practices for integrating narrative writing into diverse educational settings.

## CHAPTER III

### Research Design

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the research design of this study, outlining the setting, participants, data sources, analysis methods, and limitations. The study aims to answer the research questions: *How does personal narrative writing impact the confidence and writing proficiency of ELLs and students with IEPs?* and *How do students perceive the value of personal narratives in their academic growth and self-expression?*

This study investigates the role of personal narrative writing in enhancing student confidence and engagement in a diverse, urban classroom. The research follows a qualitative case study approach with elements of ethnographic study, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data. As a teacher-researcher and participant-observer, I collect and analyze data using the constant comparison method to identify patterns across various data sources. This study generates hypotheses by exploring the impact of personal narrative writing on student engagement and proficiency.

#### Research Setting

This study takes place in Jersey City, New Jersey, a diverse and densely populated urban area. The city is home to a multilingual community with a working middle-class population. Residents come from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, contributing to the city's vibrant and dynamic educational environment.



The research is conducted in a public charter school within the Jersey City school district. The school serves 1,551 students, including approximately 27 sixth graders who are participating in the study. The student body consists of 81% minority students, and the approximate student-to-teacher ratio is 16:1. The district offers a range of academic and support services, including programs for English Language Learners and students with Individualized Education Programs.

The school itself is characterized by its commitment to fostering an inclusive learning environment. It provides a rigorous academic curriculum while emphasizing student-centered learning. The sixth-grade class, where this study takes place, consists of students with diverse learning needs, including ELLs and students with IEPs. The school supports multilingualism and cultural diversity through various initiatives, extracurricular activities, and language support programs.

### **Research Participants**

As a teacher-researcher and participant-observer, I bring over 20 years of experience teaching in urban schools, specializing in literacy instruction, curriculum development, and culturally responsive teaching. My extensive work with English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) has given me deep insight into the challenges and strengths these students bring to the classroom. This experience allows me to analyze the impact of personal narrative writing on student engagement, confidence, and self-expression.

This study includes approximately 27 sixth-grade students enrolled in my writing class, representing a diverse range of linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many students speak multiple languages at home, offering unique perspectives to the storytelling

process. Some students are classified as ELLs and require scaffolded language support and differentiated instruction to develop their writing fluency, while others have IEPs that necessitate accommodations such as extended time, graphic organizers, or alternative assessment methods. Despite their varied learning needs, all students participate in personal narrative writing as a core component of their curriculum, using storytelling to explore their identities, experiences, and emotions.

By embedding this research within the natural flow of classroom instruction, I aim to capture authentic student experiences and examine how structured storytelling opportunities influence their engagement, confidence, and identity expression over time. This diverse participant group provides a valuable foundation for understanding the power of personal narrative writing in multi-ethnic, multilingual classrooms.

### **Data Sources**

This study draws on multiple data sources collected over a six-week period to examine how personal narrative writing impacts the confidence, writing proficiency, and self-expression of English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). These sources include student writing samples, surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and teacher reflection. Together, they offer both quantitative and qualitative insights into student growth and engagement.

Student writing samples were collected in weeks 1 and will continue into week 6 to assess narrative growth in areas such as voice, organization, and literary devices. Each piece will go through a process of drafting, revising, and publishing over two weeks, and will be scored using a standardized rubric. Pre- and post-surveys, administered at the same points, will gather

student perceptions of writing confidence and self-expression through Likert-scale questions and open-ended prompts. Survey data will be both quantified and thematically coded.

Additional insight came from semi-structured interviews with six students (including ELLs and IEPs), conducted in Weeks 3 and 6. These interviews explored students' experiences with personal storytelling and their reflections on writing growth. Daily classroom observations, totaling approximately 20 sessions, will capture engagement and participation, while field notes will be coded for behavioral patterns. A reflective teacher journal, which will be maintained throughout the unit, will add contextual depth to the study, supporting triangulation and enhancing both validity and reliability.

### **Data Analysis**

This study utilizes a constant comparison method to systematically examine data, identifying recurring patterns and emerging themes across multiple sources. By continuously evaluating new findings against existing data, this approach provides an evolving and nuanced understanding of how personal narrative writing influences student engagement, confidence, and identity expression.

The analysis centers on three key areas. First, student writing proficiency is assessed by comparing initial and final writing samples. These narratives are evaluated using rubrics that measure organization, storytelling depth, use of descriptive language, and self-expression. Tracking the progression from early drafts to final versions highlights growth in narrative skills, confidence, and individual voice.

Second, student perceptions of personal narrative writing are analyzed through pre- and post-surveys, along with structured interviews. Survey data are quantified using Likert-scale responses, while qualitative insights from interviews provide a deeper understanding of students' evolving attitudes toward self-expression. This component examines whether students feel more confident in sharing personal stories and whether they recognize personal storytelling as a meaningful tool for self-discovery and identity formation.

Third, student engagement is observed throughout writing activities. Classroom interactions, participation levels, and students' willingness to share their narratives with peers are documented through field notes. Key indicators of engagement—such as enthusiasm during discussions, persistence in revising drafts, and reflections on the writing process—are carefully analyzed to assess how storytelling fosters motivation and deeper classroom involvement.

To enhance validity and reliability, data is triangulated across these sources, integrating quantitative measures (survey results, rubric scores, and participation tracking) with qualitative insights (student interviews, classroom observations, and reflective writing). This comprehensive, multi-faceted approach ensures a robust and credible analysis of how personal narratives influence student identity development, writing fluency, and overall confidence in a diverse, multi-ethnic learning environment.

## **Validity and Reliability**

### **Validity**

To strengthen the validity of this study, a multi-method approach to data collection is used. This includes the integration of student writing samples, surveys, interviews, and

classroom observations—each offering different perspectives on the same phenomena. This triangulation not only confirms the accuracy of findings but also helps reduce the impact of individual biases or anomalies. By cross-verifying data across sources, the study ensures that conclusions are based on consistent patterns observed in multiple contexts.

Furthermore, validity is supported by the naturalistic setting of the research. Since data is collected during regular classroom instruction without disrupting the learning environment, student responses and behaviors are authentic. The use of rubrics aligned with the writing curriculum adds content validity, ensuring that assessments of writing proficiency are directly tied to instructional goals and standards.

The research questions match closely with the tools used to collect data—like surveys that ask about students' thoughts on personal narrative writing—which helps ensure the study measures what it's meant to. Regular check-ins, repeated analysis, and teacher reflections also support accuracy by allowing the study to adjust based on what is seen over time.

### **Reliability**

Reliability in this study is supported by using clear, consistent methods to collect and analyze data. Writing samples are graded with the same rubric, surveys use the same rating scale, and classroom observations follow a set list of behaviors. This helps ensure fairness and consistency for all students and across all parts of the study.

Qualitative data is organized using a method that compares information to find patterns and themes, which are updated as needed. To make sure the coding is accurate and consistent,

the themes are reviewed often and, when possible, checked by other teachers or colleagues for feedback.

Detailed notes, dated records, and clear steps for how interviews, surveys, and writing scores were collected help make the study easy to follow and repeat. This adds to its trustworthiness. Overall, using different types of data, being clear about how data is handled, and keeping everything aligned with the research questions helps make the study both valid and reliable.

### **Limitations**

This study has several limitations, the primary one being time, as it is conducted over a limited period rather than a full academic year. Additionally, student absences may affect data consistency, and variability in student backgrounds, particularly differences in prior writing experiences, may influence individual outcomes. Researcher bias is another potential limitation, as my role as a participant-observer could impact objectivity, though triangulation helps mitigate this risk. Despite these challenges, the study offers valuable insights into the role of personal narrative writing in supporting student confidence and writing proficiency in a diverse classroom setting.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which examined the effects of personal narrative writing on the confidence, writing proficiency, and self-expression of sixth-grade English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The study aimed to answer two primary research questions: (1) How does personal narrative writing impact the confidence and writing proficiency of ELLs and students with IEPs? and (2) How do students perceive the value of personal narratives in their academic growth and self-expression?

Through analysis of student writing samples, surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and teacher reflections, several key themes emerged. This chapter begins by describing the data collection and analysis processes before presenting the findings organized by thematic categories. Tables and figures are included to enhance the presentation of results.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected over a six-week instructional period within a sixth-grade writing classroom at a diverse public charter school in Jersey City. Multiple sources were used to triangulate findings: (1) student writing samples from initial and final personal narratives; (2) pre- and post-surveys capturing student perceptions of confidence and self-expression; (3) interviews with six focus students representing both ELLs and students with IEPs; (4) daily classroom observations and field notes documenting engagement; and (5) a reflective teacher

journal. Student writing was evaluated with a rubric aligned to state standards and instructional objectives. Interview and survey questions focused on how students felt about telling personal stories and the impact this had on their writing and identity.

## **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using the constant comparison method. Writing samples were scored and compared for improvements in organization, voice, descriptive language, and narrative coherence. Surveys were analyzed both quantitatively (via Likert-scale responses) and qualitatively (open-ended prompts). Interview transcripts were coded for recurring phrases, emotions, and attitudes toward writing. Classroom observations were used to track engagement behaviors, such as participation in discussions, revision persistence, and willingness to share writing. Teacher reflections helped contextualize student behaviors and growth patterns. Themes were developed by identifying overlaps between the various data sources.

## **Findings**

### **Theme 1: Increased Confidence Through Storytelling**

**Definition:** Students showed increased self-confidence when sharing personal experiences through writing.

- **Example 1 (Student Survey):** One student noted in the post-survey, “I felt proud of my story because it was real. I never wrote about my own life before.”



- **Example 2 (Interview):** A student with an IEP said, “When I wrote about my grandma, I didn’t feel nervous reading it. It felt like something only I could tell.”
- **Example 3 (Observation):** During Week 4, students who were previously reluctant to participate began volunteering to read aloud. This shift was especially notable among ELLs.

**Explanation:** The use of personal narratives created a space for authentic expression, leading students to take ownership of their voices. Confidence was especially evident during peer sharing and student reflections.

## **Theme 2: Growth in Narrative Structure and Literary Technique**

**Definition:** Students demonstrated improved use of narrative structure, voice, and literary devices.

- **Example 1 (Writing Samples):** Early drafts lacked transitions and consistent voice. Final drafts showed improved organization, use of dialogue, and varied sentence structure.
- **Example 2 (Rubric Scores):** Average rubric scores for *voice* and *organization* increased by over one point on a 4-point scale from Week 1 to Week 6.

Table 1 refers to the rubric used during this study

**Table 1 - 6 +1 Traits of Writing Rubric for Personal Narratives**

<b>Trait</b>	<b>5 - Excellent</b>	<b>4 - Proficient</b>	<b>3 - Developing</b>	<b>2 - Emerging</b>	<b>1 - Beginning</b>
<b>Ideas</b>	The narrative is focused, well-developed, and rich in details. The main event is clear, and personal significance is deeply explored.	The narrative is clear with relevant details and personal reflection, though some areas could be further developed.	The main idea is present but lacks depth. Some details are included but may not fully engage the reader.	The narrative is somewhat unfocused or missing key details. The personal connection is unclear or underdeveloped.	The main idea is unclear, with little to no personal connection or supporting details.
<b>Organization</b>	The story flows logically with a strong beginning, middle, and end. Transitions smoothly connect events.	The story is well-structured with a clear sequence of events, though transitions could be improved.	The sequence is mostly logical, but some parts may feel disjointed or lack transitions.	The narrative is somewhat disorganized, with missing or unclear transitions between events.	The story lacks a clear beginning, middle, and end. Events are difficult to follow.
<b>Voice</b>	The writer's personality shines through. The tone is engaging, and emotions are effectively conveyed.	The writer's voice is clear and engaging, though some moments could be more expressive.	The voice is somewhat present but inconsistent. The tone may not fully match the narrative's purpose.	The voice is weak or lacks personality. The writing feels detached or impersonal.	The voice is absent, making the narrative unengaging and difficult to connect with.
<b>Word Choice</b>	Vivid, precise language brings the story to life. Strong sensory details enhance the experience.	Word choice is mostly effective, with some strong details, though a few areas could be more vivid.	Some descriptive language is used, but the word choice is repetitive or lacks specificity.	Limited use of descriptive language. Word choice is basic and does not enhance the story.	Words are vague or overly simple, making the story dull and unengaging.
<b>Sentence Fluency</b>	Sentences are varied in length and structure, creating a natural, rhythmic flow.	Sentences flow well with some variety, though a few may be awkward or choppy.	Some sentence variety is present, but the structure may be repetitive or lack smoothness.	Sentences are mostly simple and lack variety, making the narrative feel monotonous.	Sentences are choppy, incomplete, or confusing, disrupting the story's flow.

<b>Conventions</b>	Grammar, punctuation, and spelling are nearly flawless, enhancing readability.	Minor errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling do not interfere with meaning.	Some noticeable errors that may distract the reader but do not completely disrupt understanding.	Frequent errors make reading difficult and interfere with comprehension.	Many errors make the narrative difficult to read and understand.
<b>Presentation (+1)</b>	The writing is neatly presented with appropriate formatting and careful attention to detail.	The writing is mostly neat, with only minor formatting or spacing issues.	The writing is somewhat messy or inconsistent in formatting.	The writing is difficult to read due to poor formatting or messy handwriting.	The writing is unreadable due to extreme formatting issues or lack of effort.

**Explanation:** Explicit instruction and revision opportunities helped students develop a clearer narrative arc. The writing process emphasized self-editing and peer feedback, which led to technical improvement and deeper storytelling.

- **Example 3 (Teacher Reflection):** “Students began using similes and metaphors without being prompted. Their revisions became more intentional.”

### **Theme 3: Identity Development and Emotional Connection**

**Definition:** Writing personal narratives encouraged students to reflect on their identities and connect emotionally to their work.

- **Example 1 (Interview):** One ELL student said, “I wrote about my dad coming to America. It made me think about what we went through. I never wrote something like that in school.”

- **Example 2 (Survey):** Eighty-five percent of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “Writing about myself helped me learn more about who I am.”
- **Example 3 (Teacher Journal):** “Students cried, laughed, and revisited difficult memories. The act of writing became therapeutic and powerful for many.”

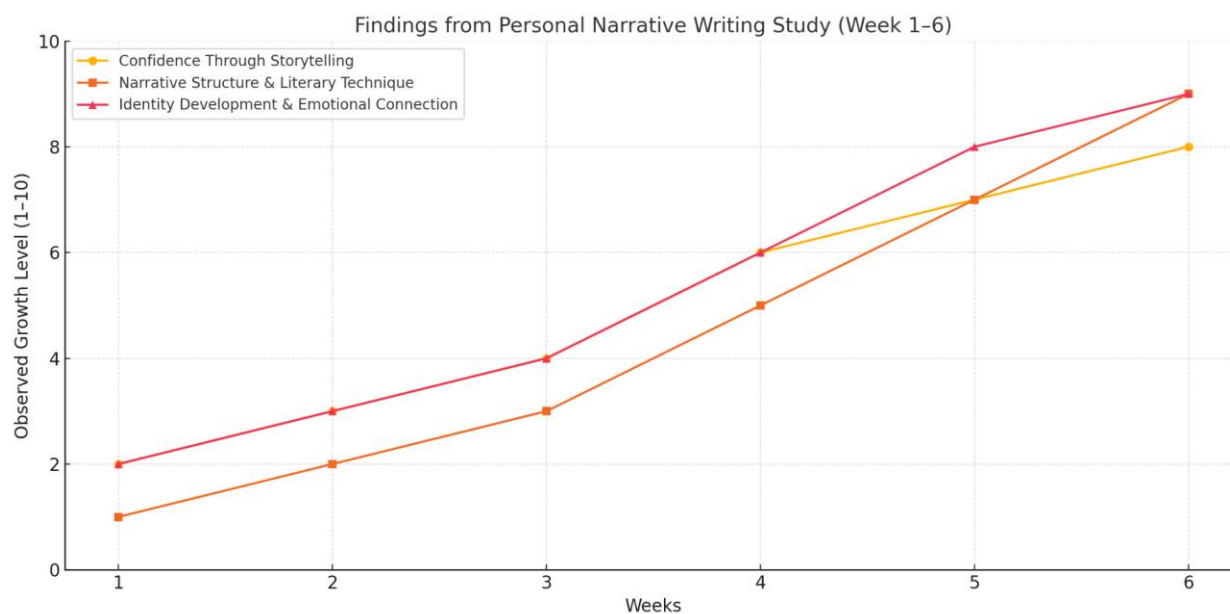
**Explanation:** Students engaged in meaningful self-reflection that extended beyond academics.

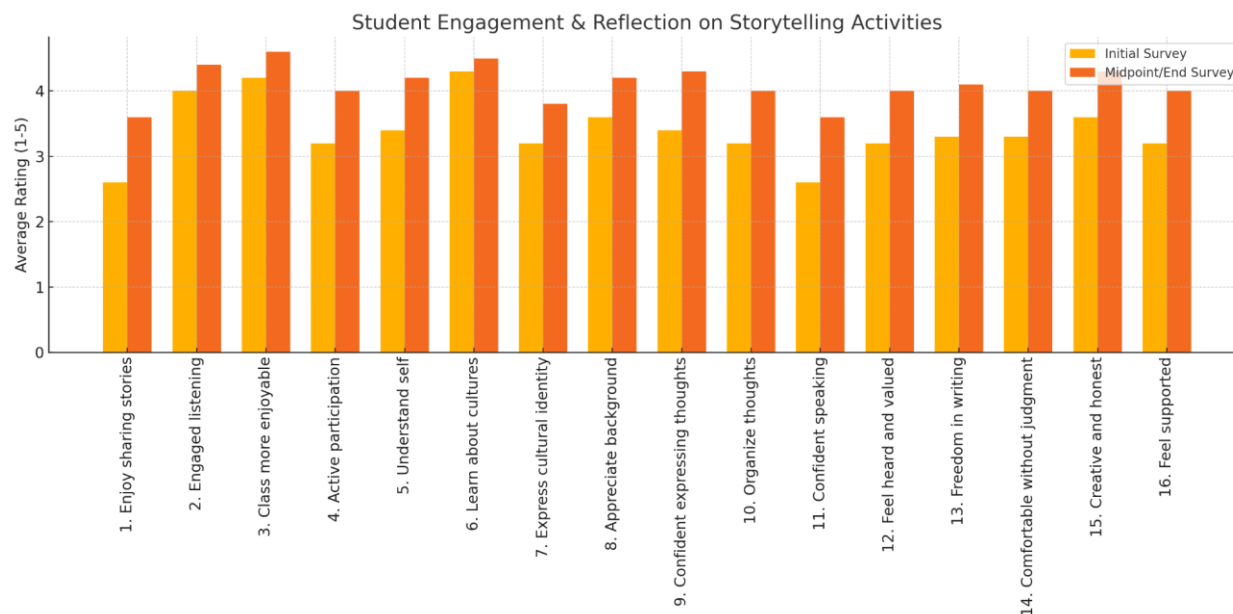
They used personal narratives to process emotions and explore identity, deepening the impact of their writing experiences.

**Figure 1.**

#### *Observed Growth Levels*

The line graph below illustrates growth across the three themes identified in the findings above. Each line represents increasing student engagement or development over six weeks based on observations, surveys, interviews, and writing samples.



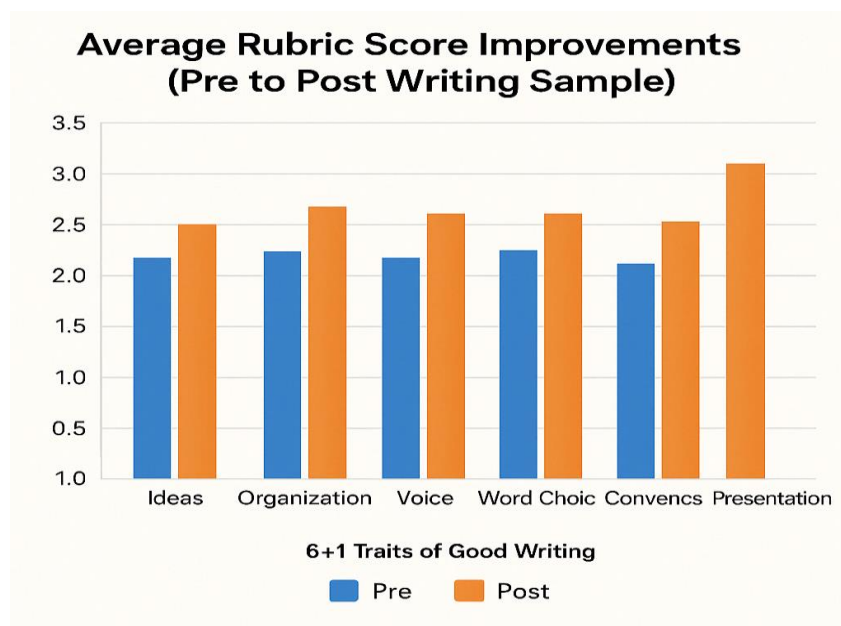
**Figure 2**

In Figure 2, every category demonstrated a clear upward trend. The most significant improvements were seen in Question 1, which measured enjoyment in sharing stories—rising from a score of 2.69 to 4.31—and in Question 11, which assessed speaking confidence, increasing from 2.63 to 4.13.

All categories ended above 4, showing strong engagement, confidence, and cultural connection by the end.

**Figure 3**

*Average Rubric Score Improvements (Pre to Post Writing Sample)*



\* ‘convens’- conventions

Each category—including organization, voice, descriptive language, and conventions (spelled as “convens” in the graph)—has shown noticeable growth. The most significant gains appeared in organization and voice, indicating that students structured their stories more effectively and developed stronger personal expression. While conventions started the lowest, they also have shown consistent improvement, reflecting better grammar and mechanics over time.

## Summary

This chapter detailed the findings from a six-week qualitative study exploring how personal narrative writing affects the confidence, proficiency, and identity development of ELLs and students with IEPs. Three major themes emerged: (1) students gained confidence through storytelling, (2) they demonstrated improved narrative skills, and (3) they engaged in deeper identity exploration. These findings, supported by data from writing samples, surveys, interviews, and observations, suggest that personal narrative writing plays a valuable role in student growth—both academically and emotionally.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the conclusions of the study based on the findings discussed in Chapter 4. The study investigated how personal narrative writing influenced the writing confidence, proficiency, and self-expression of sixth-grade English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The research questions that guided the study were:

1. How does personal narrative writing impact the confidence and writing proficiency of ELLs and students with IEPs?
2. How do students perceive the value of personal narratives in their academic growth and self-expression?

Drawing from student writing samples, surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and teacher reflections, three major conclusions have emerged. These conclusions align with the key themes presented in Chapter 4:

1. Personal narrative writing increases students' writing confidence through authentic storytelling.



2. Personal narrative writing improves students' use of narrative structure and literary techniques.
3. Personal narrative writing supports identity development and emotional engagement.

This chapter elaborates on each conclusion, discusses its connection to existing literature from Chapter 2, relates it to the theoretical framework described in Chapter 1, and offers recommendations for future research and educational practice.

### **Conclusion I: Personal Narrative Writing Increases Students' Writing Confidence Through Authentic Storytelling**

#### ***Discussion***

From the data analysis, particularly survey results, student interviews, and classroom observations, this conclusion was evident. Multiple students described feeling proud of writing about their own lives and expressed a sense of ownership over their stories. For example, one student stated in a post-survey, "I felt proud of my story because it was real." Increased willingness to read aloud, especially among ELLs, and enthusiastic participation in peer-sharing activities further supported this finding. These behaviors reflected a noticeable shift in confidence over the six-week instructional period.

The findings of this study are consistent with research presented in Chapter 2. Calkins (2003) emphasized that student voice is strengthened when writing is rooted in personal experience. Similarly, Dyson and Genishi (2005) found that narrative spaces allow culturally and linguistically diverse students to express themselves authentically and develop a sense of agency.

The findings in this study affirm that, for ELLs and students with IEPs, storytelling provided a powerful tool to feel seen, heard, and confident in their abilities.

This conclusion also aligns with the sociocultural theory that framed this study (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that learning is a socially mediated process, enhanced when tasks are meaningful and embedded in students' cultural experiences. By writing about their lives, students constructed meaning and confidence within their zones of proximal development through guided support and peer feedback.

The findings raise important implications for current educational challenges, particularly the need to build inclusive and culturally responsive writing classrooms. More studies could explore how this increased confidence translates into improved performance across other writing genres or subjects.

## **Conclusion II: Personal Narrative Writing Improves Students' Use of Narrative Structure and Literary Techniques**

### ***Discussion***

Based on rubric score comparisons between initial and final writing samples, students demonstrated significant growth in organization, voice, and use of descriptive language. Final drafts included stronger narrative arcs, better transitions, and intentional use of dialogue and figurative language. The teacher journal also noted students voluntarily experimenting with similes and metaphors, a clear shift from early drafts. These improvements support the conclusion that structured personal narrative instruction promotes technical writing development.

This conclusion reflects findings from Graham and Perin (2007), who identified explicit writing instruction and revision as key components of writing improvement among struggling writers. Additionally, Hebert et al. (2016) emphasized that narrative writing enhances not only creativity but structural and grammatical command, especially when students engage in self- and peer-revision. Like these studies, this project found that scaffolded instruction and opportunities for personal expression encouraged both engagement and growth in writing proficiency.

This also fits within Vygotsky's framework (1978), which emphasizes that learning is internalized through meaningful dialogue and active participation. Writing about personal topics encouraged students to think critically about how to structure their narratives in a way that made emotional and logical sense. Students developed these skills through revision conversations with the teacher and with peers.

Further research might investigate how narrative writing strategies can be embedded across content areas to support cross-curricular literacy. Additionally, future studies could explore how genre instruction compares to narrative-focused instruction in terms of developing structure and technique.

### **Conclusion III: Personal Narrative Writing Supports Identity Development and Emotional Engagement in ELLs and Students with IEPs**

#### ***Discussion***

Student interviews and surveys consistently revealed that writing about personal experiences allowed students to reflect deeply on their backgrounds, emotions, and family histories. One student wrote about a family immigration experience and said, "It made me think

about what we went through. I never wrote something like that in school.” Eighty-five percent of students agreed or strongly agreed that personal writing helped them learn about themselves. Teacher reflections documented emotional breakthroughs and increased student investment in writing assignments.

These findings affirm research reviewed in Chapter 2, particularly the work of Paris and Alim (2017b), who advocated for culturally sustaining pedagogies that support students’ multiple identities. The emotional connections students formed with their writing reflect what Souto-Manning (2010) described as the importance of narrative for honoring diverse voices and histories. This study contributes to that body of research by showing how these benefits apply specifically to ELLs and students with IEPs—groups that are often marginalized in traditional writing instruction.

The conclusion aligns with the sociocultural framework’s emphasis on identity as central to learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Holland et al., 1998). As students engaged with narrative writing, they not only developed academic skills but also deepened their personal and cultural awareness. This identity exploration was integral to their emotional and intellectual investment in learning.

While the findings were overwhelmingly positive, future research might investigate how students’ identity work through writing affects long-term academic performance or self-concept. It would also be worthwhile to study how students respond to other genres—like argumentative or expository writing—after engaging in narrative work focused on identity.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the conclusions above, several recommendations for further research, teachers, and administrators are offered:

### **For Further Research**

Future studies should include a broader range of populations and age groups to understand the varied impact of narrative writing. Research might focus on early elementary students to explore how identity writing supports foundational literacy skills, or on high school students to examine connections between personal storytelling and college-readiness. Studies involving English Language Learners (ELLs), students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and students from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds can shed light on how narrative writing supports academic engagement and self-expression across contexts. Additionally, long-term studies should investigate how identity work through writing influences academic growth over time, particularly in students' performance across genres such as expository, persuasive, and argumentative writing. Comparative studies could examine whether narrative writing provides a stronger foundation for genre-based writing than traditional skills-based instruction, especially for historically marginalized groups.

### **For Teachers**

Teachers are encouraged to embed personal narrative writing into regular instruction using culturally relevant prompts. These prompts can help English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with IEPs connect their writing to personal experiences. Instruction and revision should be scaffolded through modeling, consistent feedback, and structured opportunities for drafting and revising. Peer collaboration can further enhance this process. Teachers should also

foster identity exploration by promoting writing that allows students to engage with their cultural, familial, and personal identities, thereby increasing engagement and investment. To support these strategies, teachers should pursue ongoing professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive classroom practices, and trauma-informed writing instruction.

### **For Administrators**

Administrators should support inclusive curriculum planning by intentionally integrating narrative writing units that center identity, reflection, and voice, particularly for students from underrepresented backgrounds such as ELLs, students of color, and those receiving special education services. These units should be embedded across grade levels and disciplines to affirm diverse identities and experiences. To enable effective implementation, administrators must provide targeted resources for teacher training, including professional development on differentiated writing instruction, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and trauma-informed practices. They should also ensure that teachers have access to sufficient instructional time, updated pacing guides, and materials such as mentor texts, writing technology, and planning time. Finally, administrators should promote a schoolwide writing culture by creating opportunities for students to publish their work, participate in author events, and share their stories in community showcases—prioritizing voices that have been historically marginalized.

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