

CHAPTER 19.

MOTIVATING LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH TOWARD EDUCATION POLICY

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Writing studies scholars have long known that writers change along highly variable paths both across literacies (e.g., Lorimer Leonard 2013; Sarroub, 2005) and across time (e.g., Brandt, 1995; Carroll 2002). This work, along with the work of the lifespan writing collaboration, indicates that writing trajectories cannot be universalized. However, standards-based reform, the prevailing model of educational oversight in the United States, presumes that writers will grow only in one direction and only toward one goal of academic writing, broadly defined (Nordquist, 2017; Lin, 2014). Such a model seems like it cannot capture the complexity of a literate life, yet it dominates public education in the US.

Schools often position “development,” “growth,” or “progress” as the unsailable goal of education. Such an orientation renders modern standards-based reform legible (as you need a goal in order to have standards). As a result, standards-based reform is dependent on the growth model, even if that model neglects the foundational premise that writers shift in varied, unpredictable ways across time and space (Dippre and Phillips, 2020). I bring this disconnect to the attention of those interested in lifespan writing because curriculum is itself rhetorical. Schools can only offer a partial reading of teaching concepts, which are selected on ideological terms and reproduce society’s understanding of the world; if a school teaches it, society might believe it (Giroux, 1981). As a result, it is this understanding of writing, not one that sees all of a writer’s literacies as entangling across the lifespan, that is instilled in students. Yet, by intervening in policy conversations, we may be able to shift the popular definition of writing in the very long run.

How might these interventions happen? Bazerman et al. (2018) argue that two kinds of research are necessary for applying lifespan writing concepts to policy and curriculum: The first would identify the kinds of challenges that students with different experiences, languages, and contexts can address productively and learn from. The second would focus on the practices, challenges, and activities that can foster development over long periods. This chapter adds to this list by proposing

a third strand of research: an understanding of how these two aforementioned strategies can become possible within existing frameworks for education such as standards, exams, and accountability. We must turn our research attention to the contexts around writers in schools to understand how state standards, zoning, class sizes, vouchers, teacher experience, district mandates, curriculum guides, pre-existing understandings of writing, and testing all do or do not create opportunities for teachers to cultivate a lifespan orientation in their classroom. Sometimes the effect on the student writer may not be immediately visible, but these contextual factors are what make (or would make) lifespan-writing-in-school possible—or not.

In pursuit of this goal, I argue here that the concept of writing embedded in the United States' education standards—and the tests used to measure them—is a result not only of unexamined assumptions about writers and their growth, but also by the very constraints and complexities of policymaking and school governance. As a result, this essay operates from an assumption of good faith regarding education policy.¹ While writing researchers often discuss what education policy misses, corrupts, or obscures about writing, hypercritical approaches to policy often overlook the legal, political, and organizational obligations of policy action—the need to ensure equity across races and income levels, the difficulty of bringing teachers and administrators up to speed as curricula change, the complexities of intergovernmental relations, and so on.

Lifespan writing researchers must work *with* these limitations rather than simply critique them, so that our work can become useable within a policy context. We can observe from a critical distance to understand the effects of policy at all conceptual levels (as is hopefully clear, this very paper is deeply indebted to those approaches), but must also understand policy's objectives and constraints when it is time to chart a path forward. Because these concerns are baked into the policy-making process at such a deep level, making connections between lifespan writing research and policy is fundamentally a methodological question: we cannot only ask how the results of our research can contribute to policy, but how our research can shift in focus and methodology to address policy at its core in both schools and government.

This essay focuses on education policy in the United States. While the policy landscapes of different nations will invariably lead to different intersections between writing research and policy, the United States offers a productive starting point for studying these intersections for a few reasons. Education in the United States is exceptionally decentralized, which creates many different simultaneous policy realities that writing researchers may encounter. Exploring how policy is

1 This statement applies to broad, longstanding systems of education policy (e.g., standards), rather than the outright attacks on public schooling coming from the likes of Governors Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott.

taken up by these different localities and governing bodies can offer multiple productive understandings of the potential role of lifespan writing research in writing development. Education policy in the United States is also significant because the past seventy years has been defined by conversations, policies, and legal rulings around equity; starting this analysis with a country that has legal obligations to equity may keep connections between lifespan writing research and equity central as we transpose this analysis transnationally. Do note that the particularities of standards are often in flux in this country and they vary across the states. This text then focuses on the rationale of standards and testing in general, rather than the particulars of individual standards.

The foundational commitments of policymaking and writing pedagogy are each built on sound principals, even though the traditions, ways of knowledge-making, and above all stakeholders bring our work in different directions. I propose three themes for lifespan writing research's prospects for coming to terms with policy foundations:

- The decentralized nature of education policy, in which many actors have a say in what happens in the writing classroom
- The presumption of stepwise growth toward one writing goal that renders standards legible to these many stakeholders despite simplifying writing
- The concern for equity, which is a foundational concern for an education system that has such an unequal past and present

In the conclusion, I explore implications for lifespan writing research design, and offer perspective on motivating lifespan writing research broadly.

THEME ONE: WHAT IS POLICY, EXACTLY?

I begin with an exploration of the players involved in implementing education policy in the US, both to offer context on policy in general and to map the complexities of possible interventions. In the US, individual states set *content standards*, or goals that they want students to achieve at a certain age. The rationale behind this approach is to avoid state-mandated school actions (e.g., individual lessons or assignments); as long as the students can meet the standards (usually as measured by tests), the mode of getting there is left up to individual districts, schools, and teachers. This means that any investigation into the effects of education policy on student writing knowledge must connect the text of the standards to the system of educators who can influence writing pedagogy at the high school level. It is not enough to say “the standards say students must learn X, and so students will all do Y.” Students may learn X by doing Q, R, or F,

depending on many factors. This theme, which covers the complex relationship between policy and practice, addresses the many contingencies involved in implementing education standards as classroom practice. These contingencies pose some methodological challenges for tracking what standards have to do with student learning, while also creating avenues for implementing lifespan policies in classrooms in the short term. In this section, I will briefly illustrate this issue from four perspectives: a sense-making perspective, a school network perspective, a school context perspective, and a testing perspective. Then, I will address the implications for this diffused policy system for lifespan writing researchers.

The sense-making perspective concerns individual people—teachers, principals, superintendents, district curriculum personnel—and their understandings of standards. James Spillane (2009), in a study of nine Michigan school districts' implementation of state mathematics standards, uses "sense-making" to describe how these local district personnel interpret standards by relying on their own understandings of teaching concepts and their histories with standards (p. 62). For example, Sonny Naughton, responsible for the mathematics curriculum in his district, understood math instruction as teaching procedural knowledge (i.e., the implementation of stable formulae), rather than principled, conceptual instruction (the method favored by a new set of standards). Naughton did encourage the new curriculum's *activities*, like hands-on learning, but did not see these activities as in-service of a new way of understanding math because he himself understood math in a different way. Sense-making then involves a policy interacting with a teacher or district official's "mental script" (p. 78) for that content area, which may need to change to make room for new knowledge (see also Franzak, 2008; Tardy, 2011) or the leveraging of previous knowledge to implement policy on the teacher's terms (see Lin, 2014). In terms of writing, we might think about how many teachers could have divergent definitions of "argumentation" or "appropriate style," which may create many different versions of these concepts across the nation's classrooms. While this certainly poses a policy problem, it does create an opportunity for lifespan-related interventions, as teachers with lifespan-oriented definitions of writing may be able to implement those concepts while remaining within the boundaries of the standards.

Each of these mental scripts is a small part of a broader network of people through which standards are implemented, which means that we must also pay attention to the structure of school districts when considering standards implementation. This is the focus of the network perspective. Individual districts may implement a prescribed writing curriculum (e.g., McCarthey, 2008), leaving the teachers' interpretation of the state standards less relevant—they have been pre-interpreted. The network perspective also draws our attention to the line of communication between states, districts, and teachers. District policymakers do

not only follow state guidance regarding changes to teaching practice; they may also consult the policies of other states, professional organizations, and private consultants (Spillane, 2009). Sometimes, working with multiple directives can lead to disjunctures between district and school understandings of which policy should be followed, which can lead to teachers relying on previous practices rather than adopting reform (Franzak, 2008). “The standards,” then, change as they pass through the district and school.

Another filter through which policy moves from state or federal legislation to student desks is school context. Factors like funding, learner backgrounds, and size of school might affect how standards are implemented. Teachers also recognize the learning needs of their particular students, paying attention to their interest and abilities, in crafting literacy curricula (Murphy and Smith, 2018). Other school context factors determine the extent to which schools feel compelled to follow policy changes. Teachers in high-performing and low-performing schools may feel the effects of accountability differently, as schools under pressure may be more likely to do explicit test preparation (McCarthy, 2008). The pressure to raise test scores in these lower-performing schools can overshadow a teacher’s beliefs about writing, as external pressures to avoid school closure or take-over become prioritized. The means through which policy is rendered as a classroom experience then has as much to do with the school’s location—and as a consequence, its funding and its student body—as it does with teacher understandings or organizational capacity for meeting reforms. When considering what “the standards” say, then, we must also be aware of how the incentive system built around them will construct teacher agency and, by extension, writing activities unevenly.

We must also get specific when discussing “the tests” because the theories of writing found in writing standards are not always reflected in the tests used to measure them (Hillocks, 2002; Jacobson, 2015). By pressuring schools, tests can lead to a narrowing of curriculum, leading teachers who are nervous about low scores to teach only the material found on the test at the expense of other material, or to teach “shortcuts” that apply to the form of writing on the test but not other forms of writing (see Koretz, 2017; Gabor, 2018). We must also recognize that tests in all academic disciplines, not just English, may require writing and may therefore have the power to shape curriculum. It is then necessary for us to understand not only the content of the standards, but the content of the tests, if we are to hope for lifespan writing research to have any effect on K-12 schooling.

Policy’s differential nature certainly provokes limitations: one cannot simply change the standards and expect everything else to follow. These varied influences on classroom activities also open up an opportunity for lifespan writing researchers. At the end of the day, it is classroom action and writing experiences that matters to students, not the text of the standards that they will probably

never read. This means that our lifespan writing research can be directed toward cultivating lifespan orientations at the classroom, school, and district level. Teachers and lifespan writing researchers can work together to figure out ways to meet standards through a lifespan orientation, thereby sheltering the school from sanction in the short term while still cultivating this long-term understanding of writing in students. This approach does not address the larger system itself and relies only on the goodwill of individual teachers, which does not lead to long-term change (Elmore, 2004). It does mean, though, that short-term progress can be made in classrooms while we look toward long-term progress at the level of the accountability system. We could also hope that making changes at the local level could lead to revised expectations at the national level.

Effective inroads at the national level would involve expanding the scope of the research inquiry beyond the texts of standards, or even beyond the experiences of students, and toward the teachers, administrators, and tests in their worlds. Ethnographies of writers that explore institutional context are one place to start, as are smaller-scale studies of the lifespan orientations of educators and the accountability measures they face. With the results of studies like these, lifespan writing researchers can work with schools to identify the ways that a lifespan orientation can be built in the modern accountability context. Such research can also build knowledge about how policy is implemented, which is a critical step in understanding how policy can be re-imagined from a lifespan perspective.

THEME TWO: UNIDIRECTIONAL GROWTH

With the landscape of policy implementation established, it is important to cover what the dominant policy paradigm expects a writing curriculum to look like, so that lifespan writing researchers can understand how their work may be interpreted. Education reform often holds up “college and career readiness” as its goal, and to get students to this threshold, the Common Core State Standards were written with “anchor standards” in mind. These are a set of competencies that students are expected to meet by the time they finish compulsory schooling—and backward-mapped to the earlier grades (Loveless, 2021, p. 70). Writers are then expected to embark on “stair-stepped, closed developmental trajectories” (Nordquist, 2017, p. 9) as they progress toward these goals. For this second theme, I will discuss how lifespan writing researchers can work within this unidirectional growth framework by discussing the reasons for resisting this model of writing development in the first place, then proposing how individual schools and teachers can approach alternative models of development, closing with a proposal for a research agenda that can address this question in the long run.

There are (at least) two problems with the unidirectional growth vision. The first is a consequentialist argument: a concept of unidirectional growth assumes only one set of writing goals is worthwhile, while research underscores that students build connections to writing when given the chance to set their own goals (Eodice et al., 2017) and can become alienated from writing when goals are determined for them by teachers and administration (Beaufort, 2008; McCarty, 2019). Assuming growth toward one set of writing goals also means uncritically absorbing students into “school literacy,” which often presumes a standard academic English, leaving students who speak any other language (or variant) to catch up to the dominant form of literacy on their own (Matsuda, 2006). As a result, orienting writing pedagogy around unidirectional growth toward “college and career readiness” can become a gateway for the erasing of non-dominant Englishes from classrooms and alienating of students from interest in writing.

The second reason to move away from unidirectional growth is that it is not in-step with modern research on writing development. Lifespan writing researchers are interested in growth but recognize that there is more to writing across the lifespan than all-growth-all-the-time. Lifespan writing research is interested in development as much as it is interested in “*change*, in *stasis*, even in *decline* in one’s abilities. In short, we want to understand what happens in people’s writing lives and why, regardless of whether what happens could be understood as “development” or not. (Dippre and Phillips, 2020a, p. 7). All changes (or lack of change) in writing are subject to inquiry. We must then explore how lifespan writing research can be activated to challenge this assumption of unidirectional growth.

One method is to use the structure of schools to our advantage. By teaching particular genres, techniques, settings, and concepts of writing, schools inevitably filter down the number of text types that are considered academic. When policies pressure schools to teach specific types of writing, the funnel gets smaller. For example, time spent practicing and testing handwritten argumentative essays is time not spent making infographics on a computer or poetry with sidewalk chalk, leaving those genres to live somewhere other than the academic and the legitimate. By contrast, lifespan writing research understands all of these forms of writing—and other forms of expression other than writing—as being part of a person’s literate life. As a result, lifespan writing research seek to “[cut] loose from our moorings of normalization into the great varieties of experience, the great varieties of trajectories that look so different” (Bazerman, 2020, p. xii). This commitment is foundational to lifespan writing research, but schools normalize concepts whether we like it or not. As a result, we might wonder that if normalization is an inherent property of writing in school, can we *normalize the lifespan?*

Such a project would involve re-imagining our classrooms and, later, our policy, to place writing’s lack of center at its center. This does mean that lifespan

writing research focused on classrooms and the education system would need to make one concession—that we do, in fact, need to normalize something—but could do so on the terms of lifespan writing research. Smith (2020) suggests that lifespan writing researchers take up an “across” orientation that understands writing in one location and time [as] not tethered or isolated to that context; rather, writing is a “widely distributed, highly complex phenomenon” (p. 18). We may wonder whether it would be possible to normalize the “across” orientation in classrooms. In doing so, we can see that even as lifespan writing researchers hope to break loose from normalization in our *research* (and we should continue to do so), these changing circumstances for writing can be at the center of our *teaching*.

This would involve focusing on writing’s capacity to enable a writer’s experimentation and negotiation of new social roles (Carroll, 2002; Montes and Tusting, this volume). Thinking of writing as a consistent re-making of always-shifting roles gives writing an indispensable role in an educational journey. Writing is a way to make these new roles happen, to linger and reflect on them. If a classroom can place this re-identification at its center, then writing will always have a job tied to fluctuation, thereby rendering unidirectionality inert.

Normalizing lifespan writing is an example of how we must respond to the contexts and concerns of policymaking while maintaining our theoretical commitments to lifespan writing. Schools normalize. Shying away from this function will allow alternative definitions of writing to take center stage, but by strategically normalizing lifespan writing concepts in the lives of students, a lifespan orientation can become indispensable while lifespan-oriented pedagogy and research work with—not against—the basic architecture of schooling.

To be fair, this proposal may, yet again, address the problem of unidirectional growth only at the classroom level, and not at the level of policy. If one of the fundamental reasons for studying policy is to understand what helps or prohibits classroom teachers in teaching writing from a lifespan perspective, then “put all of the responsibility on the teachers to normalize the lifespan” is just not good enough. I propose that addressing this problem of unidirectional growth from a policy standpoint begins not with persuading legislators and standard writers that unidirectional growth is wrong, but to start laying out alternatives.

To do so, I close this theme by exploring where learning expectations come from in the first place. Herbert Kliebard (2002) argues that learning expectations for students originate in the nineteenth century practice of dividing students up into groups by ability, and later by age. Only once this system of classification was in place was a logic of expectations able to be mapped onto the student experience. Acknowledging this relationship between age and standards aids our analysis in two ways: One, knowing that the concept of stepwise growth is tied to the grade classification system, a premise of the American school system

so foundational that it is taken for granted, means that we must work within these constraints for the time being (attempts to reform age divisions in the past have fallen victim to a few issues, namely that it is highly convenient for school management; see Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Second, knowing that the age classification system did *need to be invented* underscores the basic fact that it is not inevitable. If we imagine an education system without classification by grade, and thereby no assumption of clear, stepwise growth, we can envision a system that allows for progress, stasis, horizontal movement, and decline as all part of the lifespan itself. Considering writing research from outside the perspective of grades and age, instead focusing on activities, social roles, or processes of knowledge-making, may help untether our research from the expectations of grading. From that point, new orientations to writing and growth that can facilitate a challenge to unidirectional growth at a policy level may emerge.

THEME THREE: EVIDENCE AND EQUITY

While breaking up students by age *facilitates* presumptions of progress in the school system, there is more keeping the growth narrative intact. In this section, I argue that a constitutional obligation to educational equity is at the very bottom of the modern testing and standards system, and that pursuing a lifespan-oriented writing curriculum at the level of state or federal education policy would require an understanding of equity. As I will illustrate, valid concerns over equity leads to a presumption that writing must be decontextualized to be measured. Alternative definitions of equity stand on rickety persuasive ground because the U.S. Department of Education defines “evidence” rather narrowly. Overall, this section argues that it is important to engage with these concerns over evidence and equity rather than rejecting them because they are methodologically inconvenient.

Let’s start with why there is a system of tests and standards in the first place. Many histories of standard-based reform in the United States invoke economic anxieties as a major rationale for implementing standard-based education reform (often via *A Nation at Risk*, see Loveless, 2021; Addison & McGee, 2015). These economic anxieties drive many of the assumptions of linear, stepwise growth toward one writing goal, but there is more going on.

McDermott (2011) argues that “in public education, equity has been the main justification for the move to judge performance” and to centralize policy (p. 3; see also Schneider and Saultz, 2020). This evolving definition of equity and centralizing of the education system stems from desegregation; the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision made the federal government responsible for enforcing civil rights in schools, thereby giving it a larger role in a previously decentralized and stratified system. The definition of equity used to enforce those rights

evolved; *Brown v. Board of Education* started with an understanding of equity as access to the same schools, which evolved in later years to equal *funding*, to the concept that a truly equal education means equal *outcomes* (McDermott, 2011; see also Briffault, 2009). Standard-based reform offered a way to ensure this version of equity: if we test the students, we can see where they are underachieving and see where resources are needed. This is how we know about the achievement gap between white and Asian students and Black and Latino students (Koretz, 2017), which has mobilized so much productive work among education activists, teachers, and policymakers.

I do not mean to claim here that ensuring equity through testing works. As Koretz (2017) argues, “testing simply can’t carry the weight that has been piled on it” (p. 15) and contributes to a bureaucracy that objectifies students of color and leads to drop-outs as schools under pressure fudge the numbers (Johnson, 2009). Instead, I hope to name an important problem for lifespan writing research: if we take the differences between various reading and writing tasks as a given (which we should) and understand that all writers will have different paths and purposes for writing (which they will), then how can we start thinking about equity? Our work revels in difference; could such difference-focused work be used to justify an argument two educations are equitable? “Equitable” does not mean “the same,” but making substantive interventions into the field of education policy—where our data would be able to meaningfully challenge assumptions about how writers change—would require a definition of equity. Until lifespan writing can offer such a definition, the education system will continue to rely on the incompleteness of tests.

This is a massive challenge because the current equity-based system seeks to quantify and decontextualize student writing via standardized testing in order to facilitate comparison. Bazerman et al. (2018) argue that the complexities of lifespan writing, which incorporate formal qualities of writing along with values, understandings of technology, confidence, writing strategies, and other non-textual facets of writing cannot be observed by merely reading a student’s writing. One would need to get to know the student, their context, and their history before being able to make judgments about how that writer is changing, through multiple methods of inquiry (Bazerman et al., 2018). By only relying on what is on the page, the decisions we make based on test scores come from an incomplete picture. Even if a student is in a lifespan-oriented curriculum, the current accountability system is not built to give the school credit for such an approach. Schools under pressure from the accountability system then have no reason to adopt a lifespan orientation, as a lifespan orientation’s benefits are not visible on an exam.

Proposing changes to the dimensions of writing prioritized by the accountability system would dredge up another problem for lifespan writing researchers:

In the US, content standards are built around a research consensus that samples a limited range of methodologies, rather than the wide range of research methodologies that lifespan writing researchers endorse across this volume. It turns out that the difference is not arbitrary; lifespan writing researchers value the kind of research that can account for the contextual factors that are disregarded by the current system.

In 1997, Congress convened the National Reading Panel (NRP) to assess the body of research on teaching children to read, setting the stage for the evidence base used to develop content standards for both *No Child Left Behind* and the *Common Core State Standards* (Calfee, 2013). The “scientific” evidence base agreed upon by the NRP emphasized direct-instruction and mechanical reading pedagogy which led to measurable outcomes that could be held up as evidence that given policies were working (Young & Potter, 2017). The Department of Education established a hierarchy of research studies, considering randomly controlled experiments as most trustworthy and subordinating many of the methodologies that lifespan writing researchers use to account for the social dimensions of reading and writing like case studies, ethnographies, and observation (Ellis, 2013; Compton-Lilly & Stewart, 2013). This emphasis on randomly controlled experiments now extends beyond the NRP to the What Works Clearinghouse, an online resource sponsored by the Department of Education that hosts research and recommends learning interventions only if they are grounded in single-intervention, randomly controlled experiments (What Works Clearinghouse, 2020). The definition of “works,” then, is quite narrow; if educators are accustomed to this definition of “proper” research, then those of us who work in the complexities of non-controlled experiments must actively seek ways to change this narrative.

How did randomly controlled experiments come to monopolize the Department of Education’s definition of good educational practice? One reason is the make-up of the NRP itself; the vast majority of its members conceived of reading as a basic skill to be taught through direct instruction as opposed to whole-language approaches, a binary that characterized the “reading wars” of the 1990s (Calfee, 2013). Another reason is an understanding of the field of education as “subject to fads and . . . incapable of the cumulative progress that follows from the application of the scientific method” (U.S. Department of Education, quoted in Ellis 2013, p. 80). Lifespan writing researchers, who of course traffic in context-rich readings of writers, must understand these rationales. For lifespan writing research to be applicable to education policy, it would need to challenge these research paradigms or a find a way to enter them. Doing so intentionally would involve considerations of our research design—what do randomly-controlled experiments contribute, and how can lifespan writing research designs make intentional decisions around our research questions to demonstrate our contribution?

The scientism governing standard writing, funding awards, and the What Works Clearinghouse is partially rooted in a desire for replicability (Kerrigan & Johnson, 2018). Lifespan writing research should take seriously calls for replicability in composition studies (see Haswell, 2005; Anson, 2008). Lifespan writing researchers could set their sights on, say, *approximate replication*, which involves repeating studies while changing a few non-critical variables to suit the researcher's context, or *conceptual replication*, the process of testing previously uncovered results with new methods (Raucci 2021). Because replication seeks not to simply validate research but to contextualize and extend findings, it is a promising avenue for a collaborative research project like writing across the lifespan, which can work further toward cohesion through replication. Essentially, we can have replication without “essentializing phenomena in pursuit of the unnecessary requirement of generalizability as a standard of validity, ultimately weakening the research and its implications for understanding policy and its outcomes” (Kerrigan & Johnson, 2018, 291).

Replication is possible through both qualitative and quantitative research, and through many different research designs. A sustained, robust research body that substantiates claims about lifespan writing can be persuasive in higher education circles, local school governance, and professional development settings. This does not, though, mean that the positivist assumptions at the national or even state level will make space for studies that account for the complex contexts of teaching and learning (and interpretation of research results), regardless of whether such studies are replications or original. Instead, lifespan writing research ought to align itself with critical approaches to education research methodologies that continue to challenge the dominant paradigms posited by the U.S. Department of Education from the bottom up.

One way to do so is to rely on context-oriented, ground-up research methods connected to the outcomes that are often central to policymaking. We could foreground the multiplicity of reading and writing practices happening at a given site and how they make contributions to more “countable” metrics. For example, students transitioning to college may have to revise their notetaking practices to keep track of course material (Harklau, 2001). Notetaking, while not thought of as “academic writing” in many senses, is a vital literacy practice that could have connections to issues that concern policymakers, like grades and retention. Lifespan writing researchers can maintain its focus on a multiplicity of writing practices by drawing connections between them and traditional academic outcomes.

CONCLUSION

To make substantial contributions to the field of education policy, lifespan writing research must respond to the foundational concerns of that field: public education

involves a complex network of actors with individual concepts of writing; it trends toward assumed progress in defined competencies; it must be equitable. To make productive interventions, we need an understanding of teacher and policymaker concepts of lifespan writing, a disruption of unidirectional growth that is functional within the school system, and a lifespan-oriented definition of equity.

While this essay is primarily concerned with writing research in the US, answers to these questions from many national contexts are necessary to chart a path forward. In order to address the challenges in this country, we need to both remain constantly aware of the limitations that act on policy actors and teachers and be able to understand possibilities for pedagogy and policy that are untethered from the current system in the United States. Similarly, other countries with different policy systems (e.g., a system that is more centralized, or a system that has less of a legal focus on equity) may benefit from seeing ongoing work in the US in order to see beyond their immediate contexts. Comparative efforts (e.g., Jeffery et al., 2019) can shed further light on how the challenges for applying lifespan writing research to policy concerns vary by national context and values—and how sometimes, they are facts of wrangling something as complex as lifespan writing research into policy.

Applications of lifespan writing research to education policy must take place at the level of research design. While studies of writers crossing contexts should remain a cornerstone of lifespan writing research, the aforementioned issues may require comparative studies of writers, institutional ethnographies, policy readings, and case studies of teachers. While these projects are already taking place in both composition studies and education policy studies, only by designing from a lifespan perspective can we ensure that they will generate the findings needed to move the lifespan project forward. For example, we might ask questions like: if two students with different literacy histories interact with the same state-mandated writing exam, what are the different understandings of writing that they might bring to, and learn from, it? Or: What concepts of writing progress do secondary school instructors have and how do their goals differ from or echo the understandings of unidirectional growth posited by the standards? How do these understandings then differ across contexts?

When thinking about motivating lifespan writing research in general (i.e., not specifically toward education policy), we must consider motivation as a dialectic. In the conclusion to their earlier volume on lifespan writing research, Dippre and Phillips (2020b) name both *building points of convergence* and *motivating the research* as two sequential steps required to apply lifespan writing research. Moving toward points of convergence refers to identifying assumptions and findings from seemingly divergent studies and articulating the finer agreements between them while motivating refers to orienting lifespan writing

research to common points of interest. That chapter emphasizes the importance of identifying and operationalizing the shared research objects and understandings identified as points of convergence and detail the complexity of such work when research topics and methods might be so different. Indeed, patiently working through this complexity is necessary work for anyone hoping to apply lifespan writing research. However, a third step of recognizing the effects of the field we study on our research agenda is also necessary.

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