

The Office of Campus and Community Writing
Featured Writing Series: April 2019 Edition
Bright Futures Leaders

EMU Bright Futures is a 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool program serving youth and families in 25 schools in the Wayne-Westland Community School District, Ypsilanti Community Schools, and Romulus Community Schools. Bright Futures addresses the needs of children, families, community stakeholders, and schools in writing, reading, math, health, and social-emotional growth.

This winter, staff members from Bright Futures (under the direction of Lynn Malinoff) collaborated with the Eastern Michigan Writing Project (EMWP) and enrolled in a specially-designed Winter Writing Institute. The Institute focuses on integrating writing into teaching practices. Those who complete the Institute officially join our EMWP family of Teacher Consultants (TCs).

Throughout the Institute, the Bright Futures staff members have worked on their own writing, learned best practices in teaching writing, and created a teacher-research question to investigate in their own settings. Working with instructor, Dr. Cathy Fleischer, EMWP co-director and English department faculty member, they refined and fine-tuned their questions and created research plans. Here we highlight their [research questions](#).



Brett Tavana (pictured left), a Bright Futures site coordinator with local elementary schools, is focused on the relationship among student identity, representation, and engagement with writing. His question was inspired by Bright Futures' commitment to supporting students and the recent influx of diverse characters in mainstream movies and television shows. Brett noted that as super hero movie characters have become more representative, the students he works with have become more interested in trying new things with writing.

“A lot of the books [available to kids] are about a little white boy and his dog,” Brett says. “Not all of them can relate to that. I have a lot of kids who don't want to read, period, because it just doesn't interest them. A lot of times that's because they can't relate to [the books.]”

He says the process of writing his research question was a lesson in narrowing his scope and bringing teacher research into his work life. While the need to focus his research, question did not surprise him, the easy integration with his work as a site coordinator did. Writing this question showed him that he can make writing and research a major part of his work with local schools.

Christine Kim (pictured below), another Bright Futures site coordinator, is focused on a gap in the literature on reading and writing. While most research studies look at the way student interest influences their writing habits and abilities, Christine is taking the opposite approach. She is interested in the way experiences with writing impact reading abilities. She says the students she works with are not necessarily interested in reading, and she wonders if more writing in afterschool settings will inspire more reading.



She says writing her research question was relatively easy; the idea came to her and she followed it. Her experience with working with kids and observing their reading and writing habits might have something to do with the ease with which she developed this question.

“I historically have struggled [with writing research questions],” Christine says. “But, something just kind of clicked this time around.”

Rayna Ketchum (pictured below, far left), a Bright Futures site coordinator, is researching an unorthodox concept: “unschooling.” She is interested in this practice, which she says is a critical pedagogy.



“[Unschooling] has an intention to transform traditional education, to make it student driven, to make education primarily focused on student intrinsic motivation,” Rayna says. “It’s a really radical approach to education, and honestly, very little attention is given to it.”

She says the lack of focus on unschooling in educational research is due to the fact that it does not seem to relate to school settings. She says there are unschooling pockets in public-school settings, but this has not been embraced

in any widespread way.

The process of writing this question surprised Rayna because she did not think she would be able to bring her personal interests into the class.

“It was a little hard to marry my personal interests with the topic of the class,” she says. “This is a writing class so [our research questions] have to be writing oriented. But with unschooling, the whole idea is that students drive their education and learn through natural processes. How do you look at that type of practice with the intention of writing, of learning and experiencing writing, when that’s kind of contrary to the unschooling practice in itself?”

Will Spotts (pictured above, middle), an assistant director for Bright Futures, says his research question, like Rayna’s, was inspired by his personal interests. He is interested in staff professional development and the physical environment of workspaces. He brought these two interests together into a question about opportunities to embed writing into Bright Future’s programming.

He stayed flexible with the wording of his question after it was written. He found that he needed to both expand and narrow it down it later in the writing process. Will added the physical space aspect after visiting two different Bright Futures sites in one day.

“For me it was most difficult to really pare it down into something that was a little simpler to do, as opposed to an overarching question to work hard at and never really find an answer,” Will says. “I think the winnowing down was difficult but necessary.”

RJ Quiambao, pictured below, far right, is researching the five-paragraph essay format and its alternatives. He noticed the five-paragraph essay became a fill-in-the-blank exercise for a student he was working with, instead of a challenging assignment.

“[The student] was more focused on completing the requirements of the essay, rather than on the craft of writing itself,” RJ says. “He just regurgitated what was on the paper. And in that sense, he wasn’t really learning.”

While Will ended up changing parts of his question after starting his research, RJ changed his entire question. He started with a question focused on retention, but realized he needed to make it more specific.



To read the research questions the Bright Futures leaders produced, click [here](#). To learn more about the Bright Futures program, please visit the program’s [website](#). If you would like to nominate a writer or group of writers to be featured as part of our monthly series, please email Dr. Cathy Fleischer, cfleische@emich.edu