

The Meaning of Writing for Teenagers with ASD: Exploring their Motives  
for Writing in and out of School  
(*Marie-Eve Boisvert-Hamelin, Delphine Odier-Guedj*)

Corresponding Author:

**Marie-Eve Boisvert-Hamelin**, Professor

Email address: [marieveboisverth@gmail.com](mailto:marieveboisverth@gmail.com)

Université de Montréal

Département de psychopédagogie et d'andragogie

Case postale 6128, succursale Centre-Ville

Montreal, Quebec, H3C 3J7, Canada

**Delphine Odier-Guedj**

Senior Lecturer, Monash University

Level 1, Room1.67C, Clayton Campus

19 Ancora Imparo Way

Monash University VIC 3800

Australia

[delphine.odier-guedj@monash.edu](mailto:delphine.odier-guedj@monash.edu)

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# **The Meaning of Writing for Teenagers with ASD: Exploring their Motives for Writing in and out of School**

## **Abstract**

To facilitate the learning of writing in a setting that is inclusive of students with ASD, it is instructive to examine writing difficulties from a strength-based perspective by looking at the meanings students give to writing activities. This qualitative study explored the meanings and motives for writing of two 14-year-olds with ASD through their writing activities both in and out of school. Data were collected through interviews and filmed participant observation. The data analyses were cross-referenced to understand the students' motives for writing. This study suggests that bridges can be created between students' motives for writing in school and out of school. Our findings pave the way to new approaches in teaching writing in schools.

**Key Words:** *writing, relation to writing, autism spectrum disorder, inclusive education*

Since the Salamanca Statement in 1994, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1994) has promoted inclusive education for all, calling on schools to reduce barriers to learning and facilitate the participation of every student (Carrington et al., 2012). Clearly, this is the first step to a more inclusive society, and writing is essential to this process in a country such as Canada, where writing is omnipresent in daily life. Moreover, while writing is considered fundamental to academic success and employability (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Canada, 2000), for some individuals with ASD, writing is also helpful for communication and to gain a better understanding of the world and their experiences (Boisvert-Hamelin, 2014; Jackson, 2002). In addition, the abundance of writing about ASD by persons with ASD themselves appears to indicate the importance of this mode of expression both for self-understanding (O’Connell, 2010) and to be understood by others. To facilitate the learning of students who have difficulties with writing, it is instructive to use the concept of “relation to writing” to examine those difficulties from a strength-based perspective.

Two interesting approaches are emerging to reduce school inequalities related to writing difficulties of students without disabilities. The first considers the “relation to writing” of students experiencing difficulties by looking at what they say about writing, its meaning for them, the barriers they encounter, and the facilitators of their school participation and academic success (Barré-De Miniac, 2015; Bucheton, 2014). In the second, New Literacy Studies researchers view writing as a social activity (Gee, 2000). For Gee (2000), a social view of writing implies that it is used in different ways “to enact, recognize, and negotiate different socially situated identities and to carry out different socially situated activities” (p. 143). In teaching, this social view of writing reveals the importance of acquiring knowledge regarding

students' out-of-school writing and how they use writing in their daily lives, to understand what writing means for them and build bridges between in-school and out-of-school writing activities (Papen, 2005). Proponents of both approaches caution against a one-size-fits-all approach to the teaching of writing and stress the importance, rather, of focusing on understanding the person learning to write (Barré-De Miniac, 2015; Papen & Collette, 2013; Penloup, 2003). Knowing the meaning students give to their writing activities can enable educators to better support students' engagement in learning (Cardoso & Álvares Pereira, 2015; Papen, 2005; Penloup, 2003).

### **Relation to Writing and the Meaning of Writing Activities**

Over the past 30 years, researchers have explored the concept of “relation to writing” to understand writing difficulties that cannot be attributed to a learning disability in written expression (Barré-De Miniac, 2002, 2015; Barré-De Miniac et al., 1993; Bucheton, 2014). For our study, like Cardoso and Álvares Pereira (2015), we based our definition of “relation to writing” on the work of French sociologist Bernard Charlot (1997) on “relation to knowledge”, which he defined as “the relationship to the world, the other and oneself of a subject confronted with the need to learn. The relation to knowledge is the (organized) set of relationships a person has with everything related to ‘learning’ and knowledge” (p. 94, authors' translation). While Charlot (Charlot et al., 1992; Charlot, 1997) developed this notion to understand students' poor performance at school, Bautier (2002) suggested it could also be applied to understand language-related activities such as writing. For Bautier (2002), “relation to” refers to the relation between a person and his or her environment regarding an activity, which includes the meaning the person gives to that activity.

In accordance with Charlot's (1997) framework, we operationalized the “relation to writing” through three dimensions: identity-related, epistemic, and social. To understand the

meaning of writing activities, in this article we focus on the identity-related dimension, which we analyze through the meaning a person gives to learning and using writing (Charlot, 1997). For Charlot (1997), learning has meaning in the interaction between the motive driving knowledge and the intended finality of the activity. A motive is a reason underlying an action, which necessarily implies a desire that could potentially be satisfied, whereas a finality is the intended outcome. To illustrate the difference between the two, Charlot (1997) uses the example of a crime in which the finality is the death of a person, while the motive can be love, hatred, jealousy, etc. Finalities can be set either by someone else or by the writer him/herself. An example of the former is when one writes at a teacher's request, and of the latter, when one writes spontaneously. "Relation to writing" is therefore strongly related to context. For example, a student might find meaning in writing an essay to inform classmates about a preferred country, but might not find meaning in that exercise if all students are expected to write about the same country with the same information. In the latter scenario, no one is really being informed (motive), as they are all similar texts intended only for the teacher. So, when a student responds to a teacher's request, there may be a significant difference between finality and motive, which can result in lack of meaning for the student. New Literacy Studies researchers emphasize the importance of context in understanding writing difficulties (Papen, 2005), noting that both in-school and out-of-school writing activities have to be considered to understand the meaning students give to writing.

### **Relation to Writing Among People with ASD**

The American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as: 1) "Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts" and 2) "Restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities." This

reflects a deficit-based vision (Armstrong, 2017), as the DSM-5 highlights deficits that need to be addressed or remedied rather than focusing on neurodiversity (Armstrong, 2017; Tomlinson & Newman, 2017). Using this type of definition to guide teaching, Armstrong (2017) explains that “special education has too often remained insular, holding fast to its diagnostic categories (...) and remedial and corrective methods” (p.11). Moreover, this deficit-based vision often excludes persons with ASD from conversations about their condition by considering experts’ opinions to be more valid than their own experiences (Gardou, 2005; Murphy, 1987). To enable people to become true actors and to recognize human diversity, Gardou (2005) suggests disregarding categories determined by specialists in order to allow people with disabilities to speak out. When people with ASD do speak, they talk about their unique cognition and experiences (Lawson, 2011; Ouellette, 2011; Page, 2009). Some describe attempts to make friends and the difficulties they encounter in navigating social relationships (Baker-Rogers, 2017). This perspective also entails a situational and ecological view of disability. Rather than viewing ASD in terms of its medical definition, the Human Development Model – Disability Creation Process (HDM–DCP) (Fougeyrollas, 2010) suggests a disability is the result of interactions between three dimensions: the individual’s characteristics—which include, but are not limited to, ASD; the person’s activity; and the context of that activity. Above, we defined “relation to writing” as a set of relationships between a person and their writing activities that is influenced by the context in which those activities take place. If we juxtapose this definition with that of the HDM–DCP (Fougeyrollas, 2010), “relation to writing” is located at the junction of the model’s three dimensions (see Figure 1).

Difficulties with written expression in students with ASD have been known since the identification of Asperger’s syndrome (Asperger, 1944, 1991, cited in Griswold et al., 2002).

The most recent studies confirm these difficulties, but they shed little light on what motivates students to write.

## **Literature Review**

Between 2007 and 2019, 14 studies were aimed at identifying or explaining writing difficulties or presenting the perspectives on writing of people with ASD. Of those 14 studies, 10 were in line with a deficit-based approach and indicated significant difficulties in text writing (Brown et al., 2014; Brown & Klein, 2011; Mayes & Calhoun, 2008; Zrimsek, 2013). For example, Brown and Klein (2011) analyzed narrative and expository essays; they found that the narratives written by people with ASD were considerably shorter than those of a control group and that their quality was significantly poorer in terms of text structure, balance between action and interiority, context presented, and overall coherence. Likewise, the expository essays were also found to be significantly lower in quality (global and local consistency). Two of those 10 studies concerned the relations between writing difficulties and the known cognitive or social deficits of people with ASD (Chavkin, 2008; Weill, 2015). Those studies were based in particular on work going back to Kanner's (1943) early definitions of autism, as well as to the work of Leslie (1987), who underscored the problems around recognizing the other's point of view to explain these difficulties. None of this research focused on the meaning of writing.

However, in contrast to this deficit-based stance was another area of the literature that presented the views on writing of people with ASD. Four studies reported on what they had to say about writing (Boisvert-Hamelin, 2014; Boucher, 2007; Starkey, 2013; Tomlinson & Newman, 2017). In interviews and questionnaires, the participants in those studies expressed a different experience of writing that was not taken into account in the studies that focused only on these persons' deficits as determined by comparison to a norm. For example, Boucher (2007)

explained the difficulty experienced by a person with ASD when putting ideas into words, while Starkey (2013) and Tomlinson and Newman (2017) explored, among other things, the difficulty people with ASD encountered in understanding others' expectations and evaluation of their texts. Starkey's (2013) study also examined some of the reasons motivating participants to write. While some wrote for themselves, to express themselves, to explore their thoughts, or for the creative process, the responses of some participants also indicated that they wrote for others, with one participant wanting to make a living as an author and another talking about the importance of leaving room in writing for the reader's interpretation (Starkey, 2013). Participants in Tomlinson and Newman's (2017) study reported having difficulty "translating" their ideas so that others would understand. This research suggests that participants were interested in having their texts read and understood by others. However, the participants in those studies were adults, and they offered little insight into what writing meant for them or their motives for writing. Nor did these studies consider the relation between in-school and out-of-school writing or the influence of contextual factors on writing activities. Therefore, we set out to explore those aspects of writing by learning more about the meanings of writing for students, their use of writing outside of school, and the bridges that can exist between in-school and out-of-school writing activities. For the purposes of this study, the term "out-of-school writing" encompasses writing produced not only outside of school (e.g. at home) but also in school that is self-directed rather than imposed by teachers, such as for extracurricular activities.

Thus, our objectives in this study were: 1) to understand the meaning teenagers with ASD give to writing by exploring their motives to engage in writing activities in different contexts; and 2) to identify bridges between in-school and out-of-school writing activities.

## **Methods**



This study was part of a larger research program on the “relation to writing” of teenagers with ASD, which was approved by the Ethics Committee on Research with Human Subjects of the Université du Québec à Montréal (number 1515).

### **Setting**

The study was conducted in a private French high school of the Montreal region in Quebec, Canada. This regular school welcomes a number of students with diagnoses that can entail certain learning difficulties. The services of a specialized teacher and teacher’s aides are offered to students according to their diagnoses and needs. Several accommodations are made for students. In particular, they can benefit from additional time to complete exams and can use a computer with or without writing assistance software. For this study, we obtained the consent of the school administration, the teachers involved, two participant students, their parents, and other students in the participants’ classroom. For ethical considerations, the two participant students were not formally identified to their classmates, who were informed only that a study was being conducted about writing activities in the classroom.

### **Participants**

In response to an invitation letter from the researcher, the school agreed to participate in the study and identified two students. They were recruited to form a purposive sample based on meeting the inclusion criteria of: 1) having ASD, as reported by their parents; 2) being between 12 and 15 years old; 3) experiencing writing difficulties at school, as reported by themselves; and 4) using writing outside of school. In selecting students diagnosed with ASD for this study, for the first criterion, we applied the HDM–DCP conceptualization of disability (Fougeyrollas, 2010). This meant focusing on their personal characteristics, their view of themselves, and how they experienced writing, and on the context in which it took place, rather than on the deficit-

based standard definition of ASD. For the same reasons, we considered writing difficulties as reported by the students rather than those identified by teachers.

The two students were in the same school but in different groups with different teachers. The first, “Camille”, was 14 years old. She enjoyed reading, drawing, video games, and mathematics, and was interested in Japan. She enjoyed reading on Wattpad, an online platform for stories written by amateurs. At school, she was involved in various extracurricular activities; she was a member of the energy efficiency committee and a journalist for an annual talent contest in Quebec high schools. In class, Camille rarely spoke with the other students but did not hesitate to participate when teachers asked questions of the class. In her free time, she read or spent time on her iPad. With respect to writing, she reported that writing was relatively easy for her but that she had difficulties related to producing certain types of texts. For example, she explained that she found it difficult to write a crime story because she could not understand how to add elements of the genre, such as clues, to the narrative scheme that she had already mastered. She also had difficulty asking for help when needed and writing text out by hand.

The second participant, “Mathieu”, was also 14 years old. Mathieu did not talk much about his interests, but said he liked live-action role-playing and his favorite school subject was history. He was involved in the school newspaper as well as in the energy efficiency committee. He spoke to his friends before and after class and often participated when teachers asked questions. He was usually focused on the tasks to be done and completed them quickly. In his free time, he read books. Mathieu reported that he loved writing but had difficulty writing narrative stories, following instructions, and correcting grammar and spelling.

## **Data Collection**

We used an ethnographic approach (Spradley, 1980), in which we collected data through participant observation (filmed) and ethnographic interviews (Delamont, 2002). We also collected or filmed texts written by the two students. Two types of writing activities interested us: 1) in-school writing produced at a teacher's request; and 2) out-of-school writing, wherever it occurred, which included activities initiated by the students themselves, whether for personal ends or for extracurricular school activities, such as the newspaper.

The data for each student were collected separately. We started the data collection with a "field entry" phase (Boumard, 2011), in which we got to know the families, teachers, and other students in the targeted classes. After having met the teachers, participant students, and their parents for the first time, the lead author carried out two observation periods at different times in the classrooms, without cameras, so that everyone could become familiar with her presence.

Subsequently, we conducted filmed participant observations in the French and history classes, as these were two academic areas that required frequent use of writing. Camille had the same teacher for both subjects, and Mathieu had different ones. We conducted 12 hours and 45 minutes of participant observation for each student. We used two cameras: one focused on the teacher and the other including the participant student but focused more broadly on the classroom to avoid identification by classmates. Cameras were also loaned to both students to film themselves writing at home. Camille filmed herself completing a grammar assignment in French (two 20-minute videos) and another in English (one 10-minute video). Mathieu filmed himself with his English tutor discussing a text he had to write (one 10-minute video).

We alternated these observations with ethnographic interviews, defined by Spradley (1979) as friendly conversations between the researcher and the participant. We conducted four interviews of about 45 minutes with each participant student. We did not develop interview

guides beforehand. Rather, our aim was to allow participants to talk about writing on their own terms. With ethnographic questions, we encouraged the participants to describe their activities and compare them. The discussions were spontaneous and at times artefact-induced, such when the researcher, with each participant, watched the writing sessions filmed in class. In some cases, the participants' texts written at school and provided by the teachers served as the starting point for conversations. Prompts used during the interviews included: *What do you write in school/at home? What can you tell me about this text? How did you write this text? What was different between writing this text and that one?* If further prompts were needed, we inquired about obstacles and facilitators, their strategies for coping with difficulties, their writing processes, their views on different writing assignments, and related topics. We asked follow-up questions to clarify various points as needed. All discussions took place at the students' homes or in their classroom and were filmed.

### **Data Analysis**

After the interviews, only the parts concerning "relation to writing" were transcribed, as the participants sometimes branched off onto other subjects. When transcribing, we paid particular attention to ensuring participants' words and expressions were transcribed faithfully. In addition, the extracts were always put into context by adding what was said before and after.

We performed deductive and inductive thematic analyses of the interviews (Bardin, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In a first step, we inventoried the information collected and coded it into themes by comparing and grouping according to predefined criteria (Bardin, 2013). For the first round of thematic analysis, we used the HDM–DCP (Fougeyrollas, 2010) to code for three key themes: 1) participants' personal characteristics; 2) writing activities; and 3) contextual factors. Every category was described in detail using extracts from the interviews. In a second step, we

identified sub-themes within these three themes. The personal characteristics of the participants were deductively analyzed to identify information about participants' motives for writing. In this, we were guided by Charlot's conceptual framework (1997), in which motive is defined as the reason why a person acts. Writing activities were coded as either in-school or out-of-school. Then, we performed an inductive coding of the students' responses to see whether other themes might emerge. We also coded semantic and latent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which involved not only analyzing what was said by the participants, but also examining "the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). The data from the two participants were coded separately, making no attempt to find patterns in the two sets of data. However, after coding, some patterns emerged.

In line with the HDM–DCP conceptualization, the data from classroom observations informed on certain contextual factors that might influence the participants' "relation to writing". To this end, we used a coding grid to identify writing activities, their finality, the pedagogical approaches used, the medium, and possible collaboration with peers. To construct this grid, we combined pertinent aspects of those used by Reuter and Lahanier-Reuter (2007) and Barré-De Miniac and colleagues (1993), which were respectively designed to analyze writing activities and to describe classroom situations where writing took place. The data from this analysis were cross-referenced with the previous data from the analysis of the interviews.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

In ethnographic research, it is essential that researchers fully acknowledge that they will have an influence on the subject of the study. Indeed, researchers cannot postulate that the situation would have been the same if they had not been involved (Laplantine, 2015). Thus, to

ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research, researchers must be transparent about their preconceived ideas, provide a meticulous description of the context, engage in a real immersion in the field, and constantly go back and forth between the data and the research process when interpreting the data (Charmillot & Dayer, 2007). In addition to these steps, we also triangulated the data from interviews, participant observation, and texts written by the participants. We chose not to use member checks, given the participants' young age and the large amount of content involved (35–40 pages each). Instead, we raised significant themes in at least two interviews and checked for inconsistencies in the interviews and between the interviews and the observations.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to understand the “relation to writing” of teenagers with ASD by exploring their motives for engaging in writing activities in different contexts and identifying bridges between in-school and out-of-school writing activities. We present the results separately for the two participants, beginning with those for Camille. All quotes presented in this section are translations from the original French.

### **Camille's Motives for Engaging in In-school Writing Activities**

Camille indicated that she found writing useful and engaging when she could make someone discover something, discover something herself, or tell a story. She did not see the usefulness of writing a text that anyone could write or on a subject that was discussed at length in class. She pointed out examples of texts that motivated her and some texts she felt were useless. For the former, she mentioned a government exam practice she had done in class, for which she had to write a text to present to the other students on an emblematic meal from a country of her choice. The essay had to include a descriptive component, wherein the student described the

meal, its origins, and more, and a persuasive component, justifying why that meal deserved “emblematic” status. To motivate students, the teachers organized a community lunch where students could bring their meal to share with the others. The students’ meal descriptions were printed and placed in front of each meal. Camille spoke very positively about that assignment. She said she was motivated to write because she learned new things and could share her knowledge: “because it makes us discover something, it’s not pointless, and we have to provide a lot of information”.

With regard to the “uselessness” of texts, Camille spoke about a text written in a history class. Students were asked to compare the Tsarist Russian and French Revolution regimes. She spoke negatively about the activity:

My head was saying, what’s the use of knowing the difference between the two, they’re two totally different places thousands of miles apart (...) no one wants to know their differences, no one is going to send them a text showing them what their differences are. She said she liked learning things, which did not happen in this activity: “In history, my head likes to learn things, but not to identify the difference between two things”.

Camille noted that this type of text presented no particular challenge and that anyone could have attempted it. She considered that this type of comparison could have been done in the form of checklists identifying similarities and differences. She said she had no choice: “I do it only because I have to”. Thus, she saw nothing that she could learn from that writing activity, nor anyone who might learn something from her text. Interestingly, even though she felt anyone could have done it, she nodded in agreement when asked if the text was difficult to write and said she did not feel inspired in writing it. Thus, it seemed that even though she was able to do

the activity, she had the impression that it was more difficult because she could not see the relation between what was asked of her and why she would want to write it.

The second category of writing that motivated Camille involved stories. She said she liked writing stories in school and had engaged positively in this type of writing. For example, she had to write about a legend for her English class: “We’re writing a beautiful legend”. The difficulty she experienced in completing the activity did not lessen her enthusiasm or desire to write a short story. Even when she considered a story difficult to write, she found positive meaning in doing it. She talked about a crime fiction story she had to write for her French class. It was hard to write because she had difficulty understanding how to include the elements of crime narrative into the kind of narrative she had already mastered. She felt the teacher had not shown the students what was expected from them:

It was, like, hey, you have to do a detective story, we’re not even going to help you, and that’s that. We didn’t really get much help, we didn’t get any outline of how to do it. All we knew was how to make a text like the other texts, where you had to explain a story (...) we only saw some written examples, and they weren’t complete texts. I could never figure out where the clues went.

Another negative factor was the lack of time to practice writing this genre:

Because they just told us to write a detective story, we had practiced only once beforehand, and my brain was saying “help!”, I’m used to having someone describe how to do it all, and everything, and my brain was saying, “hey, wait, help!”.

Despite those difficulties, Camille said she understood the usefulness of the writing activity. Overall, Camille seemed to indicate that the usefulness of the activity had a positive influence on her engagement despite the difficulty she experienced while doing it.



### **Camille's Motives for Engaging in Out-of-school Writing Activities**

Camille's most important out-of-school writing activity involved commenting on texts she read on Wattpad, an online platform where non-professional writers can publish their texts and interact with their readers. Camille said she had never published a text on Wattpad and was not interested in doing so. However, she wrote comments about the stories, which she addressed to the authors. She wrote, for instance, that she liked the story and was looking forward to a sequel. She asked questions when there was something she did not understand and responded to authors' questions. For example, she once responded to an author who asked readers what story should be pursued next. However, all her comments were very brief. She also showed us one conversation she had with an author to plan a time when they would play a video game together. Even though the comments were brief, we could see that Camille wrote for a variety of reasons: to give her opinion, share information about herself, get more information, or understand something she found unclear.

When prompted, she also explained that she used writing while text-messaging, but did not use social media. Her parents also mentioned that she had other uses of writing at home, but Camille did not seem comfortable talking about those and changed the subject when we attempted to discuss it. We did not to push her to reveal aspects she did not want to talk about.

### **Possible Bridges Between Camille's In-school and Out-of-school Writing Activities**

While Camille's writing activities in the French and history classes were different from what she wrote outside of school, there were similarities in the motives prompting her writing. In both contexts, Camille was motivated to write when she could discover something, make someone discover things, or share information about herself. The fact that she wanted to learn new things or share information about herself through her writing showed that her motives for

engaging in writing were a part of the “relation to oneself”. Those motives were also a part of the “relation to others”. She not only wanted her writing to inform others, but also wanted others to know about her, as in when she wanted to inform the writers on Wattpad that she loved their story. All these motives point to an interest in others within the writing activities. A second similarity concerned narrative writing, because even though Camille did not write stories at home, she nevertheless wrote about stories, engaging in writing activities regarding those texts.

### **Mathieu’s Motives for Engaging in In-school and Out-of-school Writing Activities**

Like Camille, Mathieu engaged in activities that involved sharing information on subjects that interested him. He said he loved writing an essay comparing two political regimes in history class because history was his favorite subject. Outside of school, Mathieu wrote about subjects that interested him for publication in the school newspaper produced by the students themselves. We consider these to be out-of-school writing activities, given that he freely elected to engage in them and chose the subjects on his own. For example, he wrote about a visit to an aquarium and about the activities of the energy efficiency committee, of which he was a member. For the latter, he explained that it was important for him to write this article in order to make this overlooked committee known to everyone, students and adults alike. This motive for writing was also apparent in a medical book he wrote for his live-action role-playing association. Given that Mathieu could write on any subject of his choice in those instances, we can assume this desire to share his interests also motivated his writing outside the classroom.

Another motive Mathieu had for engaging in writing activities was tied closely to his relation to rules and norms. When asked what influenced his writing experience, he pointed to the logic behind the teachers’ expectations. When rules were logical, he readily followed them. Conversely, if he did not understand their logic, he made no effort to apply them. About

following rules to write a narrative essay, he said: “If I don’t see it that way, or if my idea doesn’t work, I’ll break the rules to do it my way, and most famous authors do the same thing, that’s what bugs me”. Mathieu had difficulty understanding the logic behind requests related to narrative texts, and he argued that no model should be imposed when writing stories: “If we go into the narrative format, why should there be a logic to that? There shouldn’t be any logic there, it’s the author’s imagination. That’s what bothers me.”. In the third interview we conducted alone at school, Mathieu said the narrative format was actually not restrictive, but the fact that he saw the story in pictures (like a movie) in his head complicated things. He explained that it did not fit how he saw the story in his head:

I understand that you have to bring it to an ending, and all that. I remember, but at the same time, it’s like I told you, I’m making a movie in my head. I’m a producer, not a writer.

Thus, his opinion on the need to use the narrative format may have been influenced by his difficulty in complying with it.

### **Possible Bridges Between Mathieu’s In-school and Out-of-school Writing Activities**

As with Camille, it is possible to build bridges between the motives driving Mathieu to write in different contexts. One such bridge is the fact that his writings showed that he enjoyed introducing others to topics of interest to him or to his ideas. These motives showed that Mathieu’s “relation to writing” was part of a “relation to oneself”, as well as “to others”. While he did not identify these motives himself, his main out-of-school writing activity was writing articles for the school newspaper. His mother also mentioned that he had written a medical book for his live-action role-playing association. Through those writings, Mathieu came into contact

with others. In addition, referring to his in-school writing activities, he expressed disappointment at one point that a teacher had chosen to read other students' writings rather than his:

I loved doing that one. It's the only text in English [class] that I liked. I got a very good grade. The teacher disappointed me a little bit because she was, 'I really like it', but she picked other things [to read in front of the class]".

This disappointment revealed that Mathieu wanted to share his writing with others. Thus, even though he sometimes found it difficult to put his ideas down on paper because of the imposed norms and rules that, to his mind, lacked logic (as in the case of narrative texts), writing may have represented for him a means of sharing ideas with others without having to confront difficulties in understanding social interactions. In this respect, Mathieu and his mother explained that he often had to ask her to help him understand what had happened in social interactions after they took place. She explained: "He'll tell me stories from school and I'll fill in the blanks".

### **Discussion**

Most research on strategies to help students with ASD is focused on the development of self-regulation strategies (Almumen, 2017; Jackson et al., 2018) or the use of technological tools (Bishop et al., 2015; Evmenova et al., 2016), without considering the meaning of writing for the students. While those strategies can be useful, they are not necessarily compatible with inclusive education, in that they require specific instruction for students with ASD and are driven by a deficit-based approach. A teaching approach based on the meaning of writing for students and on what motivates them to write supports the learning of writing for all students (Bucheton, 2014).

### **Motive for Writing as a Bridge Between In-school and Out-of-school Writing Activities**

In general, studies linking in-school and out-of-school writing agree on the relatively hermetic dissociation between activities in these two contexts. Penloup (2003) points out that

All studies concur, moreover, in positing an impenetrable barrier between out-of-school writing practices and in-school writing practices. They refer to the school's unawareness of the [out-of-school] practices, but even the students themselves, who would seem to be in a good position to make connections, dissociate them entirely. (Penloup, 2003, p. 216, authors' translation)

Camille and Mathieu did not talk about possible links between their in-school and out-of-school writing activities. However, our analyses of their motives for writing suggest fairly strong links and possible bridges between their activities in the different contexts. For instance, Camille spontaneously found motives for in-school writing (e.g., informing others, learning new things) that paralleled her motives for writing outside of school. In this way, she managed to invest positively in the in-school writing activity even when her motives were not directly aligned with the purposes set by the teacher.

In contrast to the conclusions of Cardoso and Álvares Pereira (2015), the participants in our study did not seem to “detach themselves from in-school writing activity” (Cardoso & Álvares Pereira, 2015, p. 40). For those authors, such detachment compromised the meaning of in-school writing. However, Camille and Mathieu gave no indication of being detached from in-school writing activities. On the contrary, they looked for meaning in their in-school writing activities, and this conditioned their positive or negative involvement in the activity.

By focusing on the meaning these students gave to in-school and out-of-school writing, our study sheds new light on potential connections between these activities. Where we expected

to see a rigid partition between the activities, we saw instead a certain permeability that teachers might use to help students find meaning in in-school writing activities.

### **Interaction with Others as a Motive for Writing**

Both participants in our study wrote to connect with others. This desire to socialize runs counter to the conception of ASD conveyed since the first definition developed by Kanner (1943) and then in Leslie's (1987) work on the theory of mind, which suggested that people with ASD would have little interest in the reader when writing (Baker-Rogers, 2017). Some studies have supported this. For instance, Chavkin (2008) explained that the participant in her study had little interest in the reader because, during a writing test practice, the participant chose to cross out part of the question and only answered the part that he had not crossed out. According to Chavkin (2008), the student did not realize that the assessors would not be able to understand why he had answered only part of the question due to a deficit in the theory of mind.

In contrast to this view, Causton-Theoharis and colleagues (2009) analyzed the discourses of seven autobiographical authors with ASD on their desire to connect with others. Those authors expressed the loneliness in which they lived and their desire to enter into contact with others, but also the difficulties they experienced in seeking contact. In our time with Camille and Mathieu, as well as our discussions, we saw the duality between the desire to connect with others and the obstacles experienced. Camille had very little contact with others in class. During our observations, she rarely talked to other students. Even during teamwork periods it was the teacher who assigned her a teammate because Camille did not initiate contact. Yet, while she did not proactively connect with others face-to-face in class, she did approach others virtually on Wattpad when expressing her opinions or asking questions about a story. Mathieu seemed more at ease in reaching out to others. He had many friends in class and approached others when it

was time for teamwork. However, as he and his mother explained, he often had difficulty in understanding social interactions and preferred not to draw attention to himself for fear of being mocked by his peers. As such, it may be that his involvement in the school newspaper allowed him to respond to this need for connection, while remaining in the background and not having to experience the direct social interactions that he found difficult to understand and navigate.

Our analysis supports the conclusions of Baker-Rogers (2017), who focused on the social relationships of people with ASD through the analysis of blogs, online videos, and published autobiographies. His analysis highlighted not only their desire to socialize and make friends, but also the difficulties they experienced in socializing in the same manner as people without ASD. He concluded that a “normalizing” conception of socialization, i.e., considering that there is only one right way to socialize, constitutes a significant social barrier to the socialization of people with ASD. Under these circumstances, teenagers like Camille and Mathieu would be motivated to find different ways to express themselves and connect with others.

## **Implications**

The results of our study may have several implications for teaching practices and policies to support inclusive education. With regard to writing instruction, the results of this study highlight the importance of taking into account what motivates students to write, in order to make writing activities meaningful. For in-school writing, this means, on one hand, that teachers should offer students true opportunities for communication and creation. Indeed, the participants in this study were easily able to identify false opportunities for communication, such as when their text would only be read by the teacher. On the other hand, in terms of the contribution of the knowledge we can develop about their out-of-school writing, it appears that, to build bridges, it would be important to focus on the meaning of these activities and what drives students to

write outside of school (Papen, 2005). This requires making connections between these activities and those done in school. For this, teachers need to remain flexible, since what students write does not necessarily correspond to what is planned. Along the same lines, it would be interesting to involve students in planning what is to be written during the year and give them more choice in terms of themes, formats, target readers, etc. Giving meaning to writing activities is all the more important for students with ASD since, even today, in many classrooms in Quebec, Canada, instruction is based on behavioral approaches in which tasks are segmented as much as possible and only one response is generally expected. Real opportunities for communication and creativity call for flexible teaching approaches that focus on the meaning the student gives to the activity rather than on the success of the task alone. Such an approach to instruction is fully compatible with an inclusive education perspective, since it is not about offering a different task to students with ASD, but rather about offering all students writing activities that make sense to them.

Papen (2005) also points out that, to bring out-of-school writing activities into the school effectively, changes are needed at other levels than just the classroom, such as teacher training programs and the school curriculum. The skills needed to bridge in-school and out-of-school writing activities should be taught in university training programs as a key component of teachers' professional development. With regard to the school curriculum, Papen (2005) points out that the types or genres of writing taught in schools are often far from people's everyday writing needs. This gap is even greater among students who do not necessarily identify with the dominant social class, such as those with ASD. Therefore, texts included in the curriculum should be more representative of the variety of texts students from different groups use or will



use in their everyday life. The program could also provide more flexibility so that teachers can adapt to the environment and their students.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The limitations of this study have mainly to do with methodology. The first concerns the impossibility of generalizing the results because of the purposive sample and small number of participants. The goal of this type of study is to explore a research subject in a new way. Our study offers a new perspective on ASD and writing that could eventually be explored in a larger group.

A second limitation stemming from the ethnographic methodology is the potential impact of the researcher's presence. It is possible that the usual behaviors of the teachers and the students were altered by the researcher's presence when conducting classroom observations. However, the teachers were informed of the importance of carrying on as usual, and they assured the researcher on multiple occasions that the students behaved as they would have if she were not there. The parents also assured her that the students did not feel uncomfortable because of her presence in the classroom.

A final limitation of this study, and perhaps the most important, was that we were not able to film and collect out-of-school writing activities to the same extent as in-school activities. As the out-of-school writings were more spontaneous and the participants did not necessarily keep them, we were not able to see very many of them. As such, we were unable to use them as supports for discussion, which may have left gaps in the explanation of the students' experiences. In our discussions with the participants and their parents, we were also given to understand that the former chose not to talk about some of their writings.

### **Conclusion**

Our aim in this study was to understand the meaning of writing activities for students with ASD by exploring their motives for engaging in them in different contexts. First, our results showed that, for both participants, meaning conditioned their positive or negative investment in the activity. Finalities, if not accepted and shared, can constitute barriers to engagement in writing activities among students with ASD. We also demonstrated that connections can be made between in-school and out-of school writing activities. Teachers could take advantage of this permeability to help students see the possibilities for meaning in writing activities in school. Second, the study brought to light the participants' desire to socialize through writing. Writing could be a way of circumventing the "normalizing" conception of socialization that can constitute a significant social barrier to the socialization of people with ASD. In short, the concepts of "meaning" and of "relation to writing" appear to be promising to better understand the difficulties with writing that have been identified among people with ASD. Given the importance of involving youth with ASD in research that affects them, we believe it is essential to pay more attention to their experience, with a view to supporting their academic and social participation in schools.

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Figure 1: The notion of “relation to” and The Human Development Model – Disability Creation Process (Fougeyrollas, 2010) (simplified model)

