Epistles of a Writer: A Case Study of Writing Instruction in Middle Grades

A Dissertation submitted
to the Graduate School
Valdosta State University

in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in Curriculum and Instruction

in the Department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology
of the Dewar College of Education and Human Services

December 2013

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation stemmed from the plethora of research on writing instruction in middle and secondary grades. Studies showed that writing proficiency for students in grades 4 - 12 was difficult, particularly with students on free and reduced lunch programs along with African American and Hispanic students. The literature offered many strategies for teaching students the writing skills they will need, but consistency of instruction among institutions seemed lacking.

Middle school is a particularly challenging time for young people as they mature simultaneously in social, emotional, and cognitive ways. Writing instruction for this age group must address the complexities mentioned along with differentiating for individual learning needs. My study addressed as many of these factors as possible. I established the research as a qualitative, comparative case study that sought to examine the writing instruction occurring in two middle school language arts classes. The dichotomy for the comparison was that one class was the most accelerated in the 7th grade while the other was the lowest level group.

Over the course of 5 months, I observed both classes, interviewed both teachers, and collected writing samples from random students in each class. This fascinating, bird's eye view revealed much about writing instruction, student reaction to the instruction, as well as interesting backgrounds of both teacher participants. This study yielded recommendations for new middle school language arts teachers, middle school administrators, curriculum directors, and teacher preparation programs. Writing instruction can be intimidating for teachers and students, and state writing exams tend to create a rather formulaic type of essay to be prominent in most curriculums. After

completing my case study and doing a thorough search of the current literature, I believe that a multidimensional understanding of writing must be taught to teacher candidates. Authentic writing assignments can introduce students to a variety of genres while giving practical, real world experience to the students in lieu of a prescribed essay. From teaching 8th grade language arts, I learned that students make connections to literature and to life when given the tools to do so. Hopefully, a more integrated approach to middle school writing instruction will not only improve the writing proficiency of all students but will also allow writing to function as a tool for learning as well as a method for self-expression and definition.

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

What you are about to read is not a traditional, qualitative dissertation. I struggled with the idea of writing about such a personal journey in scholarly language. I was afraid that the traditional, qualitative format would inadequately convey the experiences and work involved in such a research endeavor. In the following pages, therefore, you will hear my story along with my participants' stories. My story tells of my research from its inception to its completion. You will learn about my two teacher participants and the stories they told. You will read about what I saw in two middle school classrooms, and you will see samples of students' writing as well. Most importantly, however, you will hear how these experiences became part of my overall journey as a student, a teacher, a parent, and a researcher.

I searched, therefore, for a legitimate format in which to write my dissertation, and it was then that I discovered Robert Nash and his Scholarly Personal Narratives (SPN). SPN as a form of scholarly writing emerged during the last decades for theses and dissertations. Nash (2004) believed that scholarly writing and narrative writing did not have to be mutually exclusive to be a valid form for writing about research. While working on my dissertation, I was asked by several colleagues why I chose this form over a traditional, qualitative dissertation format. My answer morphed into a statement about the way SPNs approached the same qualitative research concepts but with different and more comfortable terminology in defining the important tenants of writing about research. As far as the scholarly lingo goes, Nash and Bradley (2011) had preferences for the way research components were referred to so they would mesh better with the

scholarly personal narrative. Some examples of this would be: using the term *vigor* over *rigor*; *subjective experience* over *experimental design*; using *personal testimony* rather than *gathering empirical evidence*; *perspectives* rather than *data*; *introspective questions* rather than *interview questions*; *universalizability* over *replicability*; researchers can say *according to my experience* as a way to recognize *limitations*; *plausability, honesty, and coherence* work better than *validity*; and *illustrative, embedded references* were preferred in lieu of a *separate literature review* (Nash & Bradley, 2011).

While some of these concepts may sound foreign to those reading this dissertation as you read, please keep in mind that Nash's desire is for this form of methodology and scholarly expression to work its way into the mainstream of qualitative research circles, particularly as an option for graduate and doctoral students. Nash later had a student – Christian Berry - who developed the Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (ESPN) format in order to report her findings through the use of epistles or letters. I really liked Nash's explanation of ESPN writing. He explained that:

> *Epistolary writing is not shallow or postcard-type writing. Neither is it texting, tweeting, or instant messaging. Epistolary writing focuses on the author's conveying his or her reflections, ideas, revelations, and new ways of thinking to another person or persons in an effort to contribute to the recipient's learning and understanding. ESPN writing is one of the most difficult genres to do well, because there is so much to include. Every E must be supported by an S, P, and N. This a lot for more mono-methodological writers to juggle, and probably why so few SPN writers attempt to do it.*

My dissertation is an ESPN, which means it is a series of letters written by the researcher to various people or entities. In these epistles, I discuss the content and implications of my qualitative case study about writing instruction in two 7th grade language arts classes. In keeping with the SPN tradition, my own experiences are woven throughout the letters as a way of validating the document as *me-search* and *re-search*

(Nash & Bradley, 2011). I hope that the data from this study and the subsequent conclusions drawn will add to the scholarly debate about how writing is being taught currently, the forces that motivate instruction, and the benefits of quality writing instruction. Chapter 1 is designed to give you an overall understanding of the work that went into my entire research study from writing the proposal, collecting and analyzing the data, to writing the dissertation. The epistles in Chapter 2 are addressed to five different people who I believe would appreciate and benefit from the data and subsequent findings of my research. The traditional, qualitative dissertation components can be found in those pages, however the writing, conclusions, and suggestions that are offered are written in my words, yet grounded in my data. Chapter 3 serves as a final reflection, which includes a summary of implications for further research, which are also dispersed throughout the epistles. The research proposal and literature review are included in the appendix as supporting material and in the event that other doctoral candidates might seek guidance for similar research. The following pages contain my dissertation. I ask you, the reader, whether you are a professor or dean at the university or are a doctoral student who is searching for a personal way to tell about your authoritative, scholarly research . . . please be patient and read with an open mind. My story builds.

The first epistle is written to my daughter, and I begin and conclude Chapter 2 with that letter. The purpose of the letter to Grace is to give the premise behind and the foundation underneath my research. The second epistle is directed to a new teacher graduating from college with a degree in middle grades language arts. My participants, my own teaching experiences, along with the literature offer advice for this individual as she begins her teaching career. Epistle three explains the issues of writing instruction to

the administrator of a middle school. I used this letter to address some issues that surfaced during my study and to offer information from the literature along with my experiences on how middle school administrators can foster a community of literacy within a school. The fourth epistle is addressed to a curriculum director and contains specific suggestions for curricular reform that find their roots in my participants' words and emotions. The fifth epistle is written to the dean of a college of education. In this letter, which serves really as the climax of the narrative, I refer the dean to the literature on race, culture, and schooling along with writing instruction. I address my comments to the dean on how she could improve the teacher preparation program at the university, which would then elevate the level of writing instruction and subsequent success of all students. As you read, please keep in mind that each **E**pistle has a purpose, and each purpose relates directly back to the **S**cholarly literature, the **P**ersonal teaching experiences of the author, and the **N**arrative of a good book.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with great appreciation and humility that I thank Valdosta State University, the Graduate School, the Dewar College of Education, and the department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology for the opportunity to participate in higher education and earn the degree of Doctor of Education. I am grateful to the institution of Valdosta State University along with its outstanding faculty and staff who worked with me throughout this lengthy endeavor.

Specifically, I want to express profound thanksgiving to Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing, my Dissertation Chair. Upon meeting Dr. Lorraine, I immediately experienced a higher level of professional scholarship and dedication. While she wears many hats in performance of a multitude of duties, I always knew that her students came first. I especially want to thank Dr. Lorraine for her insistence on excellence. Not only does she understand the big picture of the dissertation process, but she can also quote the entire APA manual verbatim from memory – or so it would seem. As a budding professional in academe, I hope to emulate her work ethic and true passion for scholarship.

As my Researcher and Qualitative Research Professor, I want to thank Dr. Richard Schmertzing for the many contributions he made to my journey through this program. Dr. Richard exhibits a passion for qualitative research, but he also extends that enthusiasm to his students as he listens for hours to potential graduates as they espouse their initial ideas for a dissertation study. His patience, encouragement, yet rigorous questioning helped me know when I was on the right track or when I needed more substance behind my assertions. I am forever indebted to Dr. Richard for his time and expertise in the area of qualitative inquiry. It was also Dr. Richard who suggested that I explore a text by Robert Nash called *Liberating Scholarly Writing*, which resulted in a completely new outlook on scholarly writing for me.

I would also like to thank Dr. Lisa Jones-Moore and Dr. Herbert Fiester for their participation and contributions as Dissertation Committee Members. Dr. Jones-Moore was invaluable in the area of English content and structure, and Dr. Fiester's perspective encouraged me to pay attention to clarity of details in my writing. While both professors have extremely busy schedules, they found time without complaint to serve in this capacity. I am forever grateful to both.

I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Verilette Hinkle from the department of Curriculum, Leadership, and Technology who first introduced to me the level of academic performance expected in this doctoral program. Dr. Hinkle was always kind and generous but with high expectations. Her presence at our orientation to the doctoral program was also much appreciated as she used her own experiences to encourage rather than discourage a room full of nervous but capable professionals as we embarked on the Ed.D. journey together.

I thank my participants from the middle school because my study was completed by your stories. Without your contributions, my research would have been done in vain. I appreciate your professionalism with staff and students, and I am grateful for your presence in my life and in the lives of all the students in your classes. I want to also thank Dr. Mo Yearta, the Deputy Superintendent of Schools, for approving my study in this school system, and thank you to Mr. Doug Howell, the Principal of the middle

school, for allowing me to use 2 of your most talented teachers and to be a frequent visitor on campus for 5 months. I would also like to thank Lynn Clark and Eric Croft for their willingness to work with me and allow me to work with their teachers during my program of study.

At this time, I would be remiss if I did not thank my family members for their love, support, and encouragement during my program of study. My parents, Barrett and Barbara Smith, provided love and care for me as well as for my daughter while I journeyed to classes, and they always listened with interest in their hearts to the stories of my experiences. My sister and best friend, Marcy Smith, was my source of inspiration for having traveled this road ahead of me, and she provided constant information whenever I summoned her. My nephews, Charlie and Alex Boyter, participated in one of my qualitative research projects and always understood when my school schedule dictated family gathering times and locations. For these and so many other gestures of love over the years, I am eternally grateful.

To my husband, Ralph Powell, I cannot find words to adequately convey my profound appreciation for your support. From the very beginning, you encouraged me to seek this degree, and you never waivered in your confidence that I could complete the task – even when I waivered myself. Thank you so much for keeping the family unit going even though it was tough at times when I was gone for the better part of the weekend, and I know you had work of your own as well. For the last 20 years, you have always seen the best parts in me, and I am thankful for your presence in my life.

To my daughter, Talley Elizabeth Powell, I thank you for understanding and support of me during this whole process. I know it was a tough road for you at times, but you always let me know that you missed me and were thinking of me. Thank you for the beautiful drawings and notes that you sent with me to classes, and thank you for taking on more and new responsibilities around the house to make up for my time away. Most of all, thank you for being an active part of my learning with your participation in projects and your offers of feedback on my writing. You are already a stellar author yourself!

A note of special thanks goes to my personal health and well-being specialists, Dr. David Johnson and Maresa McKinney. Your guidance over the last year kept me focused on the true importance of overall wellness.

Finally, I want to thank my friends: Val Bell, Leigh Dougherty, Lena Mercer, and Diana Patel. You all are my support network, and you each played a vital role in my completion of this degree. Without your constant counsel, I would have been a very lonely vessel lost in a sea of isolation. Thank you all for nurturing me physically, emotionally, and cognitively, and remember that we are all in this together!

For these and many other unnamed individuals, I am truly thankful.

DEDICATION

"Sometimes people need a lift between switches."
(Konigsburg, E. L., 1996, p. 138)

I dedicate this manuscript to all those throughout my life who have given me a lift between my times of change. Naming all of the people, either past or present, who fit into the category of supporters would take more pages than this dissertation. To assert that this dissertation is a product of my efforts alone, however, would be presumptuous and completely untrue. I therefore dedicate this dissertation to the following folks:

To my parents: You gave me the gifts of life, love, and intelligence. You also instilled in me the desire to work hard and give back to the community. I dedicate this to you because you equipped me with the abilities necessary to succeed at such a task.

To my sister, you provide me with constant assurance and love. Without your inspiration and encouragement, I am not sure I would have made it to this point with most of my life still intact. Best of all, however, you and Pete taught me that, "No matter what you step in, keep walking along and singing your song…because it's all good" (Litwin, 1999).

To my husband: As Paul Child once told Julia Child, "You are the butter to my bread; the breath to my life." I dedicate this dissertation to you because you never gave up on me, as tempting as it might have been. You are my best friend, and I am a much better writer, teacher, mother, friend, and soul mate from knowing you for 20 something years and from being with you everyday.

And finally, to my child: Dear, sweet Talley Elizabeth Powell, I dedicate this dissertation to you because you love me everyday, and I wrote this for you. When you grow up, you can write one of your own, and I know it will be ten times better! You are my heart.

Chapter I

THE WORK – IN THE PAST

The Beginning

My journey with qualitative research in education began during the courses in my doctoral program. In class, I learned the basic tenets of qualitative research, and I was drawn to this form of inquiry because I like to work with people rather than numbers. As simplistic as that sounds, it is the truth. I had known for a while that my own research would be in the area of middle school writing instruction because I taught 8th grade language arts before returning to school for further study. I knew that the only way to determine the best way to teach students to write would be to observe teachers as they taught. I liked the idea of a case study using the schools in my area, but I was not sure how to get started. Thankfully, my qualitative research professor suggested a pilot study as a way to access and assess the schools, so I did just that.

The Pilot Study

I started with a basic interview and one observation related to writing instruction strategies. The curriculum director of this school system asked the administrators of each secondary building to choose English teachers for me to interview and observe. I did my single interview and observation with teachers in each grade, 6 - 12. These six participants were as different from one another as night is from day. I was hooked on qualitative inquiry. Fascinating information came from the six teachers and their

classrooms, and I realized quickly that explicit writing instruction really was not occurring in isolation for grades 9 - 12. High school courses were structured around literature, and these teachers expected students to have a foundation of writing upon entering their courses. The problems arose when students were not prepared, which occurred frequently. Then it became the blame game: *It was the middle school's fault.*

After completing my pilot study, which spanned one month with six interviews and observations, I recognized the direction for my dissertation study. I absolutely had to find out why, according to several of the pilot study teachers, middle school was not teaching writing and preparing the students for the writing tasks of high school. Having taught middle school myself, I knew the story had another side. My research began to take shape, and I was ready to work. The first task was to look to the literature.

The Literature Review

Many studies revealed that students have problems learning to write, and scholars weighed in on the reasons for this literacy crisis (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Nagin, 2006). The literature explained that writing is a difficult task, and students did not appear to be graduating from high school with a level of competency or an appropriate foundation for future endeavors (Faulkner, 2005; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Kutney, 2010; Vacca, 2002). Scholars in writing instruction explored the possible reasons behind writing difficulties (Delpit, 2006; Flood, Lapp, & Ranck-Buhr, 2005; Lavelle, Smith, & O'Ryan, 2002; Sperling & Freedman, 2001), and many pointed to the social and cognitive components required for development in writing to occur (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Prior, 2008; Sperling & Freedman, 2001; Yagelski, 2006). I learned from the social and cognitive theories that writing is a process

that engages the student in creating, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing written pieces based on a variety of literature and prior knowledge and experience. Resulting from my review of the literature, which can be located in Appendix A, I examined strategies to improve writing, such as process writing, direct skill instruction, revision, self-regulation, genre instruction, scaffolding, and many more, yet I found little agreement among teachers and researchers as to which strategy was best. To gain a fuller understanding of the problem and possible solutions, I researched the following areas: the history of writing instruction, Writing to Learn, strategies for writing instruction, the impact of technology on writing instruction, teacher training in writing instruction, the impact of writing assessments on instruction, and recommendations for improving student writing. From the literature, these areas of research highlighted the most difficult areas in writing instruction. I read and researched for many months, and I want to refer you, the reader, to Appendix A for a more traditional literature review in my dissertation proposal document. After a thorough search, I had the foundation from which my study would spring. The scholarly literature on writing instruction in secondary grades was extensive, but the data from prior studies was not. It was evident that the field needed more data from qualitative studies, and I was ready to contribute.

The Study

Based on my pilot study, my review of the literature, and my own teaching experience, I was ready to hone in on the specifics of my research. I chose to look at two seventh grade language arts classes at the local middle school, and I was interested in how strong and struggling writers were being taught writing. My participants, therefore, were selected because one taught the gifted students and the other taught the lowest level

of mainstream language arts. By establishing the study as a comparison of such a dichotomy, I hoped to see strategies that were specific to each group as well as techniques that might work for all students.

The Data

I chose my participants based on their willingness to be a part of a lengthy endeavor because my study lasted approximately 5 months along with the fact that they each taught one of the target groups of students. Mrs. Abbott (pseudonym) taught the low level class, and Mrs. Banks (pseudonym) taught the accelerated group. I interviewed the teachers three times (Seidman, 2006). Each interview focused on a different aspect of their experience with either writing or teaching writing. The guide that I developed for the interviews can be found in Appendix B. Summaries and quotations from these interviews are located throughout the epistles in Chapter 2.

I also observed the two classes once each week throughout the study. I looked for lessons on writing, but I witnessed so much more. The weekly observations were recorded on an observation guide that I created and used for my pilot study, and the observation guide can be viewed in Appendix C. After each observation, I also recorded my insights in my researcher journal. Excerpts from the researcher journal appear in various epistles. The journal allowed me to digest the observations as well as my own thoughts about the research as I went along.

Finally, I was able to collect writing samples from both classes. These pieces, located in Appendices D and E, gave a valuable perspective to the study. Categorized as document data, the students' writing helped me process the specific needs of various students in both classes, and they also gave a multidimensional view of each teacher's

class. I was present for many of the lessons behind the pieces of writing, and I was able to observe some of the writing for those samples. All student names were removed before the pieces were given to me. Mrs. Banks also included a copy of the Georgia Performance Standards with her students' work to assist my understanding of the grading criteria.

The Analysis

At the completion of my time at the middle school, I began my data analysis with preliminary assessments of the reflections in my researcher journal. I approached data anyalysis with gusto because I had tons of data and was eager to make sense of it all. The first thing I did was transcribe all interviews, copy all observations, journal memos, and student work samples. I organized everything into large piles on the living room floor. Each pile represented information from data obtained through either Teacher Abbott or Teacher Banks. I created an inventory list of the contents, and then I began coding.

Coding is a term I learned from the various qualitative data textbooks, but I was unable to find a perfect model from any one scholar or group of scholars that fit my needs. I, therefore, created a system that worked for me. I started with the interviews. While reading each transcript, I made a list of words, phrases, and concepts that I thought were significant – either to myself or to the applicable literature. I then looked for commonalities and differences between the two participants. The same procedures applied for the observations, journal memos, and work samples. Once the coding was complete, I determined the most significant issues, and divided those into two categories. The first category consisted of issues that stemmed directly from my study. The second category was for the themes that related back to the literature. While most of my formal

data analysis occurred on the living room floor and was displayed on chart paper, I have provided an example of the analysis along with a more technical explanation of this process in Appendix F. During this time of data analysis, which spanned approximately one month, I literally resided with the data. I read, listened, discussed, watched, digested, and wrote about what seemed most important from my experiences at the middle school with my two participants. Gradually, my thoughts came together with the data, and my themes for writing my dissertation became clear. Next, I had to write.

The Decision

After delving back through all of my data and determining the significant ideas, themes, and recommendations from my study, I was ready to begin writing the remaining chapters of my dissertation. On a whim and as a procrastination technique, I revisited a list of texts given to me by my qualitative research professor as interesting resources for writing about qualitative inquiry. One of the books was Nash's, *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (2004). Once I learned about Scholarly Personal Narratives (SPN), I was intrigued. I then ordered Nash and Bradley's text, *Me-Search and Re-Search: A Guide for Writing Scholarly Personal Narrative Manuscripts* (2011), which was where I discovered the offshoot to SPN writing called ESPN.

Something extraordinary happened. I began to visualize the epistles I would write. The audience for each letter came quickly along with my goals. The outlines were fun to write because each letter addressed significant parts of my data, my experiences, and the literature. The ESPN format allowed me to relay the events, outcomes, and recommendations from my research but to communicate these with my thoughts and experiences intertwined. For days following my realization, I wrote and wrote and wrote.

I found a way to give meaning to my study in a very personal way, and I was delighted. As a researcher, I was able to accurately describe my participants, their instruction, and their words. As a teacher, I was able to analyze and incorporate my own experiences teaching writing. As a student, I was able to assimilate my newly acquired knowledge from other scholars in the field. As a parent, I was able to find the significance of my research for my own child and for others' children. The decision to write my dissertation as an ESPN was not entered into quickly or lightly, and like a marriage, I have been through good and bad times with this document. My excitement, however, remained strong, and I found this new form of scholarly discourse to be *liberating* as it allowed me the ability to report the rigors of my efforts but with my own voice and my own story echoing throughout.

Chapter II

THE EPISTLES

My dearest Grace,

As I watch you blossoming and growing into a beautiful young lady here on your tenth birthday, I decided to write you this letter. Your father and I could have only hoped for such a wonderful, talented, and compassionate person when we first discovered that we were having you. Every decision we have made for your life thus far always began with our ultimate goal and outlook for your future in mind.

While sitting and watching you jump into the pool and swim from one end to the other under water, I am amazed at your transformation from a small, uncertain little child into a more self-confident, medium-sized pre-teen. Recently, I began reflecting on one of your questions that has so often been asked over the last three and a half years, and that question was, "Mom, why do you have to do this work?" Or the other, which I dreaded the most was, "Mom, why do you have to drive to class this weekend?" I realized that I wanted to write you this letter to give you a more detailed explanation of my activities other than "because I have to do this if I want to finish my degree and graduate." So, let me tell you a little more about my big project that I've been working on and why it is so important to me.

I have always known that writing was important for many reasons. Early in school, it became evident to me that teachers liked it when I would write neatly and could express my ideas on paper. As I grew older, however, the kinds of writing that teachers

wanted me to do became more involved and quite frankly, boring. In high school, I remember feeling completely lost as I drove to the local community college to do research for a paper that was assigned in my Advanced Placement English class for which I felt completely unprepared or at least under-prepared. You see, Grace, I do not remember being really good at writing like I believe you are. Even at your young age, your writing has been chosen to represent your grade and your county multiple years in a row. I am so proud of that for you because writing does not come naturally to many people.

Anyway, back to my history with writing. I managed to graduate from high school with honors and secure a full, academic scholarship to a very good liberal arts college. It was my second year in college when I took the required writing test for graduation, and guess what? I did not pass! I was mortified. How could a presidential scholar fail such an easy task? Well, in order to rectify the situation, the college required each student who did not pass to meet with an assigned member of the faculty, and after doing so, we were allowed to retake the exam. As it turned out, I had to meet with the head of the English department. In a state of humiliation and anxiety, I trudged across campus to Dr. Blithe's office. She invited me in and had me sit in her most comfortable chair. I braced for the criticism. I prepared for the stains of red ink she most surely had placed on my paper. Instead, however, I saw soft gray pencil and lots of questions marks. The first thing Dr. Blithe said to me was, "Now, I don't want you to be alarmed. I've worked with many students in your situation including other of our top scholars." Well, Grace, you cannot begin to imagine my initial shock and subsequent relief. Dr. Blithe continued by examining my paper and telling me some of the things that she really liked

about what I had written. This was a complete surprise. Maybe I was not hopeless in the writing department after all. Finally, we discussed some of the problems with the structure of my essay and how I could improve. She encouraged me to go back to my dorm room, rewrite the paper using some of the techniques and ideas that we had discussed, and then return the following day. After several meetings of this nature with one-on-one discussions, I was allowed to retake the writing test. Dr. Blithe's smile when she found me after class to return my passing essay is emblazoned in my mind forever. I remember thinking that if only I had had a teacher in high school with the time to conference with me like that in a one-on-one setting, maybe I would have had a better understanding of how to write such an essay. If only I had been nurtured by a teacher who found the good in my writing along with the problems, who only bled soft, gray pencil in lieu of bright, red ink. If only I had experienced the value of the revision process as making something better and not just rewriting it neatly, maybe I would have been more prepared.

So, Grace, I tell you this because you are so good at writing, and you are only ten. My hope for you is that you encounter teachers who continue to challenge yet nurture you as you grow in your writing and develop skills for a variety of written tasks. I devoted myself to my research for the last few years in this area because I really believe that all children and adults have something important to say, and they should all be taught the language necessary to say it correctly with passion and conviction.

You may also remember some of my stories from when I taught 8th grade language arts before you were born. I worked with a very poor population of African American and Hispanic students. During those years, I came to question why it was so

difficult to teach those students how to write clearly constructed sentences and paragraphs, and how did they arrive in the eighth grade without being able to do so. It was this questioning that continued to plague me during the early years after you were born. As we spent our wonderful mother-daughter hours playing, reading, singing, and learning together, I began to make possible connections in my mind between early exposure to literacy and future success in school. Once you started school, I decided that it was time for me to go back myself and find some of those answers. It was with that goal in mind that I drove on weekends to class, headed off to the middle school for my research, or secluded myself at the computer.

Middle school was a fun place for me when I was there as a student and then again years later as a teacher. I remember meeting new friends and teachers and having more freedom than in elementary school. I also recall my 6th grade language arts teacher who first introduced me to the idea of writing in various genres for different audiences. The enthusiasm with which she began each unit, whether we were writing poetry or stories or letters, was contagious. I looked forward to each new piece of literature that we read because I knew it meant we would get our chance at writing something similar. Writing became an adventure! I can also remember the fun I had with my friends as we wrote lengthy notes to each other and traded them in the cafeteria. My journey as an author began to escalate during those years, which is why I decided to focus my dissertation study on the middle school writing classroom. I wanted to find out what writing strategies are being used now for strong students like you and for struggling students like so many of my former students.

Grace, this is where it gets really interesting! As you also know, I spent the better part of this past school year going once a week to the local middle school. I worked with two, 7th grade language arts teachers. One taught only the accelerated students and the other taught only the low level and special education students. What a dichotomy. The differences illuminated between the two environments were stunning. One group was working on diagramming complex sentences and then incorporating such complexity into their own narratives while the other group was having trouble with main ideas, capitalization, and punctuation. These students, however, were all in 7th grade. Their classrooms were very different academically and socially, yet I found some surprising similarities. For example, both teachers created open, caring environments where their students trusted them and felt comfortable enough to be vulnerable with their writing, and both teachers expressed lack of time as a major impediment to improving student writing. Both teachers experienced pressure from the new Common Core Curriculum, and I observed many grammar lessons in both classrooms taught in isolation. And most interesting, Grace, was that both teachers were teaching the same basic structure for an expository or persuasive essay, and students in each class had difficulty with various aspects of mastering this structure.

Before I go any further, let me explain a little more about the teachers in my study. I had two teachers, or participants, and I observed each teacher weekly for about four and half months. During this time, I also interviewed each participant on three separate occasions with roughly equal amounts of time in between each interview. I also gained permission to secure student work samples from each group as long as I did not use any student names. If you remember correctly, all the papers that I showed you had

been copied or cut to eliminate the identities of each student author. The observations, interviews, and documents for this study placed my research in a qualitative category rather than a quantitative category dealing with numbers and statistics. My initial questions came from my own experience as well as from the professional literature that highlighted the need for improvement in teaching students how to write. I set out to see how these two teachers, Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks, taught writing to struggling and strong writers. I wanted to learn about these two teachers' backgrounds with writing, their beliefs about writing instruction, and their advice for new teachers, administrators, curriculum writers, and college education professors. I know you may be thinking that my goals and questions may have been too ambitious, but I discovered so much about teaching, writing, and teaching writing through this experience.

You see, Grace, students have struggled with writing for many years. Some writing tests have been given across the country, and the results have caused concern among educators. One test, for example, was given by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2002, and only around 24% scored at the proficient level, while a higher percentage didn't even demonstrate basic proficiency (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 8). Another report by Applebee and Langer (2006) looked at statistical differences in writing achievement among subgroups of the population and found that African American, Hispanic, and free or reduced lunch students did not show improvement over 4 years, and this caused the scholars to focus on equal access to quality writing instruction as well as time spent on writing, different genres of writing, technology in support of writing, professional development for teachers, and approaches to instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2006, p. 3). These authors suggested that future

researchers, like myself, could focus on those issues in our studies, which is precisely what I tried to do. One other important area that I found for future research was from Sperling and Freedman (2001) who recommended that research in writing must look at the diversity in student populations when it comes to sociocultural and linguistic contexts. That really means, Grace, that we need to look at how different ethnic groups interact and speak, so that we can determine the best methods to use when teaching writing in ways that work for everyone. I do believe, and did from the beginning of my research, that using the entire writing process is crucial to helping students improve their writing. I will talk more about that later, but I am so thrilled that you have already learned the basic process of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing by the end of the 4th grade. That will help you tremendously with future writing tasks. One other important idea that I gained from the literature actually came from the reading I did for one of my doctoral courses, and that is the belief that all students – regardless of race or ethnicity – need to be taught Standard English when writing. Many scholars purport that Standard English is the language of power and privilege and will be the gate-keeper for entrance into colleges, universities, and the work place, and students who speak other languages including African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or African American Language (AAL) find writing in school particularly challenging (Delpit, 2006; Flood, Lapp, & Ranck-Buhr, 2005; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). Delpit explained that students of color speak and write from a different set of cultural and linguistic rules. A good teacher recognizes and celebrates these differences, while introducing children of color to the rules of the dominant culture.

I know some of this may be boring or difficult to follow, but I tell you this because I think that some students will struggle more with writing than others. It was fascinating for me because when choosing my participants, I was looking for a teacher of struggling writers and one of strong writers, but scheduling did play a part in which teachers would be available and willing to help me for an entire year. As it turned out, Mrs. Abbott taught the struggling writers who were mostly African American and Hispanic, and wouldn't you know it? Mrs. Abbott was African American. Then, to make things even more interesting, Mrs. Banks taught the strong or accelerated group, and the majority of the students along with the teacher in that classroom were White. I know that you have experienced something similar, Grace, when you get pulled out of class at school to go to your gifted class. You've asked me before why most of the children in your gifted class are White when you have lots of African American and Hispanic classmates who do not go with you. I'm afraid that the answer to that question is very, very complicated, and I only have some hypotheses after working with these teachers for the better part of last school year. I will continue with that discussion in a later letter.

As for now, I wanted to give you a sense of why I have worked so hard the last few years on this project. Mrs. Abbott, during one of my interviews with her, was responding to my question about what future challenges with writing her students might face in the future. She looked thoughtful for a moment and then reminded me that these seventh graders are not where they are going to end up. They are still works in progress just like every piece of writing they do. I thought that was a wonderful way to look at it. Grace, I need to bring this letter to a close for now, but I will write more later.

Love,

Mom

Dear Liz,

Congratulations on your recent graduation from the University of Ideals! When your mom and dad wrote to me and explained that you were completing your degree in middle school education and would be teaching language arts at Mercy Middle School, I was elated for you. Your parents asked if I could give you some words of wisdom from having traveled that road previously, and I told them I would try.

First, let me say that your teaching situation and your students will be unique to your experience, and other's experiences may be similar but will not be exactly the same. Next, I want to encourage you to look at the first year of teaching as one that will have an extremely high learning curve. No amount of course work or student teaching experience can adequately prepare you for going in and interacting each day as the teacher in the room, but I know you will do fine. It just takes time to find your rhythm and teacher-persona.

To be most helpful, I would like to tell you about how my dissertation research study turned out because you were always so interested in my work. Both of my teacher-participants were veteran language arts teachers, and I think you may find wisdom from their experiences as well as mine. As I mentioned previously, I observed and interviewed these two language arts teachers in 7th grade at the middle school where we live. Mrs. Abbott taught the lowest level language arts class, which also contained inclusion students and an inclusion teacher. Mrs. Banks taught the most accelerated group in the school. That class was doing seventh and eighth grade curriculum in one year. It was intense! Do you know which level of students you will be teaching? I would guess that your first year would probably be spent teaching average students unless you have gifted

certification, which I believe your mom said you did not. Anyway, I chose to do a qualitative study because I liked the idea of becoming immersed in two classrooms once a week for about 5 months and really seeing what was happening with writing instruction. As I'm sure you recall from our conversations, it was Purcell-Gates, Perry, and Briseno (2011) who looked at literacy research and practices while using the context of literacy as a social act. Through the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS), Purcell-Gates et al. looked at preferred research methods of qualitative studies in the area of literacy by doing cross-case analysis. CPLS found many research inquiries that used specifically designed case studies with related research questions, and all studies functioned within the framework of literacy in a social and cultural context. This paved the way for future case study research like mine. Stake (1995) explained that case study research gains much from a willing environment, and that is exactly what I was privileged to find. I enjoyed my research as I recorded my observation notes and subsequent researcher memos. The best part, however, was interviewing each teacher on three separate occasions throughout the study. I learned so much about both of my participants and their personal and professional struggles and triumphs with writing. Here is some of what I discovered:

Mrs. Abbott

Mrs. Abbott is an experienced teacher of middle school and high school English classes, and she hopes to retire in another year or two after 26 years in the school system. She is an African American, who has a beautiful voice and loves to sing to her students. Her class that I observed was first period, which ran from 8:25 - 9:30 each morning. This group was comprised of 10 boys and 9 girls; a number that fluctuated during the year, but

most days there were 8 African American students, 6 Hispanic students, and 5 White students. Mrs. Abbott had a co-teacher with this group because some of the students received special education services but were included in the regular education class. The co-teacher and Mrs. Abbott demonstrated a professional and caring relationship with one another. The co-teacher, however, was not a participant in my study.

Mrs. Abbott was an energetic teacher most days, and her lessons were straight from the Common Core Curriculum. This class as a whole struggled with capitalization at the beginning of sentences and punctuation at the end. Many days, I observed specific grammar lessons dealing with sentence types, phrases and clauses, verb tenses, and basic diagramming. While I was in the room, which was once each week for close to 5 months, Mrs. Abbott expressed frustration with the students because they were not showing that they understood these concepts by using them in their writing. During most of my observations, the total amount of writing time was minimal for the students with one or two word answers being required for a practice activity or quiz. Only in the spring did I observe several days of drafting or revising of essays. The following is an excerpt from my researcher journal about Mrs. Abbott's class when I was in the middle of my time at the middle school:

> *2-13-13: Today, the tasks in Mrs. Abbott's class were very rote. The climate was comfortable, and the students responded well to the teacher. The worksheets were related to parts of speech and the entire class period was used to complete them. Mrs. Abbott continued to talk about how the students need to pay attention to the concepts in their writing, but she did not have enough time in class for them to practice writing. This occurs often during my observations, and I know that both teacher participants are following the curriculum with their lessons. It seems to me that a more integrated approach would be more effective than so much isolated grammar work.*

Mrs. Abbot met with me on three separate occasions and answered questions from my research study. During the first interview, my questions focused on her own years in school and her experiences with writing. She talked about loving to write and using it as a way to live in an imaginary world. As she laughed and boasted about her wonderful imagination, she also explained that she had been known to write things for the other children in her class. She said that when she was in the 8th grade, she had an English teacher who instilled in her the love of writing. This influential adult turned out to be her basketball coach as well throughout high school, and Mrs. Abbott explained that this teacher encouraged her students to set their goals high and know that they could accomplish anything they chose. This teacher also told Mrs. Abbott and her middle school classmates that when others might tell them, "you know, you're never going to amount to anything," she needed for them to remember, "that's foolishness. Come over here and let me show you what you can do."

Mrs. Abbott said that college writing was very challenging for her and that her papers were always, "you know, full of red ink and full of 'that is not what we asked for'." As discouraging as that was, she started to realize the importance of grammar and structure rather than the freehand style she so enjoyed. When I asked her about her college courses in preparation for teaching, she admitted that she did not have any courses that taught her how to teach students to write. She also explained that she would love to be able to write for pleasure now, but she spends all of her spare time reading her students' writing. She occasionally will write a speech or poem for church.

The second interview with Mrs. Abbott examined her approach to teaching writing, and she said she likes to begin the year with lots of quick writes – one paragraph

in length – so that she can assess where her students are when they come to her. This allows her to focus her class instruction on common areas of weakness. The main goal she had for most of her students was to help them develop a controlling idea and appropriate supporting details. She found that citing evidence from a story is difficult for them, and their quotes were out of place and unrelated. Her laughter when explaining this was infectious! When she asked students how their in-text citation related to their main idea, they often responded by saying, "at least it's a quote." Mrs. Abbott's response to the students was, "Well, it's a quote – yea, but it's got to be related to what you are saying." She does try to help the students see that the grammar they are doing can help make their papers better, but she doesn't see much progress in that area.

Liz, I then asked her about the curriculum. As I am sure you are aware, the state of Georgia changed over to the Common Core Standards this school year. Both of my participants found that the demands placed on them under the new standards were nearly impossible to meet. Mrs. Abbott again leaned back and laughed heartily as she told me that, "you know the reading teachers and the language arts teachers are supposed to be married to one another this year!" We talked about the shift from many years ago when the same teacher taught both reading and language arts to the same students, and that was my experience when I taught 8th grade. I found it to be much easier when I knew what the students were reading, and I could help enhance their writing by doing responses to literature and not just teach the five-paragraph essay in isolation for the state writing assessment. Mrs. Abbott's experiences were similar to mine. When I asked her about the integrated approach, she admitted that she believed it was better.

The main concern, Liz, for Mrs. Abbott was the lack of time to conference with each student about his or her writing. Due to the constraints of the new curriculum, she found it difficult to do what she used to do which was give the class an assignment and then call each student individually to the back of the room so that she could conference with them about their writing. She explained that even though it took about 3 days to meet with every student in one class, it was well worth the effort. Mrs. Abbott felt that the new curriculum does not allow her enough time to use the entire writing process, and she stated, "the writing process, the full writing process, has to be used." She tries to incorporate the parents or grandparents into the picture by asking them to read their child's papers and talk with them about it, but she said that she hasn't had a tremendous amount of success. She believes that most of her parents can probably read the newspaper and therefore shouldn't have any trouble reading their child's essays, but she attributes the lack of success with possible apathy or different priorities on the parents' part.

Finally, Liz, during the third interview, I was able to discuss the content of the previous interviews to make sure that I had accurately transcribed the key concepts. We then focused on Mrs. Abbott's time of reflection on her students' writing and on her work as a writing teacher. She passionately explained that she loves teaching writing. She said that she loves everything about it. This is when we had some poignant moments as she opened up more to me because I think she felt that she knew me and trusted me a little more than when we first met 6 months earlier.

Mrs. Abbott shared her problems with the Common Core Curriculum because the children had to do so much writing. She explained that the amount of writing actually

hurt the students and their ability to progress because she no longer had the time to evaluate each piece and share that evaluation with each child. When I asked about any concerns about writing that she might have for these seventh grade students as they move forward in their lives, she did talk about those in her class who are basically non-readers. She worries that they've gotten to this level by hiding behind behavior problems or sleeping in class because they cannot read, but Liz, her main reaction was so fascinating to me. This is where I think you may want to take notes because she also offered advice for new teachers. When thinking of the future challenges in writing for most of her low-level group, she looked right at me and said, "Remember that writing is a process. It's a process. So you've got to go through the steps. And the children are works in progress just like their writing [laughter]. Just start with the end in mind." She went on to say that teachers must let their students know that they care about them, and teachers should always model what they want their students to do.

Mrs. Banks

Mrs. Banks is a veteran teacher of 20-something years and will possibly retire in the next few years. She taught for several years right after college, but then she took a 10-year hiatus while she raised her children. Upon her return to the classroom, she was armed with her gifted certification, which landed her in a position that she has maintained for many years. She thrives on working hard and often arrives very early and stays very late at the middle school. She is a White teacher, and many of the students in the class that I observed were White as well. This class was third period, which ran from 10:25 - 11:20 each day, and the class was comprised of 15 students: 8 males, 7 females; 10 White students, 2 African American students, and 2 Hispanic students. As an accelerated

language arts class, Mrs. Banks had the responsibility of teaching both 7th and 8th grade Common Core Curriculum standards to this class in one year. She prepared them for the regular Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), and this group also took the 8th grade writing test and the advanced placement language arts test. Liz, when I was in school and later when I taught, we never had groups that did this, but I understand that students are being allowed to accelerate these days. Many students are able to graduate from high school with college credit already on their transcripts. It is amazing. In my researcher journal, however, I noted the following in the spring of this year:

> *4-18-13: Today, the students in Mrs. Banks' class were uncharacteristically loud and chatty. Over the last few months, these students have been preparing for various accelerated exams in writing, which included the eighth grade, writing test, and I feel like the pressure is starting to get to them. The lesson today was more diagramming, and Mrs. Banks was constantly reminding them of the importance of using complex sentences like these on their AP writing test in order to score well. This class rarely ever has trouble settling down or listening in class, but today was really different. The worried expressions on some faces when talking about tests and grades told it all. Mrs. Banks had already commented to me that this group was really uptight about the testing.*

Mrs. Banks did not shy away from any challenge. She was very energetic and enthusiastic, and the students seemed to respond well to her. Her class climate was very inviting and comfortable, and behavior problems did not seem to be much of an issue at all. When I observed this class, I saw numerous lessons involving detailed and complicated diagramming of sentences. In fact, I don't believe that I ever learned that level of diagramming in all of my years in school. Mrs. Banks explained to me that the children really resist the diagramming at the beginning of each year, but they enjoy it by the end. She said her students who are good in math and science embrace the diagramming because it is *formulaic*, while the students who are more creative do not find it as easy. Other lessons that I observed revolved around preparation for writing

assessments and focused on improving the students' writing by adding in the grammatical elements from the previous lessons. These students seemed to transfer the isolated material into their writing with little difficulty.

On occasion, this group would meet in the computer lab to key in their papers. Mrs. Banks had a computer program where they could enter their paper and the computer would tell them the grade level equivalent of their writing. Then, she asked the students to add in some subordinate clauses or adverbial phrases, and the computer would reconfigure the level. The students were excited to see that their score increased. I was fortunate to gain permission from the school as well as from both teacher-participants to secure copies of student writing without the students' identities. I hope, Liz, you will take the time to peruse Appendix D, which will show you work samples from Mrs. Abbott's class, and Appendix E will show you work samples from Mrs. Banks' students. I believe you will notice the difference in writing between Mrs. Abbott's and Mrs. Banks' students. All samples were written by seventh grade students.

I also had the opportunity to interview Mrs. Banks three times with the same interview themes and questions that I used with Mrs. Abbott. During the first interview, Mrs. Banks shared with me about her love for writing and her love for teaching writing. Her earliest memories, however, really started with high school writing where she said that the writing was minimal, and papers were assigned and then graded without much direction. College was where she began doing most of her writing, and she was frustrated with the lack of instruction with each writing assignment. From the literature, this is apparently still an issue. Fisher and Frey (2003) more recently found this to be the case as well. They reported that teachers were requiring or causing writing to occur in

secondary grades rather than instructing students in how to write. Fisher and Frey contended that the reason for this was that teachers were missing the instruction component as they went straight from assigning writing to assessing it. That is important to note, in my opinion, because it suggests that certain areas of writing in schools have not changed much in the past 30 years. Mrs. Banks did admit that she loved to write novels and short stories as an adult and was able to write while staying home when her children were younger. Now, she said that she has no time for her own writing because she is constantly reading and grading her students' writing.

Going back to her earlier training, Mrs. Banks disclosed that once she mastered the structure of the expected writing in college, she no longer hated writing but really did not enjoy it yet. Taking her first journalism course in college, however, changed that. All of a sudden, writing became fun. She enjoyed the authenticity of the assignments when asked to go to a play and write a review or do an interview and write the results for a newspaper article. She also enjoyed the collaborative nature of working with peers as editors, which was basically a new experience for her. When asked if she had any courses in her teacher preparation program on teaching writing, she laughed and said, "No. no. I did those extra courses myself by going to conference after conference on the weekends."

The second interview focused on the details of Mrs. Banks' writing instruction and the strategies that she uses to improve student writing. Now, Liz, you need to remember that this is a teacher who has the top students in the school in her room, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they are all perfect writers. In fact, you may find Mrs. Banks' experience to be interesting. Mrs. Banks began by explaining that her approach

to teaching writing begins with modeling good examples and allowing students the room for trial and error to find what works for them. She said that her instruction also hinges greatly on teacher-conferencing. She explained that she would work with her students before and after school for as many hours as necessary in order to do this. She also was able to secure a substitute teacher every so often for a day so she can sit in the hall and have uninterrupted student conferences.

Mrs. Banks also explained that she works very hard at the start of each year to assure that each accelerated student has a grasp of the basic, essay structure. She said that once they understand the basic structure then they can begin adding in the extras. Another important component of her instruction is that she grades everything that they write. She said that some teachers will take a set of essays and, for example, only grade the opening paragraph one time, but she believes that the students need to know that if they write it: she will read it! She doesn't leave school until 7:00 or 7:30 some evenings, and she said that she is often up until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning at home. She said she is only able to do that now with her own children grown and not living at home.

The accelerated students respond to journal prompts each day that usually require quick writing and higher order thinking. They also complete many practice writing tests throughout the year that are either expository or persuasive/argumentative. Her instructional decisions are completely motivated by the curricular demands, and even then, time is still an issue. She has eliminated some of the "fun" writing assignments that she used to do because the new curriculum prohibits any deviation just by the sheer number of standards to be covered in one year. Mrs. Banks said that she insists on high expectations for all of her students. She became emotional as she told of one student who

was underprivileged but ended up in her accelerated class years ago. She said that the child didn't want to be in the class because she had no friends there, but Mrs. Banks convinced her to stay. By the end of the year, she was "best friends" with most everyone, and she still writes to Mrs. Banks as she is about to graduate from college and thanked her for continuing to believe in her. I saw obvious love and pride in Mrs. Banks as she recalled this story.

The third and final interview with Mrs. Banks also began with a discussion of my understanding of her previous statements, which is a way to triangulate my data, Liz. This will be important for you if you ever become a teacher-researcher as I fully anticipate you will one day. Here's a quick lesson on qualitative data validity. I focused on triangulation through multiple sources of data to address data quality (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Merriam (2002) discussed *member checks* as an important strategy to demonstrate qualitative validity of a study, and even though the exact language may be different, the participants should be able to "recognize" the information from the original encounter (p. 26). Member checks are particularly important when interviewing teachers to be certain that the participants accept the accuracy of the meaning from the interviews. Maxwell (2005) referred to member checks as respondent validation, which offers validity in the accuracy of the researcher's account of what was said or done (p. 111). I will explain later about other ways in which I tried to address validity of my data.

As I was saying, the third interview looked at past data and then moved forward to discuss Mrs. Banks' reflection on her own teaching. Mrs. Banks said that time is still the biggest issue for her, but she does reflect daily on student writing by reading their

journals. The formative assessments, or practice writing tests, also give her time to monitor their progress and make instructional decisions. When asked what works well with her students, she said that modeling through literature and then having the students mimic that style of writing is very effective. Mrs. Banks explained that, on the other hand, busy work does not go over well with her accelerated students. She said that they must have a reason for doing each and every assignment, and they don't respond well to the answer "because I said so."

Mrs. Banks explained that these children need to be inspired to write, and they also need to know that the teacher cares about them. She frequently stops by to watch a student at band practice or on the soccer field because she feels it strengthens her relationships and enhances the work that they do for her. She said that her accelerated students must be given feedback on their writing. With feedback, she explained that once she models something for them, they can take their own writing and self-correct. Mrs. Banks also expressed frustration with technology's impact on this bright generation who often will omit capital letters or punctuation – not because they don't know to do it – but because they are so used to texting, tweeting, and emailing. She also had some advice for new teachers, which you may find useful. She said beyond the inspiration and relationship development, new teachers must equip themselves with the knowledge of how to teach writing. Mrs. Banks adamantly stated that, "I think teachers are afraid of writing because it's this big, massive vague…it's like this closed door that has never been open to educators."

She concluded by talking about the importance of remembering that the middle school learner is a social learner. Research, as I'm sure you know from your own teacher

education program, Liz, also supports this. For example, Daniels (2007) worked with middle school students in an effort to improve their overall writing and their feeling about their own writing by establishing a *Literacy Café*. According to Daniels, students grew to enjoy sharing writing and participating in the discussions as they developed a true understanding of writing as an important avenue for learning. Student writing improved, as reported by Daniels, because the sharing of the writing brought the process into the "…larger context of learning and social constructs…" (p. 18). Daniels explained the sociocultural theory as a way for middle school students to use contexts and language to determine and develop meaning. These scholars and many others, Liz, also believe that writing is a way for students to learn content in other classes. I will discuss *Writing to Learn* and *Writing Across the Curriculum* in my epistle to Mr. Taylor, who will be your middle school administrator. I will report suggestions for improved writing from my study as well as from the literature. For now, I do hope you will remember the importance of understanding that the middle school student has multiple modalities with which they learn, and your instruction should tap into their social nature.

The final advice offered in the third interview with Mrs. Banks was to colleges and universities in the area of training teachers for the middle school writing class. I will address this further in my letter to the Dean of Education at your university, but for now I think that you need to make certain that you do some independent reading and research. When I was a first-year teacher like you, I felt very shaky about teaching writing due to lack of instruction as well. My strategy was similar to Mrs. Abbott's where she said that she does lots of quick writes at the beginning of the year to determine her students' strengths and weaknesses. I also found that having the students keep a folder or *portfolio*

of their writing was helpful. After several weeks of generating writing, I would ask them to pick several favorites to pull out and improve. At the end of each grading period, we would take an entire day to do portfolio presentations with rubrics that asked the students to read a favorite piece, discuss why they liked it, talk about what they didn't care for during the process and why, etc. The students were assessed on their final written products but also on the presentation of their own writing processes. I suppose this was similar to Daniels' *Literacy Café*, and I found that my students looked forward to these presentations each six weeks.

Recommendations from My Data and My Experiences

Liz, as you begin your career as a middle school language arts teacher, I hope you will remember that your students need to know that you care about them. I hope you will show them that you are fair but also in charge. Classroom management with Mrs. Abbott's students was a bit of an issue, and she speculated that the students' whose skills were below where they should be compensated by either sleeping or disrupting. My experience with the same level of student was very similar. So, they need to know that you care, but they also must see that you are fully equipped to move forward with the curriculum and will not accept disruption. This also takes time and practice. Don't expect that first year to be *smooth sailing* if you end up teaching the lower level students. Mrs. Banks' class had very few disruptions, but she reminded me that her challenge was to always keep them challenged and understanding the reasons behind the work. Teaching gifted and accelerated has its own issues, and I think you should approach it the same way really. According to Mrs. Banks, these students also need to know that you care about them and are ready to move forward with the tasks for the year. I only taught

one class of advanced students each year, and I enjoyed their wit and enthusiasm. The exciting challenge, however, was to teach any student who struggled with writing to believe in their ability to express themselves and to make progress.

Next, I hope you will find time to conference one-on-one with your students about their writing as often as possible. Both Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks talked about the effectiveness of this practice, and my experience continues to echo theirs. You may or may not be in a situation where you can do this easily with the time constraints of your curriculum, but I hope you will find a way. It might mean that you only work on introduction paragraphs one week, or you might find a way for students to come before or after school. I also think that you need to balance your own personal time, but try to read what your students write so they will know that it matters. Otherwise, I believe the quality and effort of writing assignments in your class will decrease rather than increase.

Liz, I advise you to be excited about writing everyday, and make sure that your students actually do WRITE everyday. Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks were firm believers in both of these concepts as am I. Nagin (2006) of the National Writing Project (NWP) put it succinctly when he stated, "In short, if students are to learn, they must write" (p. 104). Unfortunately, many of my observations of both classes did not contain much actual writing for the students beyond one or two word answers or a very long sentence to diagram. Each day, I would record the number of minutes that the students spent actually constructing a response in their own words or writing in their journals, and the tallies were very low. At least 80% of my observations yielded 10 minutes or less in Mrs. Abbott's class and 14 minutes or less in Mrs. Banks class. The participants explained

that this was due to the new and demanding Common Core Curriculum. Mrs. Banks told me:

> *We are very strict Common Core, and it's all the way down. The county also adopted the combination of 7th and 8th grade for accelerated language arts, so we pretty much decided for middle school to follow this. We do a few extra assignments, but time is centered around those standards. That doesn't leave much time for anything else.*

I will address those issues again in my letter to the state curriculum director. For you, however, I think that using short quick writes each day will improve your students' writing over time.

Another recommendation from my participants as well as from my own experience is to model each writing task that you want the students to do. Years ago, I loved to use my overhead projector, which you have probably never heard of. Not to worry, however, because they apparently call them *Elmos* now. I would conduct a class discussion to begin each new writing task, and we would often construct a sample response together where all could see and copy for their own notes. Then, I would request that they make a similar attempt on their own. I found this reduced the number of questions I had to answer, and it gave the students a concrete example with which to work. Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks talked at length as well about the importance of this practice for both struggling and strong students. Fisher and Frey (2003) purported that along with writing everyday, teachers should use modeling and scaffolding strategies, particularly with the struggling writers.

For the writing classroom, I believe that it is imperative to use the entire writing process with middle school students. Both participants in my study agreed that this is the best practice, but time does not always allow for it. Mrs. Abbott, however, was

particularly adamant. With her struggling writers, the process allows for collaboration, which fits right in with the social nature of the middle school learner. While I will address the debate about teaching writing for the product only in this assessment-driven world in my letter to the state curriculum director, I do want to make you aware, Liz, of the basic issue. You see, when I wrote the proposal for my research, I declared that teaching writing through the use of the *writing process* was the foundational framework for my entire study. After completing my data collection and doing extensive data analysis, I can still stand firm in my assertion.

Some debate has surfaced about using the writing process in place of direct instruction, and Delpit (2006) believed that students of color and particularly African American students needed a balance between *process writing* and direct instruction due to the complexities of Standard English in order to obtain the language of power and success. Delpit advocated that, when teaching writing to poor students and students of color, a combination of the two works best. She explained that ultimately, regardless of how a piece of writing is produced, the students' work will be judged on correctness. After teaching a poor and largely African American population myself as well as observing both classes for my study this year, I must tell you, Liz, that I agree with Delpit's assessment. Both participants agreed that their students must be able to master the basic sentence, paragraph, and essay structure before they can branch out into other genres of writing. So, my advice to you is to get to know your students, and then base your instruction on where they are and where you want them to go. Mrs. Abbott frequently challenged her Hispanic students, for example, by explaining to them that they must learn to speak and write Standard English. One student was having difficulty

pronouncing the word *coordinating*, and Mrs. Abbott would not let her return to her seat until she said it correctly. This was done, by the way, in a loving manner, and the student was smiling as she returned to her seat. She was able to be very honest with her African American students as well. One time, an African American male student said "your own self," but he immediately realized his error and corrected it before Mrs. Abbott had a chance to jump on him. She remarked, "you better get it right!" Again, I believe these types of issues were addressed by Mrs. Abbott in such a caring way that the students trusted her and had no doubt of her motives to improve their academic and subsequent opportunities in life.

Another important aspect of teaching writing is to reflect on your teaching each day and monitor your expectations accordingly. Both Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks had classroom mottos or slogans that the students were very much aware of, and they served as constant reminders and motivators. I enjoyed watching and listening as the teachers and students recited these on occasion. For example, Mrs. Banks' accelerated students were frequently called to chant "I believe in myself' and "Today is going to be a great day!" Mrs. Abbott's class was somewhat different because she taught a different student population, and her own background – particularly religious beliefs – came into the moral lessons. Mrs. Abbott would often say things to her students like, "we are not going to pick cabbage, right?" to which the students would respond "right!" Then she continued with "we are going to own the cabbage fields, right?" to which another chorus of "right" would ring out. Mrs. Abbott also taught the children to always be thinking, "How can I help someone else today?" She said, "It should never be about you. It should always be about someone else." Both teachers, Liz, were extremely aware of their students'

progress and needs, and they used their time of reflection to alter their instruction and motivation accordingly. When I taught language arts, I found that keeping a checklist on each class' clipboard was most useful for my formative assessments. I would read through each group's portfolios every so often and make notes. Sometimes, I would discover that students were still not able to use compound sentences in their paragraphs, or I would find subject/verb disagreement. This helped me know which isolated skills we should work on. Often, these moments of reflections would assist me as I monitored my expectations as well. Was I introducing too much at one time, or was I not challenging them enough? Were all students on board with our class initiatives to always put forth a new effort each day?

The final piece of advice comes from my participants. Always remember that your students are not – during the year they are in your room – where they eventually will end up. According to Mrs. Abbott, you must "begin each day with the end in mind." Mrs. Abbott also attempted to involve the family members of her students. She would often call home and ask for mom or grandmother to read a child's paper. Mrs. Banks never mentioned this with her accelerated students, but she obviously had some level of contact with parents in order to gain permission for the students to come to school early and stay late. As for my own teaching, I tried to at least make some kind of contact with each family during each grading period. Unfortunately, I called or wrote more often due to behavior issues than for academic support. I did invite my principal to attend one of our portfolio presentations, and I wish I had invited the parents. You will find what works for you, but remember that each child comes from some place every morning and returns to that place every afternoon.

Liz, all of the advice from my participants was consistent with the professional literature. One other hint, however, was not specifically addressed in my study, and I thought it might be helpful for you. Writing, you see, can be useful for many reasons. As students grow, they will be asked to write for many different reasons and in a variety of different genres. One worthy use for writing is in teaching and learning new content. I can remember when I was in high school we would have these ridiculously long vocabulary/spelling tests. The only strategy that seemed to work for me was to write each word and definition along with a practice sentence using the word, and then I was able to remember most everything for the test. Another example came from my history class. Learning history was not interesting to me until the 10th grade when we had to do a reflection paper analyzing World War II from our textbook's perspective versus how it was characterized by Anne Frank in her diary. According to Knipper and Duggan (2006), writing is a way to help students construct meaning. This construction allows students' cognitive processes of critical thinking, synthesis, and reflection to evolve, and the process requires active rather than passive participation (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). Lacina and Watson (2008) looked at middle schools and determined that literacy instruction in content classes required that every teacher become an *enabler* who assists students in learning from and thinking about each text. Because of the cognitive processes involved, the use of reading and writing "… can lead to improved understanding and retention of content area knowledge" (Lacina & Watson, 2008, p. 160). This is all to say, Liz, the more students are writing – whether in your language arts class or in history or science – their cognitive processes are being enhanced through writing. As a faculty member of a middle school team, you can certainly encourage your

fellow teachers to use writing in their classes. Due to the social or *collaborative* nature of this form of communication as described by Vygotsky, many scholars promoted *writing to learn* or *writing across the curriculum* (WAC) as an integral component to successful learning through writing (Daniels, 2007; Lacina & Watson, 2008; Tobin, 2010).

Finally, Liz, I want to conclude this letter by reminding you about the importance of the middle school years for children. As they depart their elementary school experience, they are growing physically, cognitively, and emotionally into more complex people who are ready for more complex tasks. Your goal, then, is to follow the curriculum and challenge the students to stretch their minds with new and different genres of writing. As Mrs. Banks reminded me, your energy and enthusiasm will be directly proportional to the amount of effort and work you receive from your students. If you teach the strong writers, I hope you will strive to make them stronger. Use the literature to show them what is possible. If you teach the struggling writers, waste no time in making them stronger. Fisher and Frey (2006) encouraged teachers to use writing models, power writing, daily interactive writing, generative sentences, and independent writing to improve fluency, accuracy, and length of responses (p. 403). Kutney (2010) discussed important lessons derived from elementary writing instruction. He explained that teachers in middle school and beyond should start by making a careful study of their students' writing behaviors and habits (p. 41). Kutney persisted that students need choice in topics, and teachers should not place too much emphasis on errors. Mrs. Abbott said that she examines the writing of her low students at the start of each year, and this is what she concluded:

> *The writing is just not good – not where it needs to be. So we work on improving what we have. Like a lot of my kids came to me this year – It's like they never*

heard of punctuation before. So, we talked about run-on sentences, and we look at their work. And I try to make them aware so they can make a little progress. Sometimes it's hard to stimulate their minds.

I realize I have given you much to consider. I hope to hear about your students and classes very soon. You may call on me for any advice, and be sure to always surround yourself with positive supports for your professional endeavors. Also, take care of your mind and body so you will be a stronger person for the difficult tasks required of teachers these days.

With warmest regards,

Heather

Dear Mr. Taylor,

I would like to thank you again for the opportunity to complete my dissertation research in this middle school. Please accept my appreciation of your welcoming actions and attitude as the principal of the school as well. My study yielded wonderful information about writing instruction in middle grades for strong and struggling writers, and I would like to share some of my findings with you. I also appreciate your willingness for me to choose my participants from your 7th grade language arts teachers; Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks were both extremely cooperative and accommodating, and I will always be grateful to each participant for her contributions to my professional life.

Let me back up and give you a little information about my own teaching experiences. After completing my master's degree in teaching, I taught 8th grade language arts for 5 years until my daughter was born. At that time, I left the formal classroom and stayed home to do my toughest teaching assignment yet: raising a child. Once establishing a good foundation for her, I returned to school to work on my Doctor of Education degree (Ed.D). in Curriculum and Instruction at Valdosta State University. My days in the classroom, however, prepared me for my other assignments because teaching my daughter from birth and returning to school as a busy mom and wife were truly much harder than I imagined but both used a variety of communication skills – including written ones.

When I first started teaching, I was full of ideals. It wasn't long before reality set in. My students were reading below the 8th grade level, anywhere from 7th to 2nd grade. After that initial shock, I had to completely regroup. If my students struggled to read, how could I possibly expect them to write? As Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks both stated, I

also found the need to have students write short pieces for me everyday so I could assess their strengths and weaknesses. I just wasn't prepared, Mr. Taylor, for the multitude of weaknesses displayed by the student writing. Many of my eighth grade students did not use capital letters at the beginning of a sentence or punctuation at the end. In fact, the majority of their writing consisted of run-on sentences or fragments. Even worse, I could rarely find much of a main idea once I waded through the grammatical jungle. I could tell the students already knew that they were behind their peers, and this lowered the academic morale in the room.

So, I tried to take things one day at a time. First, I tried to create situations of success for these students by introducing literature on their level or creating authentic writing tasks. Next, I modeled a piece of writing in response to literature, or I led the class in writing a group letter to the editor of the newspaper about school uniforms. I found that generating their interest in an assignment was really half the battle. In the beginning, I conferenced individually with each student, and later I was able to teach them how to work with a peer to edit their writing. We made progress. The students kept their writing in individual portfolios and would choose several favorite pieces to publish and present at the end of each grading period. My principal at the time would come to these portfolio presentations on occasion, and he was very supportive of my efforts. That meant so much to me because these were not the top students in school, and the products were nowhere close to perfect. His presence, however, gave us all confidence that what we were doing was important. During my time at your middle school this year, I often saw you walking the halls and coming out of classes. I just wanted to tell you how crucial I believe that is for teachers and students. This may not be the case for all

schools, but my students enjoyed the time spent with the administrator during our presentations.

Ways for Administrators to Assist

As curriculum changes, teachers experience stress, as I know you are aware. This year was the first for Common Core Curriculum, and I observed and discussed concerns with both of my participants along with many other teacher friends. In fact, one of the major issues that emerged from my study was *time*: or lack of it! Let me give you a little background on that. You see, when I taught, the curriculum was not quite as demanding, and I was able to schedule individual conferences with my students during class while the others worked quietly on another assignment. Mrs. Abbott told me in one interview this year that she used to do her conferences like that and still tries to, but the daily curricular requirements do not allow her much time to do so. She said:

> *The only thing is I don't have time to sit down and talk with every single person. I will pick out some things that are universal that they are all doing, and I try to teach that aspect of it. The problem is that some students don't realize, "Oh, she's talking about me."*

Mrs. Banks also believes in the critical importance of one-on-one conferencing to improve student writing, and she told me that she gets a substitute teacher for her room every so often to accomplish the task. This allows her to work privately in the hall with each student individually and not have to divide her attention with watching the class. She explained it like this:

> *I work with a lot of them one-on-one because they've come from different places. I've got several who are avid readers – like that boy on the back row – but they struggle with writing. At the very beginning of school, I identify kids who need extra help. I try to have them up with the rest of the group by November. It takes a lot of after school and one-on-one.*

Having one-on-one time with any student who struggles with writing would be ideal! If you could find it in your budget to allow the language arts teachers in the building at least one day each grading period to have a substitute while he or she did one-on-one conferencing with students about their writing, I think writing would improve dramatically. My assertion is supported by the interviews with both teachers in my study, my own teaching experiences, and the professional literature on process writing and middle grades writing instruction.

Technology can enhance students' writing if used for that purpose, and you could also assist your teachers in this area as well. While I was at your school doing my observations, I saw different uses of technology in these writing classrooms. Mrs. Abbott had three computers in her room for student use, and certain students were allowed to type their papers on those computers. When I inquired about computer use, the co-teacher explained that the students with the most illegible handwriting were usually the ones to type their papers. In this same room, the students rotated through stations in preparation for standardized testing, and the computers housed practice tests they could complete. Mrs. Abbott also used her computer to project lessons and other information from the Internet onto the *Elmo*, and then the *Elmo* was used by itself to magnify a worksheet or a reading passage that everyone needed to see at the same time.

In Mrs. Banks' room, I believe I saw several computers in addition to the teacher computer, but I never observed any students working on them. This class would occasionally meet in the computer lab where every student had a computer on which to work. Mrs. Banks' students would compose and type their narratives in the computer, and then they were able to access a program that assessed their writing and gave them a

grade equivalent. For example, many of Mrs. Banks' seventh graders were writing at ninth or tenth or even twelfth grade level. This proved very helpful to the students, Mrs. Banks explained, because when they varied their sentence type and length or added specific types of clauses, the students could see how their writing level increased by using more complex writing tools. The students appeared to enjoy this independent time with the computer as they composed.

The research in this area is certainly mixed because many educators fall into the trap of using technology for the sake of using technology, and sometimes the curricular objectives do not fit with the technology (Hammerberg, 2001; Heitin, 2011; Wood, 2000). In writing, however, technology has grown in its role as a major influence on the practice of writing. By looking at writing as a tool for reflection on one's self, on others, and on the community, Bruce and Comstock (2005) contended that technology and its influence on these purposes is yet another avenue for people to record their thoughts and understandings. While the change in form of writing due to texts, emails, blogs, and webpages may seem extreme from the pencil to paper of old, it was not unlike the feeling of scholars after the invention of the printing press (Bruce & Comstock, 2005). They contended that technology enhanced the ability to tell the story but through a different lens.

I would imagine that your chief concern must be about the allocation of resources, but I believe the research supports the use of technology to teach writing. Heitin (2011) examined technology's impact on the teaching of writing in middle school language arts classes, and she determined three benefits for this new type of discourse for students. Writing to collaborate, writing for an audience, and motivation to master the conventions

were all listed as having positive impacts on student writing – both digitally and traditionally (p. 5). With the advent of blogs and *Google Docs*, Heitin found that writing became a collaborative effort for students rather than the isolated act of drafting with pencil and paper. Teachers and students also had the opportunity for closer and easier collaboration during the writing process when feedback was provided. In contrast to traditional writing, Heitin discovered that digital writing often provided students with an immediate and truly authentic audience rather than the normative writing for personal reflection. One middle school teacher told Heitin that digital writing had assisted students' clarity and purpose for writing because it added "power" to their language (p. 5).

The research now becomes interesting as it relates to the language arts teachers' responsibility to teach the students how to write an essay for the state writing assessment. I thought about both Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks as they dealt with that task along with all the new writing demands of the Common Core Curriculum. Heitin (2011) explained that teachers, partly due to assessment criteria and pressure, taught standard and even "formulaic" writing structures and then allowed students to branch out creatively with digital writing. The finding, however, was that students returned to their knowledge of conventions and fundamentals even when composing digitally, and this served as a motivating factor for many students to edit and revise correctly (p. 5). One word of caution came from Heitin as she reminded that teachers needed to maintain instructional objectives when integrating technology into the lessons and not use technology for its own sake.

I can definitely say that Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks always had their instructional objectives clearly in mind – and often stated on the board – and technology was used only if it enhanced those objectives. As an administrator, I think you could use technology to enhance writing instruction in several ways in middle school. First, language arts teachers should have equal time to schedule the computer lab so that every student gets a chance to do some writing in the digital genre. The data from my study indicated that Mrs. Abbott's class did not utilize the computer lab as much as Mrs. Banks' class. Next, I believe that teacher training on the available software and other options should occur so that the language arts teachers do not feel intimidated if they don't know what a *Google Doc* is or how to create a class webpage. These collaborative writing opportunities could provide motivation and interest for many students who see writing as dull. Finally, I think that administrators can help create prominent places in the school for language arts students to display their writing efforts. This would be a great idea for every content area, actually, but the published copy of something that reflects hours of work actually completes the writing process for teacher and student.

Thinking about other content areas leads me to the next way for administrators to assist with writing instruction. Scholars used to talk about a cross-disciplinary theory of writing instruction called *Writing Across the Curriculum* or WAC (Lance & Lance, 2006). *Writing to Learn* theory evolved from WAC, and it called for content teachers to ". . . provide instruction and practice in discipline-specific reading and writing" because these tasks would increase students' knowledge and vocabulary as well as argumentative and evaluative abilities (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 23). Yagelski (2012) viewed writing as "practice for living," and he reported that writing in many content and English classes

was often focused on technique as correctly informative or argumentative (p. 190). According to Yagelski, writing was a transforming act of students interacting with their own thinking about subjects and with the world to foster a deeper understanding of content material. I do believe, Mr. Taylor, that the authors of the Common Core Curriculum were attempting to increase writing in all content classes, but I do not know how much of this is actually occurring. Neither of my participants was able to speak to the amount of writing that students were doing in other classes. They guessed and said that it probably was not much. One place for you to start would be to do an anonymous survey of your faculty to determine if writing is being used outside of language arts and reading classes, and then look possibly at a whole faculty initiative at some point.

The best reason, Mr. Taylor, for you to explore WAC or *Writing to Learn* is what Lacina and Watson (2008) teach us. They explained that *Writing to Learn* not only assisted in content knowledge acquisition but was viewed also as a social act requiring interaction between students, texts, and ideas. This speaks directly to the social nature of the middle school learner, which makes it a perfect strategy for any content class. Mrs. Abbott did know that when her sister was a long-term substitute at your school in a social studies class, she had them write all the time. She admitted, however, that her sister is a former English teacher and therefore knew the value of writing in all areas. Students do read texts in all content areas, but writing can enhance the learning from those texts. While researchers contended that writing and reading do compliment each other, the cognitive processing for reading a text was different from creating and organizing thoughts for writing (Graham & Perin, 2007).

This leads to my final recommendation for you, as an administrator, to assist your language arts and other content teachers in writing instruction. I think it is important to recognize that writing has transformative power. I want to address this issue in much greater detail in my letter to the curriculum director, but I believe it is critical for school administrators to understand the basics of the issue. You see, many scholars are afraid that writing is becoming too "formulaic" due to the nature of the writing assessments (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Casey, 2007; Nagin, 2006; Sperling, 1996; Yagelski, 2012) . Teachers are becoming awfully good at instructing to the persuasive or expository structures so their students will know how to write their essays in response to the test prompt, and this may be occurring to the exclusion of teaching other genres of writing. This may not be all bad because, as both of my participants pointed out, knowing the basic essay structure is necessary for every student in order to move on to more advanced and/or creative writing endeavors. The concern, however, enters the picture when all we have time to do is teach to that writing test. Many scholars (Indrisano & Paratore, 2005, Lance & Lance, 2006, Yagelski, 2006) worry that we are not allowing students to learn the other values derived from writing. In fact, I join with the writing researchers who are concerned that we are not allowing students to enjoy writing for the sheer joy of writing.

My observation notes and researcher memos from the months of study in your school yielded interesting results when I think about why we teach students to write. The curriculum obviously drove the instruction. Each day in both classes, some type of grammar was discussed, and the basic essay structure was reviewed and practiced. Both teachers tried to help their students apply the isolated grammar and usage lessons to their writing, but only Mrs. Banks' students were able to do this well. Mrs. Abbott often

expressed frustration with the students because they were not applying themselves to the work in her class. She used praise when they did try. Mrs. Banks challenged her students as well, but she did not have to fuss at her group very often. Mrs. Abbott's class often had to take time away from instruction when she found herself needing to address a behavior problem, and this only happened one time in Mrs. Banks' class during all of my observations. That incident only lasted about one minute, whereas Mrs. Abbott frequently had to use 15 minutes at a time to address an individual or group of students whose focus was not on the lesson. My researcher journal served as a reflection tool for me, and here is an excerpt that you might find relevant:

> *3-1-13: Today, Mrs. Abbott had her usual energy and enthusiasm for the class. She reminds the students that they need to learn the grammar skills for the CRCT but also for high school and college writing. She tells them that they must write well if they want to become a doctor. In Mrs. Banks' class, I hear this theme of preparing for future endeavors more often perhaps because they are the accelerated group, and it's expected that they will become professionals. I was pleased, however, to hear Mrs. Abbott inspiring her students as well to get it right so they can do more with their lives.*

Both Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks created comfortable environments in which the students could write. You can see from the writing samples, however, that Mrs. Abbott's students struggled with writing much more than Mrs. Banks'. My observations revealed multiple times where both teachers communicated through their words and their actions that they cared deeply about the students, and I believe that both teachers were able to illicit the best possible writing based on the capabilities and efforts of the individuals in their classes. Mrs. Abbott used many real-life examples about former students who did not keep their minds on school as they grew older, and she explained to her students that some of those students found great hardship later in lives. Mrs. Abbott explicitly told

them, "Your priorities are wrong. You would rather go to club meetings and eat cupcakes than learn. It doesn't work towards being the best you can be. Stop being off task. Use me as your teacher." Later, as she walked around the room looking at their work, she reminded them to bring their money for breakfast on Friday, which she bought from McDonalds so they could have a time of fellowship together. She also reminded them, "You know I love you." Mrs. Banks took time during class once to read some poetry from other classes where students had expressed difficulty with the peer pressures and unkind behavior of some students in their classes. She urged her accelerated students to try be a good friend to their peers and to forget about their own problems. As tears came to her eyes, she told the students, "You know, the teachers here, we really do love y'all."

I will conclude, Mr. Taylor, with these anecdotes. I hope you have found some of this information useful as you move forward. The writing instruction in these two classes was excellent, and both teachers knew their students well, cared for them as individuals, followed the curriculum to the best of their abilities, used research-based practices, and helped their students make progress throughout the year. Again, I enjoyed my time in these environments thoroughly.

With profound appreciation,

Heather Powell

Dear Dr. Dory Leighten,

My name is Heather Powell, and I am writing to you as a doctoral student from Valdosta State University. I am currently working on my dissertation to complete the requirements for my Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. I wanted to make you aware of my qualitative dissertation study and its results in the area of writing instruction for struggling and strong writers in middle grades. I believe that my classroom observations, researcher memos, teacher interviews, and student work samples together have lessons from which we can all learn. As state curriculum director, I know that you are always seeking avenues for curricular improvement, and I believe that my study along with my own teaching experiences and the professional literature on writing instruction can offer several suggestions for such reform.

Let me give you the background of my study. My purpose was to examine closely writing instruction in two middle school classrooms to search for effective teaching strategies, areas of difficulty in writing instruction, and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about writing and writing instruction. The objectives of this research were divided into three categories: intellectual, practical, and personal. The intellectual goal of this study was to understand the process of writing instruction from the teacher's perspective. The practical goal for this proposed research was to ultimately assist in identifying problem areas and ways to improve the practice of writing instruction and student writing. Maxwell (2005) explained that, "Generating results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible, both to the people you are studying and to others" gives credence to research studies that strive to inform educational practices (p. 24). Finally, the personal goal of this research was to find answers to questions I

struggled with as an 8th grade teacher in Athens, Georgia. I questioned, and continue to question, why writing is so difficult to teach and why students struggle with the components that are necessary for successful, written communication. Through this research, I gleaned some understanding about the state of writing instruction in two middle school classrooms in one south Georgia town.

The impetus for my research stemmed from the problems with student writing. Let me briefly summarize some of the more pertinent areas of research in writing. I began by examining the problems associated with struggling writers. Scholars focused on struggling writers' literacy development in and out of the school setting. Faulkner (2005) explained that schools were being blamed and exonerated in the professional debate of how to solve the writing crisis, and certain case studies as well as other pedagogical research illuminated problem areas for writing instruction in some schools. Coker and Lewis (2008) highlighted the fact that teacher preparation programs fell under scrutiny for lack of sufficient research in writing instruction, and Vacca (2002) explained that students were developing a "one-dimensional view of writing" (p. 8). He went on to say that students were receiving explicit instruction in how to write a certain type of essay or story, but they really were not able to use writing to "…explore and interpret meaning that they encounter in texts or class discussions" (Vacca, 2002, p. 8).

Research in writing instruction supported further study into the problems that arose in writing instruction, and many entities reported that progress in writing was needed. In 2002, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) gave a writing exam to students in grades 4, 8, and 12, and the results indicated that only "…22%-26% of students scored at the Proficient level…" with high percentages of

students not even meeting the basic level of proficiency (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 8). In addition to these alarming statistics, Graham and Perin (2007) elaborated further on the literacy crisis as including writing along with reading for many students. They explained that reports by the National Commission on Writing in 2004 and 2005 showed concern by employers in the work force in both public and private sectors when asked about applicant's written communication skills; in fact they considered the skills critical for succeeding in the hiring process. The National Commission on Writing reported that, "…about 30% of government and private sector employees require on-the-job training in basic writing skills" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 9). Furthermore, students were not entering colleges and technical schools with the necessary level of writing preparation, and the National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2003 that, "at least a quarter of new community college students enroll in remedial writing courses" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 9).

Both, the writing skills assessment process and equal access to quality instruction were identified by multiple sources as issues when reporting students' overall writing achievement. In their report on *The State of Writing Instruction in America's Schools*, Applebee and Langer (2006) looked at the statistical differences in writing achievement among subgroups of the population. After examining writing achievement in grades 4, 8, and 11, it was noted that, "Black and Hispanic students and those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch remain relatively the same as four years earlier" (Applebee & Langer, 2006, p. 3). This same report looked closely at several issues as being crucial for future study such as time spent on writing, different genres of writing, technology in support of writing, professional development for teachers, and approaches to instruction.

Sperling and Freedman (2001) recommended that future research in writing must look at the diversity in student populations as well as examine "…patterns in writing and learning to write that are influenced by particular differences" in sociocultural and linguistic contexts (Sperling & Freedman, 2001, p. 17). The challenge of mastering written language in the classroom is difficult enough even for those students whose first language is English, but students who speak other languages including African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or African American Language (AAL) found writing in school particularly challenging (Delpit, 2006; Flood, Lapp, & Ranck-Buhr, 2005; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). Rose (1989) discussed the state of writing instruction for students placed in college remedial classes who were only taught grammar and skills in the effort to improve their writing. Rose explained that students in those courses did not write "…anything longer than a sentence" because that would be encroaching on the task of the English Department (p. 207). Because those students were not engaged in the *writing process* - which refers to the process of drafting, editing, and revising writing in a collaborative setting - the isolated skills at the sentence-level were not adequate to improve students' writing.

To address the future of writing instruction, Coker and Lewis (2008) discussed several barriers to effective approaches. Recognizing and expanding on several of Graham and Perin's (2007) conclusions, the following were recommended. Coker and Lewis noted that writing instruction must address the difference between *strong* and *struggling* writers, and much more research is needed to determine effective strategies for both groups. To elaborate on Graham and Perin's assertion that the writing instruction concern is not limited to grades 4-12 as suggested by the NAEP tests, Coker and Lewis

suggested stronger instruction for early elementary grades might "avert" or "reduce" problems in the later grades (p. 245). Finally, instructional strategy recommendations included assisting students in developing flexibility as writers because "…writing instruction needs to bridge the gap between school and workplace writing" (Coker & Lewis, 2008, p. 245).

The final and perhaps most important problem with writing instruction in secondary grades was the loss of writing for the sheer joy of writing. Yagelski (2012) explained that the problem really was not with the way many schools were teaching writing because some were doing it quite well. The problem, Yagelski contented, was that most educators had a very narrow view of writing and its role in shaping lives. He explained that, "…we simply don't teach writing in ways that give students access to its transformative power; we don't allow them to experience writing as a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them" (Yagelski, 2012, p. 189). Applebee and Langer (2009) looked at how writing instruction had changed due to the influences of assessments and new technologies as well as new state standards and mandates, and they came to the ultimate conclusion that teachers were responsible for not only preparing students for writing tests but assisting them in becoming "…the writers they will need to be as they leave our secondary schools at the cusp of their lives as adults and citizens" (Applebee & Langer, 2009, p. 27). The problem, therefore, for this research was that scholars did not agree on which approach to writing instruction was most effective, and teachers were using a variety of methods in an attempt to tackle the overwhelming task of improving students' thinking and writing. The following research focused on two 7th grade language arts teachers in the same middle school to allow writing instruction

strategies to be observed, teachers' perceptions to be explored, and students' writing to be examined. I would like to share with you some of what I learned and then make some recommendations for revisions to the curriculum based on this study, the professional literature supporting this study, along with my own teaching experiences.

Observational Data

For the months of October, December, January, February, March, and parts of April, I tried to observe each teacher once every week. Scheduling conflicts did arise, but my data comes from multiple observations. Mrs. Abbott taught the lowest level language arts class for 7th graders, which included some special education students with a co-teacher. Mrs. Banks taught the highest level or *accelerated* seventh grade language arts class. As a qualitative researcher, I made observation notes during each visit and later wrote a researcher memo each time as well. These pages of raw data were then categorized and coded based on the literature and the data. These are called *in vivo* codes (Coffee & Atkinson, 1996). As Coffee and Atkinson recommended, I used a *bottom up* approach where I allowed the data to speak for itself (p. 32). I also allowed literature and experience to form the themes for the study. Here are some points of interest from the observational data.

1. Most lessons that I observed started with isolated grammar and usage instruction and lingered through most - if not all - of the hour. The Common Core Curriculum was followed, which involved parts of speech, sentence types, diagramming sentences, verb tenses, and more. The difference in how in-depth the two teachers were able to go with each lesson was stunning. For example, in Mrs. Abbott's class, the sentence diagramming focused on

identifying the basic parts of speech and placing them correctly on the line. Conversely, in Mrs. Banks' class, the sentence diagramming was so complex that one sentence took on the appearance of a road map with multiple turns and twists. While both teachers taught the curriculum at the appropriate and challenging level for her students, these two seventh grade classes were worlds apart.

2. I did not see many lessons where the students were asked to compose a piece of writing in class. This certainly does not imply that these classes were not writing because I know that they were. I witnessed a few lessons in each class where the students were either writing rough drafts, editing a pre-existing draft, or publishing a final copy, and it is important to remember that my observations each week were merely a snapshot of what was really going on. With that said, however, I did not see many lessons where students were doing quick writes or responding to an idea. Mrs. Abbott's students did watch Cable News Network (CNN) for Kids and then respond about their favorite story. Mrs. Banks' class did write responses to journal prompts, but some of this must have been done outside of class. When I inquired, both teachers explained that they were not able to do as many daily writing assignments because of the curricular demands for grammar exercises and lengthy essays.
3. The students in both classes had similar skin color to the other students in the same class, which was different across classes. In Mrs. Abbott's class, for example, the majority of students were either African American or Hispanic.

Only 4 out of 19 students were White. In Mrs. Banks' class, only 2 students out of 15 were African American, and the other students were White.

Interview Data

During my study, I interviewed each teacher on three separate occasions. These interviews occurred approximately one month apart, and the structure of each interview was as follows: Interview 1 – Teacher's own history with writing; Interview 2 – Teacher's approach to teaching writing; and Interview 3 – Teacher's reflection on teaching writing. The interview data informed my study tremendously. I found myself enthralled with each participant and often wished for more time. During the third interview, I took time to review with each teacher her answers from the previous interviews to ensure accuracy on my part as a recorder. This is a concept in the qualitative research world known as validating data through member checks (Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002). Both participants concurred with my reports of their answers and intentions, and they even added helpful information. Here are some points of interest from the interview data:

1. Interview one revealed that Mrs. Abbott loved writing as a young person because of her vivid imagination and supportive middle and high school teacher. Mrs. Banks did not really enjoy writing in high school or college because papers were assigned with little instruction on how to do it. Mrs. Abbott found college writing to be difficult, and her papers often were returned with plenty of red ink. Mrs. Banks began to enjoy writing from a journalism course in college because the assignments were authentic, and the teacher assigned peers for editing. Both teachers said that they received

absolutely no instruction as education majors in college or graduate school on how to teach their future students to write. Both teachers said that right now they were too busy reading their students' writing to do any personal writing except for during the summer. Mrs. Abbott did occasionally write something for church, and Mrs. Banks was working on a novel that she hopes to finish in retirement.

2. Responses to interview two revealed a plethora of information about writing instruction strategies employed by both teachers. Let me begin with what I learned from Mrs. Abbott.

    At the start of the year, Mrs. Abbott determined through quick, short writing assignments that her students were struggling with basic sentence structure. She began by helping the students improve from one to five sentences and then from 5 to 10 sentences. Then she introduced the basic essay structure, which she felt was the foundation for their future writing. Mrs. Abbott confided in me that the Common Core Curriculum requires too many full-length writing projects for her students' levels. Nonetheless, she worked on teaching varied sentence types and the use of quotes as ways to strengthen their writing. Mrs. Abbott provided a model each time she gave a writing assignment. She liked to find examples from literature, but she often wrote something herself. Mrs. Abbott talked about the importance of using the entire writing process with each piece of writing, but she was frustrated with the demands of the new curriculum, which left her without time for conferencing with students much at all.

Mrs. Abbott did find it challenging to stimulate interest in her low-level students, but she saw it as a challenge and approached it with love and humor. Finally, Mrs. Abbott did admit that the old way of teaching reading and language arts to the same group of students was a better, more integrated approach for student learning. She solicited help from the parents and other caretakers of her students but did not find much success. Mrs. Abbott loved everything about teaching writing, which she has done for 27 years. She explained it this way:

I like everything about teaching writing. I've been teaching 26 or 27 years, and I've always taught writing. We used to teach writing, literature, grammar, and vocabulary – the English teacher taught all of that. So we would write, and we would do responses to literature. So, I like what I do. I LOVE what I do.

Mrs. Banks' approach to teaching writing was to model with good examples, and she allowed her students room for trial and error. She also believed that the basic essay structure was critical for the students to master before they could branch out into other writing genres. Mrs. Banks spoke strongly about the importance of the one-on-one conference between teacher and student. Because she taught the accelerated or top students in the school, she quickly identified any students who struggle with writing, and she worked with these students one-on-one after school for the first month to catch them up. She said that she read everything her students write from journal entries to formal essays, and she believed it made a difference in how serious her students took their writing assignments. Mrs. Banks strictly followed the Common Core Curriculum,

and therefore, time dictated her attention to preparing the students for the writing tests that they encountered during the year. More than everything, Mrs. Banks believed that showing students how much you care will encourage and motivate them to do their best on any assignment but particularly with writing where they must divulge a piece of themselves. Her words explained this best:

> *In order to inspire these accelerated kids to write for you, you have to show them that you care. I go to their ballgames, I go to their recitals, I go to their practices. You cannot teach them without that relationship. If they think that you really care about them, you'll have them eating out of your hand.*

3. During interview three, I asked the teachers to reflect on their writing instruction and what meaning it had for them. Both teachers admitted that they did not have time for lengthy, philosophical-type reflection. Each day after school while looking through the writing from the day was the best time to see how things were going. Mrs. Abbott learned over the years from her writing instruction that short writing assignments and use of the entire writing process worked best for her students. She also reflected on the fact that when her students are in her seventh grade language arts class, they are a long way from where they are going to end up. She believed that modeling good writing and showing them you care about them were the two best strategies that she employs. Mrs. Abbott did take time to marvel at the demands of the Common Core Curriculum, and she admitted there was no way to do it all. Mrs. Banks declared that there was little time to reflect formally when she had so many papers to read, but she used the shorter journal pieces each day to

gage how her instruction was going. Teaching advanced students required that she find advanced reading material to model and inspire. She believed that her students would struggle in the future if they had writing teachers who did not read everything and offer feedback, and she was concerned that the students were coming to rely heavily on technology to check spelling or grammar. She also expressed frustration at the number of creative writing assignments that she used to do with this advanced group that – due to Common Core Curriculum and the pressures of testing – she was no longer able to do. Mrs. Banks raised the expectations for the writing in her class where she believed they needed to be even if the students did not think they could meet the expectations. She said that by the end of the year, they usually did.

Document Data

Documents in the form of student writing samples were obtained throughout the study, beginning in fall semester and ending in April. IRB approval was obtained along with permission from the school administration that these samples could be used in my dissertation as long as student names were removed before publication. Work samples from students who emerged as interesting from a writing standpoint, on either end of the academic spectrum (Coker & Lewis, 2006), were solicited as document data. These papers in the form of essays, narratives, letters, and other projects provided a "behind-the-scenes" view of the writing instruction in each language arts classroom (Patton, 2002, p. 307).

Please peruse the writing samples from students in Mrs. Abbott's class in Appendix D. From the standpoint of a writing instructor, I found many common issues with these samples. To remind you, Dr. Leighten, these students were mostly African American and Hispanic, and some in the class needed the services of an *inclusion* or special education teacher. These samples represented the production from the lowest level of 7th grade language arts at this particular school. I would also like to emphasize that I had great difficulty obtaining copies of these samples from Mrs. Abbott. Please do not misunderstand: Mrs. Abbott and I worked well together, and she enjoyed the experience according to her statements during interviews. I did make note, however, on numerous occasions in my researcher journal that my requests and reminders for copies of the work samples were continually postponed with sincere apologies for forgetting to make the copies. In most instances when I was able to secure copies, the co-teacher took care of that for Mrs. Abbott. Upon reflection, I believe that Mrs. Abbott really did not want to surrender the work of her students, which she knew to be subpar or well below the level of their grade or age peers. I believe, after many discussions with Mrs. Abbott during formal interviews or casual conversations that she hated to give away proof that these students were significantly behind in their written communication skills. The words from my researcher journal express my feelings at the time:

> *4/26/13 - After continual requests to obtain copies of work samples, the co-teacher finally sent me to the office with a stack of papers to copy. She was pleasant about the task, and she asked me specifically what I needed. Mrs. Abbott obviously placed this task on the co-teacher, and I really believe it is because Mrs. Abbott is not ready to let go of her students' work. Mrs. Abbott continually apologizes to me about forgetting to make copies. I always assure her that it is no problem, but I get a feeling that it is more than forgetfulness. I could be wrong, but she is also always reminding me that these students are not where they will be eventually with more time and instruction.*

After assessing the samples from Mrs. Abbott's students, I found many parallels with what experts stated were the most difficult issues for students from other cultures or backgrounds or for students who struggled with written communication. The writing samples from this class ranged in purpose of assignment. Some paragraphs were meant to be summaries of CNN news that they watched as a group along with their own opinion about which story held the most significance for them. The other samples came from an argumentative prompt related to the book, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, which they read in their reading class. Students were asked to take a stance and defend their position using evidence from the text. One sample was a persuasive letter to an imaginary younger student about the impact of having famous people for role models. In most samples, students had difficulty with structure and fluency - at sentence and paragraph level - organization, and mechanics. Flood, Lapp, and Ranck-Buhr (2005), when working with faculties in San Diego and New Mexico, found similar issues in middle school writing, which they addressed through professional development and writing intervention programs. While rubrics for writing assessments were standard at this school, I was not sure how much congruency there was between instruction and assessment. I observed Mrs. Banks as she discussed the rubric for the writing assessment in detail with her students, but Mrs. Abbott never discussed it with her class in my presence. When I asked Mrs. Abbott if she used the rubric when grading student work, she said that she did, but it was difficult to use with the level of her students.

The writing samples from Mrs. Banks' classes are included for you as well. These samples were extremely easy to obtain. In fact, Mrs. Banks provided me with many more than I actually needed, and she always brought her enthusiasm to the task of

turning over her students' work. Her pride as a teacher was understandable, and she talked openly about how much progress she had seen them make since the first day of school. Because these students were preparing for the eighth grade writing exam as well as Advanced Placement tests, Mrs. Banks used the *Georgia 8th Grade Writing Assessment: Scoring Rubric*, which I have provided with the samples at the end of this entire document.

The samples from this advanced group ranged from personal narratives to the same *celebrity* assignment from Mrs. Abbott's students. I found that these students had good command with structure and fluency at the sentence level, but some struggled with paragraph structure and organization. Mechanics or conventions were not very problematic for most students, but style and sense of audience were awkward at times. The personal narratives were started by the students in the fall of the year and completed in the spring.

Recommendations for Curriculum Revisions - Examples from My Study and the Professional Literature

Based on my qualitative research on writing instruction in middle school language arts for struggling and strong writers, I would recommend the following alterations to the Common Core Curriculum. Because the literature review guided my research questions, I have included specific examples from the literature to give you a more thorough understanding of my recommendations and their foundations.

Recommendation One

First, language arts teachers need more time to engage students in the full writing process. This may seem obvious, and I am not suggesting that we rush out and lengthen

the school day. I think that the participants in my study were expressing great frustration because they found themselves unable to use the writing process in its entirety to strengthen student writing. Both teachers, whether teaching low or high level groups, had students who struggled with writing. Over and over, they used the word *time* as the biggest impediment to their writing instruction. Mrs. Abbott, when asked about whether she could collaborate with other teachers about student writing, explained,

> *Well, we used to, but those language arts teachers don't have time to read it. They really don't have time to read it. They used to send us a folder – it was mandatory – and we would each take a piece of writing and ...but, now, who has time to look at it? The only thing I don't have time to do is to sit down with each individual person and talk to them about their writing. I will pick out some things that are universal and teach that aspect to the whole class.*

Along with the entire writing process, both teachers expressed that the critical component for student success was the one-on-one conferencing and feedback from teacher to student. Many scholars addressed the need to teach writing as a process, and time was a critical component to allowing the entire process to be used effectively. Dr. Leighten, the following example from my literature review makes this point very well, and the subsequent data from my participants echoed this sentiment:

For example, Yagelski (2006) examined the underlying theories and pedagogies of three pieces of literature that he considered closely related in their aims for writing instruction in K-12 settings, and I found these theorists along with the accompanying analysis to be particularly relevant to the use of the entire writing process. He compared and contrasted Peter Elbow's (1998) Writing without Teachers with Paulo Freire's (2001) Pedagogy of the Oppressed alongside Donald Murray's (2004) A Writer Teaches Writing. The driving force behind Yagelski's review was the implementation of a required writing component on the college admissions exam, the SAT. As a member of the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) task force designed to examine the new SAT writing exam, Yagelski and others authored a report that expressed concern. The NCTE task force thought that, "...the SAT writing test would likely send to students, parents, school administrators, and teachers questionable messages about what constitutes 'good' writing" (Yagelski, 2006, p. 531). Yagelski continued to parallel the task force's concern about timed writing assessments, and he explained that most schools in this country hold a similar definition for acceptable writing as being "...organized,

formulaic, rule-governed, and relatively straight-forward…" (p. 532). Yagelski, therefore, felt compelled to review these three pieces in response to a colleague's comment about Murray's (2004) article Teach Writing as a Process Not Product as being "radical" (p. 532).

To connect the seemingly unrelated authors' works, Yagelski (2006) reviewed the works of Murray, Elbow, and Freire in an attempt to explain how writing instruction is not without political and economic implications for students, teachers, administrators, school systems, policy makers, and the world. By focusing on the current trend of educational reform and accountability measures, Yagelski (2006) argued that the writing process movement lost momentum that it should not have. According to Yagelski, the common thread between these three works was "purpose of writing" (p. 533). When considering the times in which each book was written, the three works also represented times of change. Murray, Elbow, and Freire all wrote during the political and social unrest of the 1960s with varying experiences yet all continuing a tradition promoting change and rectifying injustices. Yagelski pointed out that at the time he was writing this article, the world was reeling from social "inequalities" revealed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 (p. 533).

Yagelski (2006) explained that Murray (2004) questioned "conventional writing instruction, which positions the student as passive direction-follower, as disengaged from the world around him or her, as un-self-reflective" (p. 534). Elbow (1998) also was portrayed by Yagelski as being in support of process writing, and Elbow taught that the topic for student writing is irrelevant as long as students are writing. For Elbow, according to Yagelski (2006), writing was about the individual's experiences and not the teacher or the teachings. Elbow thought that the problem with current "conventional" writing instruction was that, "they remove the experiential- and therefore the epistemic – component from school-based writing;…" (Yagelski, 2006, p. 537). Elbow's experience stemmed from the era following the assasinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy when he volunteered as an instructor in the Black community of Boston helping with the children and teaching writing to adults. Yagelski explained that Elbow's perspective stemmed from a time with multiple political and social complexities. Elbow wrote, "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words" (p. 539).

Finally, Paulo Freire's (2001) work was portrayed by Yagelski as being down on the current educational system and its motives to maintain the status quo, but Freire's work is also driven by "his deep sense of hope" (Yagelski, 2006, p. 542). Stemming from his own experience with oppression, Freire was able to point out the inequalities in education while finding a way to overcome them at the same time. Yagelski (2006) suggested that, "we teachers of writing can draw from Freire – as well as Murray and Elbow – to address the ills we see in the education system" (p. 542). Yagelski encouraged teachers of writing to remember the legacies of these three scholars when looking at the writer as an individual, when not ignoring the "struggling student writer" who is only concerned with the required length of a paper, or when facing the inequalities of poverty or race in writing or schooling in general (p. 543).

Allowing teachers more time to teach writing as a process not only improves student writing, but it gives a multidimensional view of writing through the use of different genres as well. Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks continually spoke to the lack of time to accomplish the mandatory writing tasks in the curriculum as well as the frustration of having to omit enjoyable writing assignments from years past. My review of the literature helped me to understand that *process writing* is invaluable. Its encompassing demands on the individual writer's cognitive ability to develop, draft, edit, revise, and publish written work was the foundation from which my research study springs, Dr. Leighten. Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) examined the various perspectives of secondary writing instruction in recent years and found that the writing process was highly recursive in nature (p. 402). Stemming from the problem-solving perspective, Lavelle et al. found that writing cannot be separated from the writer's intentions and the way meaning was created. They also discovered that the development perspective was motivated by the work of Fiztgerald and Shanahan (2000) and that literacy development increased in intensity and difficulty from the elementary to the middle grades and on to high school and college (p. 402). Based on the interview data with my participants, the existing curriculum apparently abbreviates the use of the entire writing process. This, according to the literature, my participants, and my own experiences, does not equip students with a foundation necessary to be writers in any setting and for any purpose.

Recommendation Two

Next, teachers need some relief from the pressure of teaching writing only for the purpose of the writing test. Although both participants admitted that mastering a basic

paragraph and then essay structure was crucial to future success, they both expressed frustration that they no longer have time to do more creative types of writing assignments from past years. The curricular goals must reflect the importance of students developing a multidimensional view of writing for a variety of purposes. For example, Mrs. Banks told me that she would bring out her "…fun, expressive writing assignments such as poetry…" only when it was the day before a holiday or a day when a substitute would be there in her stead. Mrs. Abbott explained that,

> *The curriculum this year is so demanding that don't have time to touch on each thing. When I first looked at the Common Core, I thought, "Do they really expect us to get through all this?" You can forget about doing anything extra.*

Literature supported the need for students to learn to write for multiple purposes and audiences. Mandatory writing assessments in secondary grades permeated instruction in the last few decades, and this reality forced writing, like other test-based subjects, to fall victim to the concept of teaching a set of skills to pass the test (Bloodgood, 2002). Bloodgood contended that the writing process became a shortened version of itself with more attention paid to the mechanical structure and teaching a prescribed type of paper where certain steps in the process were glossed over or omitted (p. 31). All of these modifications came as a result of accountability testing through writing tests (Bloodgood, 2002). Hillocks (2005) concurred when he described that the methodology employed by teachers to teach writing was greatly influenced by states' exams, and further research into the rubrics used as scoring guides primarily indicated that form more than content earned higher scores. Bloodgood continued to promote teaching writing as a process, and she explained that the movement should not be "abandoned" (p. 41). In fact, she advocated that teaching students to write through the

writing process allowed for collaborative efforts between parents, teachers, and community, and "Helping students learn to express real ideas clearly and correctly would be part of that process" (Bloodgood, 2002, p. 41).

Casey (2007) studied one middle school literacy teacher to determine how current assessment in writing altered instruction. The participant teacher believed that literacy encompassed reading and writing as well as creativity and critical thinking skills. Because of literacy assessments with teacher accountability standards, the teacher's pedagogical beliefs were not fully realized due to specific lessons that were needed to assist students with performance on standardized tests (Casey, 2007). One conclusion of this study indicated the need for more study and reflection on middle school teachers' ability to teach the necessary literacy for success in the world and not be forced to focus on assessment skills.

The National Association for Education Progress (NAEP) and the National Writing Project (NWP) found that certain instructional practices did increase achievement and scores on national writing assessments (NWP & Nagin, 2006). According to NAEP, teacher-student discussions and the use of student-kept portfolios increased scores on writing assessments by providing opportunities for collaboration and reflection during the writing process. The NWP and Nagin (2006) also advocated for the use of *writing to learn* strategies and *writing across the curriculum* as being critical to the success of student writing by exemplifying the communication needs found in every assignment. Teachers of English were encouraged to teach writing to learn strategies with specific genres of writing as well as for students to develop learning strategies to use in diverse content areas (NWP & Nagin, 2006, p. 51). Both Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks

talked about the value of teacher – student discussions when writing, and Mrs. Banks was able to require her accelerated students to keep writing journals with their works collected in one place. Neither teacher knew very much about writing to learn strategies or whether the other middle school content teachers were using them in class.

Recommendation Three

Finally, language arts teachers need to teach literature and writing as an integrated approach, and they need to be aware of the students' writing and learning strategies so they can capitalize on the strengths. Both participants in my study admitted that under the new Common Core Curriculum, they were supposed to be "married" to the reading teachers, but this left a lot to be desired in writing instruction. With the demands on teachers during planning times, these two participants did not see those marriages having time to flourish. Both participants felt that integrating the reading and the writing provides stronger textual models for a variety of writing genres, and the student placement could also be more consistent for students who are strong readers but not writers. These reciprocal processes could compliment each other in an integrated class. When asked if an integrated approach to teaching language arts and reading was preferable for student learning, Mrs. Abbott replied:

> *Yes, yes, I believe that it is. You know from the time we used to do that, things have changed – curriculum has changed. I was recently thinking back to how we did that. After reading an expository piece, we used to then write an expository piece. Same thing for narratives and informational writing. We used to also incorporate the vocabulary from the stories into their writing. Now, in order to help them write an essay on the literature they read in the reading class, I have to go back and spend time reviewing and brainstorming with them even though I am not teaching that story. Yes, a more integrated approach works better.*

Dr. Leighten, the primary research goal for this study was to examine the instructional strategies being used and the pedagogical choices being made in two middle

school language arts classes and to ultimately reach some conclusion about the effectiveness of these various strategies and decisions. Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of various writing strategies used by secondary students as opposed to college students. They discovered that writing strategies, similar to learning strategies, provided middle and high school students with the tools necessary to bridge the gap between the writer and the writing task (p. 400). Lavelle, et al., also determined that students used different strategies for writing tasks depending on many factors such as developmental level, language level, and for assessment situations to name a few. According to Lavelle, et al., "The term 'approach' was originally used to describe college students' personal experiences with learning," and the meaning morphed over the years to include the ways that students engage with the learning material (2002, p. 401). The research suggested that when teachers were focused on the strategies that students used to complete a learning task that the "…instructional climates [were] richer, and approaches deep" (Lavelle, et al., 2002, p. 401).

By examining the approaches to writing instruction taken by secondary students, Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) were able to recommend useful strategies for writing instruction. For students whose approach to writing was just to "get it finished" because it was an assignment that would carry a grade, the *Achieving-Competitive* approach was often adopted (p. 412). For these students, Lavelle, et al. suggested using writing assignments that encourage students to see the relevance in the assignments such as writing in content areas, using the Internet, email, collaborative writing, and using graded and non-graded assignments (p. 412). The *Planful-Procedural* approach was often

utilized by students whose focus was on rules and grammar (p. 412). These students needed writing instruction and assignments that encouraged more scaffolding, carefully constructed assignments, use of concept mapping, and the structure provided by expository writing. Finally, the *Elaborative-Expressive* approach was shown by students who demonstrated basic competency in all areas of written expression with the one exception of revision skills (p. 412). According to Lavelle et al., writing instruction for these students included diverse genres, self-regulatory strategies, and writing assignments that were both timed and untimed.

Derived from their study, Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) found three implications for improving secondary writing instruction. Revision, self-regulatory strategies, and expository writing all surfaced as needed areas for improving secondary students' writing. The researcher asserted that revision strategies must be integrated and "embedded" in the entirety of writing instruction for secondary students rather than being viewed as something to be done near the conclusion of an assignment (p. 412). While they admitted that more research was needed to determine which self-regulatory strategies assisted most in certain writing situations, Lavelle et al. agreed that self-regulatory strategies should be integrated throughout writing instruction. Expository writing assignments should be utilized in secondary writing instruction as a way to increase the complexity of thought required of secondary students, which would also introduce the complex self-regulatory and revision strategies. Finally, Lavelle et al. determined that students should be involved in reflective writing through journals and collaborative activities. They asserted, "Too often the emphasis has been on the acquisition of skill as separate from intentionality and writing self-hood" (Lavelle et al.,

2002, p. 413). The strategies outlined by Lavelle et al. could serve as potential categories for specific instructional guidelines for integrated classes in language arts and reading.

Now, let me give you some examples from my own teaching and learning that might be useful. My own experiences as a teacher, parent, and student yield a little more advice for curricular renovation.

Advice from My Teaching Experiences

Fearful, Apathetic, Un-motivated . . . these words come to mind as I describe many of my former students at the start of each year. Dr. Leighten, I believe that the 8th grade should be an exciting time for all students. After all, they have endured several years of not being the oldest in school, and now, under the middle school model of grades 6-8, they are now on top . . . the oldest . . . the "seniors" if you will. That year can also mean, for many, that it is the last year to goof off because classes don't really count on your high school transcript until ninth grade. As a student in the 8th grade in the early 1980s and a teacher of 8th graders in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these ideas all resonate on some level with me. So, let go back to what concerns me most as an educator . . . Fear, Apathy, Motivation.

You see, my students all lived in a town right here in Georgia that housed a large university as well as a significant population of government housing recipients. Like any town in Georgia, we also had an increase in Hispanic and Latino students. Our middle school population, therefore, was comprised of the *haves* and the *have nots*. Again, this is a fairly common situation in most towns in America. When I make this statement, I am not only meaning in a financial sense, but I also think that students of certain

ethnicities were in the *have not* category due to inadequate opportunities to develop skills with Standard English. This included both African American and Hispanic students.

In our middle school, we scheduled language arts/literature and math content classes by students' level or performance on some type of testing instrument. As a new, fairly young teacher fresh from her graduate program, I was fortunate to be given all classes of low-performing students. Now, this makes perfect sense, right, Dr. Leighten? The most inexperienced teacher should be given the students with the greatest deficits and needs, right? Not quite! I know that by the time I left this middle school when my daughter was born 6 years later, I was good at what I did, but I don't mind telling you that the first year… I was lost! But, I will get to that later in my letter to the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Ideals. Let's just say that I struggled as many first-year teachers do. Teacher preparation can help immensely with that phenomenon, which is what I will discuss in my letter to Dean Simon. For now, Dr. Leighten, I would like to tell you a few lessons that I learned while teaching in that setting, which I believe could impact curricular modifications in the future for middle school language arts teachers.

Lesson 1:

I am a proponent of teaching literature and language arts as an integrated approach by the same teacher. I realize some of the history and background that went into the shift because stakeholders were concerned at students' poor performance on tests. Teachers were expected then to specialize in one area rather than be responsible for all content, particularly at the elementary level. This *departmentalization* in elementary schools evoked controversy, as most new ideas in education do, but middle schools also

wanted teachers who specialized in reading or in language arts. I must admit that it sounds like a good idea. I experienced both models, however, and my preference for student learning and teacher satisfaction is the integrated approach.

Due to scheduling logistics, I always had two blocks, or classes, each year where I taught the same group of students for reading and language arts. That filled four of my five instructional hours each day; therefore, my fifth block was a group of students to whom I taught language arts and another teacher on our hall taught reading. The difference in the progress I was able to make with the *double block* groups versus the *single block* groups was amazing. The students I saw for two hours each day were also much more engaged in learning and not near as apathetic as the students who only attended my class for one hour of language arts instruction each day.

I read recently that Gewertz (2012) found many schools systems across the country are realizing the need for integrated instruction with reading and writing in all content areas. Common Core Curriculum was the impetus for such curricular modifications, as schools begin to recognize that in addition to improving students' writing, explicit writing instruction can also foster better content understanding. While *Writing Across the Curriculum* (WAC) and *Writing to Learn* are not new concepts, research finds that many students graduate from high school without writing more than a paragraph in length in many classes (Gewertz, 2012).

Lesson 2:

Students must write everyday if they are going to improve. This also speaks to teaching under the integrated approach. I was not only able to have the students write everyday, but by teaching both literature and language arts, I was able to ask students to

write for a variety of purposes and audiences. The fear and lack of motivation with many of the students who are below grade level was understandable. Many of these students had never experienced academic success particularly in language – whether they spoke Spanish or African American Vernacular English or any other language – was a barrier. In fact, I found that many students felt inadequate to write or read in English because the language barrier in the classroom had created the impression that they couldn't do it well. Sometimes, I am afraid that teachers give students that idea, but I will also address the issue of teacher influence on students in my letter to the Dean of the University of Ideals. I state this now to illustrate the point that, by having the students write short pieces everyday, they experienced success in writing. Many days were spent building scaffolding, modeling with literature, and working together to edit and revise. Once I gained the trust of my students, I was able to take them through the entire writing process. By learning to peer-edit and self-edit, the students were more motivated to share their writing and less fearful of criticism.

Lesson 3:

Another lesson I learned from teaching is that the entire writing process must be used in conjunction with isolated skill instruction. By teaching under the portfolio system and using the entire writing process, I was able to help students improve and be able to self-correct. We were not quite as assessment-driven at that time, and I could basically teach my curriculum using the entire writing process all year and then spend the month of January teaching the students how to "short-circuit" the process for the sake of the *timed* state writing test. As explained previously in this epistle, research and my

participants support the use of the entire writing process, but the current curriculum does not allow teachers time to accomplish it.

When I taught eighth graders in language arts, my students were required to keep their writing in a portfolio. In doing so, they experienced the writing process for each piece of writing from brainstorming to publishing. I had rubrics that I had designed and modified to help each student during every step of the process. By the end of each grading period, the students chose a certain number of pieces to publish. Once completing the final copies, every student presented their pieces along with a self-reflection of why they made the choices that they did and what they learned through the process. We created a *coffee house* environment – without the coffee – but where affirmation by applause was mandatory. I will cherish these memories as the times I most often saw my students smile.

Conversely, I saw many frowns while teaching my heart out to these students in preparation for the state writing test. Of course I recognize that most students detest any type of standardized testing in school, but I also feel an obligation to help them understand that tests are a part of school and life. We, therefore, dove into writing test preparation with gusto, but I found their writing became *flat* or *one-dimensional*. The authenticity or purpose was lost, and the students returned to their fretful states as they pictured an unknown audience with a rubric and a red pen. Of course we did make progress, but I found the five-paragraph essay that was required at the time to be quite *formulaic*. I do agree with my participants, Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks, that students must master a basic essay format, but I believe that authentic writing tasks will accomplish this much more. Some students in my experience, however, rise to the

formulaic occasion just like many students who like math over language arts enjoyed diagramming sentences and its *concreteness* according to Mrs. Banks. Writing tests, however, do not allow the students to really use the entire writing process. I referenced earlier that we *short-circuit* the process to be within the time constraints of the test, but we really do much more than that. We place value on sameness. We ask students to answer similar prompts – usually expository or persuasive at the middle school level – each year with the same brainstorm web, introduction, body, and conclusion. Quickly the students must re-read for content, organization, tone, style, mechanics, and then publish their writing in a two-hour period. I do not think we are helping students formulate their own thoughts and feelings about literature or life in a meaningful way by measuring their writing ability in this way.

Lesson 4:

Finally, all students must be held to the same expectations of learning Standard English. When I welcomed a new group of 8th graders each year, I assessed each student's writing skills through quick writes along with learning each student's background and prior knowledge. I taught many African American students and some Hispanic students each year. My classes were mostly comprised of students who were functioning well below the 8th grade level. At first, the challenge of teaching the low students was exhilarating, but it quickly changed to sheer drudgery. I felt hopeless at times that these students would never catch up with their peers.

As the years went by, I became satisfied with making progress. My energy returned, and I believe I effectively improved student writing. I struggled, however, with a pure *writing process* approach with students who struggled with sentence structure due

to the language barriers of speaking either a form of African American Language (AAL) or Spanish. Doing a portfolio with these students was often frustrating if they were not able to correctly form a sentence in Standard English. So, I did something very uncharacteristic of myself, and I began teaching grammar – in isolation! It was the only way I could help these students understand that a sentence must have a subject and a predicate. They would say, "What is a subject? What is a predicate?" and as I explained that a subject has the noun in it, and the predicate has the verb, they were still uncertain about how to proceed. So, Dr. Leighten, you can see my dilemma. It was either back up, and teach the noun and the verb or have a lost group all year. I chose to isolate skill instruction, and by the middle of the year, we could proceed with writing. Those were my lowest classes, but I soon found for even my "average" students who were still below grade level, skill instruction integrated with the writing process was beneficial. That became my plan each year.

After taking some years off to stay home when my daughter was born, I recently had the opportunity to teach language arts for a week to a group of Hispanic, migrant students comprised of 6th – 9th graders. Based on my previous experience in the classroom, I might have approached the task of improving writing with this group differently if it had not been for a course I took in my doctoral program. Our class, entitled *Race, Culture, and Schooling*, featured authors like Delpit (2006), Howard (2010), Cochran-Smith (2000), Shafer (2001), Baugh (2008), Wilson (2011), Mott-Smith (2008), and Esters (2011). In this class we read and discussed how race and culture impacted a student's education, which inevitably it does. According to Delpit (2006), students of color - particularly African American students - need a balance between

process writing and direct instruction due to the complexities of *Standard English* in order to obtain the language of power and success in school and beyond. Delpit contended that regardless of how a writer produced a piece, the student's paper ultimately would be judged or graded on the final product and its *correctness*. When teaching Black children and poor children, Delpit advocated neither the *skills* approach nor the *process* approach but rather a combination of the two (p. 46). The intention, therefore, of my research study was to acknowledge differing forms of writing instruction while maintaining the framework for middle school writing instruction as comprised of the social, cognitive, and linguistic processes that are most appropriate for each student involved when drafting, editing, revising, and publishing written assignments.

It was after completing this experience that I began to understand the true necessity of adapting instruction for each individual but with the same outcomes and expectations in mind. This goes back to the language of power and privilege. Do schools only expect Standard English from one part of its population? I expressed these concerns one day after observing both classes and recorded those in my researcher journal:

> *2-22-13: After watching an interesting cultural tirade by Mrs. Abbott today as she challenged some of her African American male students to stop talking like they were from the "hood," my mind is filled with questions. Why is the lower level class full of African American and Hispanic students? Why is the upper level class full of mostly White students? While I see these two teachers using the same curriculum and trying to hold students to the same standard, how did such a disparity in writing ability occur? What can educators do to stop this cycle of segregation?*

These are important questions for those in your position who determine the curriculum by which students are judged. I hope this epistle was helpful to you as you evaluate possible improvements to the state curriculum.

Thank you very much,

Heather S. Powell

Dear Dr. Simon,

Let me first extend my congratulations to you on your new appointment as Dean of the College of Education at the University of Ideals. I know that you are excited about the opportunity before you, which is exactly why I decided to write you this letter. Since we last spoke after my graduation from my Master of Arts in Teaching program, my teaching and professional research have taken me in an interesting direction. In the following pages, I would like to share with you my thoughts on how writing instruction could be improved for teacher-candidates in college preparatory programs to ensure better writing instruction for students, particularly at the middle school level. My own experiences as an 8th grade language arts teacher and graduate student, my qualitative dissertation study in two, 7th grade classrooms, along with the professional literature worked together to inform my recommendations.

My Personal Experiences

My undergraduate degree, Dr. Simon, is not in education. I attended a wonderful Presbyterian, liberal arts college, comprised of about 1,000 students at the time. My major was American Sign Language Interpreting, and my college was the first in the country to offer this as a 4-year degree. It was then that I fell in love with sentence structure. How odd that must sound! You see, when interpreting from a spoken language to a silent language comprised of symbols made by hands, arms, and face, the structure of the English sentence must be completely rearranged, which is actually common in other languages as well. I enjoyed my years as an interpreter for deaf individuals, and my experiences took me to many settings. As a freelance interpreter in two large cities in the southeastern United States, I found myself in settings from doctor

appointments, board meetings of corporations, to mental health situations and juvenile detention centers. As an educational interpreter, which I found I preferred, I interpreted for middle school students and their teachers as well as for college and graduate students and their professors at two large post-secondary institutions. The relevance of these experiences goes to the heart of my letter to you. In my own undergraduate program, my major classes were in two categories: American Sign Language linguistics and Sign Language Interpreting – Theory and Practice. Through those required courses, I learned a second language and how to interpret back and forth in English. If my courses in college had not adequately prepared me for the cognitive and motor abilities to interpret, I would not have been very successful as a sign language interpreter. Although I admit my most difficult learning situations occurred after graduation when I no longer had professors and other colleagues on whom to fall back and debrief. My program of study, however, taught me what I needed to know to be a good interpreter. Before leaving that field to return to graduate school, I achieved the highest level of skill by passing the National Register of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) national certification exam.

Upon returning to graduate school years later, I sought a teaching certificate in Secondary English. After interpreting for so many English and language arts classes over the years, I decided that I wanted to do more than facilitate communication. I wanted to help students learn the joy of words and what happens when you string them together in certain ways on paper. My experience as an interpreter took me into many others' classrooms as they taught language arts, and I had some ideas on how I might improve on the task. When entering the Master of Arts in Teaching program, I declared my major as Secondary English Education for grades 7 - 12. Because I lacked any education courses

from my undergraduate degree, I took many classes to prepare me for teaching. I also took several content classes to satisfy the masters level major of English. Because I was a graduate student, however, I had complete freedom of choice because my undergraduate degree met all of the requirements for literature courses. I was, therefore, extremely fortunate. Due to my prior interest in language, I took several courses on writing pedagogy, and I began my true relationship with the process involved in writing and in helping students learn to write.

During my courses in writing pedagogy, I learned that writing is a very personal thing. My studies taught me that a writer's audience for a particular purpose dictates the level of formality as well as other elements of writing such as tone, style, and vocabulary. Writing and teaching writing became significant pursuits in my life. This is when my masters level teacher preparation program placed another worthy requirement on me, and that was the year-long student teaching internship. I was so fortunate to be placed with a mentor teacher in an 8th grade language arts class who happened to love writing and teaching writing as much as I did. Together, we strategized on how best to prepare the students for the many writing tasks they would face in their school and real life situations. Included in those scenarios was preparation for the state writing exam. This was only one of many foci for us during the year. When it came time for me to teach that class on my own for the spring semester, I implemented – with my mentor teacher's blessing – a writing portfolio system.

My portfolio project with these students was a success. For weeks, we did nothing but generate a variety of pieces that ranged from personal narratives to letters to the editor to poems to responses to literature. In doing this, we created a wealth of drafts

from which to choose. Next, the students picked several favorite pieces to refine, and that is where the real work began. We did peer and self-editing. As a whole class, we looked at some of my writing. By providing this as a scaffold, we learned how to edit for clarity of content and then later to revise for grammar and usage. I taught skills in isolation such as sentence types or subject and verb agreement, but we always then went immediately back to the portfolios to look for these errors and correct them in our own writing. At the end of each grading period, the students would then give portfolio presentations where they read favorite pieces, explained the revisions they did, and gave commentary on what they learned from the process. I would videotape the presentations, and we would watch them later with popcorn when we had an early release day for parent-teacher conferences. Throughout my years of teaching eighth grade language arts at this very school, I continued this practice with my classes. I delight, Dr. Simon, in those in memories.

All was not fun in this teaching environment, however, and I felt frustration often with some students and even groups of students and their lack of progress with writing. My most frustrating groups were the lowest 8th graders who were, of course, grouped together in one demoralizing situation without a peer to model how to write. Many of these students were African American and Hispanic. Both groups had one thing in common: The majority of students struggled with Standard English, and therefore, they did not like to write. The start of each year was difficult. I worked hard to establish trust with these students so they would relax enough to open up and tell me some stories. I am proud to say that most of my students did make progress, but some of my students were 15 or 16 years old. I am saddened by the fact that for some, it was almost too late. As

these 8th graders moved on to the high school by way of social promotion, I often heard of many who dropped out before graduation. An African American female student once told me that 8th grade was the last year her mother was going to make her attend if she decided to start having babies. I felt completely unprepared to deal with different cultures, and I was not equipped as a language arts teacher to work with students who did not know Standard English. I began to seek out workshops and seminars that could enhance my understanding and better equip me, but I soon realized that I was on my own. My relationships with these students grew, and I found over time different ways to reach students from other cultures. The students did make progress in reading and writing but not at the rate I had hoped. After my daughter was born, I left this middle school to stay home with her. Recently, while doing my research for my dissertation, I returned to a middle school and studied two language arts classes. I was not surprised but still dismayed to see that we were still tracking students by test scores, and many African American and Hispanic students are still underperforming in language arts without appropriate grade-level skills in reading or writing. I think we may not be preparing teachers for this particular challenge. My concern about the underachievement of African American and Hispanic students in my own classes motivated me to seek further study in the area.

In my masters program, I took a course entitled, *The American High School*. Rose (1989), Shaughnessy (1977), and many others were required reading. Those authors gave me a better understanding of the plight of underachieving students. Rose talked about how the low level course instructors in the community college were not allowed to assign full-length essays because the students needed *remedial* grammar

practice instead. After schooling myself in the literature of writing instruction for the oppressed populations, I felt prepared to face the challenges of a "school within a school" and other efforts by public institutions to track students based on race rather than ability. Facing this reality, however, presented many other challenges for me as a teacher. I could not believe that many of my students were in the 8th grade with reading levels of 2nd grade at best. After taking some time off when my daughter was born, I decided that the reasons for the disparity in achievement might have something to do with opportunity as well. I was drawn to higher education once again to explore this social blemish on American schooling. It was during my doctoral studies that I chose to take a course entitled, *Race, Culture, and Schooling*. In this course we read authors like Delpit (2006), Greenfield and Rowan (2011), Howard (2010), Cochran-Smith (2000), Shafer (2001), Baugh (2008), Wilson (2011), Mott-Smith (2008), Esters (2011), Pollock (2008), and many others. The literature from this class gave me significant insights about my teaching. As I looked back over my journaling from this class, I realized that there were lessons to be learned for future and current teachers of language arts. These were my reflections at the time when I was submerged in the *Race, Culture, and Schooling* literature:

As our class began its journey in May of this year, I was very excited about the course and considered myself one of those "non-racist" white people. This naïve opinion could only come from an individual who had never spent any significant time reading or researching the issues related to race, culture, and their impact on schooling. As far as contemplation, however, I had certainly done my share of that when considering how the students in my classroom seemed to speak and behave differently depending on their race and/or culture, but recognizing differences is only the very first step. Delpit (2006) reminded us that this first step is important, but it is not enough. She explained that reform efforts do not provide all of the answers if we do not first have, "...some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another" (Delpit, 2006, p. xxv). I realized, therefore, early in the class that meaningful

dialogue and exploration of the literature was the critical next step in my own journey to be knowledgeable about race, culture, and schooling concerns.

Before I taught language arts in Athens, Georgia 15 years ago, I was one of those people who might have thought that we should look beyond race – in other words try to be colorblind. Growing up in a very liberal household with parents who actively participated in the efforts to support the Civil Rights Movement, I never saw race as unimportant. In fact, I believe now that some of the painful stories my parents told us when we were little made me want so desperately for race to cease to be such a divisive issue. After teaching in Athens and being one of the white teachers in the black school-within-a-school, I realized how emphatically race mattered and should not be ignored. The readings from this course spoke directly to that point, and I now have a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the importance of race in life and certainly in schools.

Howard (2010) taught me many things about why race matters. One crucial point he made was that being aware of someone's racial classification was simply not sufficient. He explained that racial awareness must include the acknowledgement that the dominant race is the white race, and that being white carries with it privilege and superiority (p. 121). This is an uncomfortable thing to read for the first time, but I recognized the truth in his words. The other key component that I will carry with me from Howard was that teachers must delve into their students' experiences and backgrounds to learn who they are and from where they are coming. Educators must learn from those experiences as well as from the political climate in this country as males – particularly Black and Latino – continue to be criminalized in society, which is mirrored in schools (Howard, 2010). I think back to the many black, male faces on our 8th grade hall who spent most of their time during in the In-School Suspension (ISS) room, and now that scene takes on a drastically different meaning.

Students' feelings about race in the classroom are critical to learning, and I found a poignant example of this. Cochran-Smith (2000) used the power of narrative writing as she explored her own journey as a teacher in a teacher-preparation program and how she initially came to grapple with race in the classroom and curriculum. She described the pinnacle event for her as being the time when the student-teachers in her class were asked if they thought that the college was doing enough in the program to highlight and discuss race in the classroom and a number of students, mostly students of color, spoke with anger and even "rage" that no, the university was not bringing race and culture to the forefront in the teacher-preparation program. Cochran-Smith, a white teacher, thought that by adding into her courses an examination of race, class, and culture that she was doing enough. Once the honest dialogue amongst her students occurred, she realized that the curriculum itself was not inclusive of other voices. Cochran-Smith came to the conclusion that unlearning the racism that is inherent in life was the only way to begin to address the issues. She discussed reading texts for the teacher preparation program as racial texts, and three things were necessary in this endeavor. First, all teaching should be viewed as text. Next, teacher education has explicit and implicit texts, and finally, teacher education was largely racial text (p. 168).

Culture, according to Howard (2010), was one of the contributing factors to learning for students, and the problem arose when students from the non-dominant cultures found a disconnection between school and home. I liked the cultural modeling

tenets described by Howard: 1) academic problem-solving requires students to be authorities on their own knowledge; 2) classroom materials should relate to students' everyday issues; and 3) "privileging students' knowledge as intellectually rich and valuable in the learning process" (p. 58). Delpit (2006) discussed how important it is for teachers to acknowledge or recognize that the way their intentions are perceived by students was vital to success with students from differing backgrounds (p. 168). Another concerning reality surfaced in Delpit's continued questioning of the writing process for African American students. She asserted that teachers who were not familiar with African American Language kept those students in the drafting stage of the writing process because they did not understand the linguistic abilities of the African American students (p. 174). My concern here is that this does not make the writing process bad; it makes those who execute it incorrectly uninformed educators. Delpit continued with her own personal opinion of the debate between teaching writing through skills or through process writing, and she concluded that neither approach had all of the answers. The key, according to Delpit, was for teachers to help students find their voice – and use whatever approach was best for each child (p. 46). I agree with that completely as well as with Delpit's point that underteaching is yet another example of deficit thinking (p. 176). This goes back to the heart of what Rose (1989) discussed. Deficit thinking occurs when an educator thinks that a group of students is not able to complete a more advanced task.

An interesting article emerged as I was researching the writing process and how it is viewed in the literature related to race and culture. Shafer (2001) taught composition to a group of women in a minimum-security prison and gained new perspectives on writing in an academic setting. While attending to the goals of teaching composition to incarcerated women for college credit, this instructor found himself in an unusual position. Shafer discovered that these women were in need of writing like most of us are in need of fresh air in our lungs. These women had stories to tell. The stories were a mixture of confessionals along with desperate dreams and hopes with much regret mixed in. Shafer took the women through the required assignments of the course – cause/effect essay, descriptive essay, and research paper – but he then completely revamped the syllabus based on the first day's writing samples. The women expressed their feelings with such strength that he had no choice but to change. Shafer realized that the assignments could still be fulfilled for the course but with topics that were real and genuine for the students. The students did participate in the writing process. They drafted, made revisions, and produced final copies. The discussion ensued about the dialect of the writer, in this case mostly Black English, versus utilizing Standard English. Shafer did admit that his students had to attend to "readability" and "correctness," but the "emotional spirit" of each paper should not be sacrificed in the process (Shafer, 2001, p. 78). If the "culture and language of a student" were not considered, according to Shafer, this would prove detrimental to the ability of the student to find voice in writing.

Throughout my journey in this class, I continually questioned how all of these issues related to the schooling of children. My answers came from the readings, and several issues were crucial in my world as I found myself making modifications to my research proposal and my mindset. For me, the real issue became access to education, and the language of power ultimately controls success for students (Delpit, 2006). Baugh

(2008) explained that African Americans were denied equal access to educational opportunities based on their linguistic patterns when compared to the European English. Wilson (2011) found similar attitudes among faculty and tutors in college writing centers. When asked to compare and comment on sentences written in African American Language (AAL), sentences by English Language Learners (ELL), and sentences with errors written in European American English (EAE), the results were overwhelming. Faculty and tutors responded with "…distaste even disdain…" toward the sentences written in AAL, yet the same faculty and tutors were much more forgiving when discussing the ELL sentence "errors" as they deviated from European American English.

Another critical component of culture and race in schooling I, once again, related to writing. Mott-Smith (2008) explained that when students were allowed to explore their own racial and cultural experiences in writing, this assisted them with understanding and dealing with the "ranking" or tracking system in schools that classified certain racial and ethnic group as inferior (p. 146). Mott-Smith also described how, through writing, students developed voice and became "…more deeply invested in school" (p. 146). I also enjoyed how Mott-Smith explained that she must remember that her own whiteness has an impact on the class, and she also reminded herself to respect any of her immigrant students who did not wish to share about their heritage, background, or experiences. I believe that both of those lessons are worthy of repeating in all teacher preparation programs.

How do I connect all of the scholarly literature with my own experiences as a white child growing up in a liberal household that sat in the middle of conservative Cobb County, Georgia? How do I connect all of the scholarly literature with my own experiences as a white teacher in an almost entirely black section of an eighth grade hall who had multiple frustrations with white and black students alike because I thought they were not trying to reach their full potential? I do believe now that many of the students who simply did not try hard enough -in my opinion- to make it to high school had probably experienced a lifetime of the white, privileged world telling them that they were not good enough; they were not college material; and they did not belong in the institutions of education because they did not speak "proper English."

My final thoughts emerged as a result of reading the text about college writing centers and the racism that has been pervasive in faculty, tutor, and student relations there for quite some time. Humility and willingness to engage in genuine interaction with other races and cultures were two themes from the readings, and I found myself hopeful as I move forward with newly discovered knowledge. I appreciated Esters (2011) assertion that making a writing center an inclusive place required building a community where issues related to race and culture were not silenced. He explained that writing centers, and I would add to the list all educational classrooms, "…should be safe spaces, liberating spaces..," where students can bring their experiences, and teachers would value those experiences (Esters, 2011, p. 299). I think this is a worthy goal for all educators in every classroom for every student (Powell, 2012).

My Dissertation Research

These reflections occurred before my dissertation research, but the literature from the *Race, Culture, and Schooling* course informed my study in many ways. Now, I would like to tell you, Dr. Simon, about my study because my recommendations for teacher preparation programs also stem from that data as well. I was fortunate to find two, 7th grade teachers at the local middle school to agree to be research participants for my qualitative dissertation study entitled, *Writing Instruction in Two Middle School Classrooms*. My study took place from September to April of the 2012-2013 school year. I chose each participant because she taught 7th grade language arts. One taught the highest-achieving students in the school while the other taught the lowest-achieving students. I examined the writing instruction in each classroom once every week for approximately four and half months. My data consisted of observation notes, researcher memos, interview transcripts, and student work samples. Most relevant to this discussion are the interview transcripts because it was during the first and third interviews that I asked each teacher about their own teacher preparation programs and then about any advice they might have for the future of teacher preparation programs.

Participant Preparation for Teaching Writing

Mrs. Abbott taught the low level language arts class. She taught for 28 years and says that she loves what she does. She talked about her experiences with writing in college, however, and she stated,

> *College writing was very, very challenging. It was like I thought I knew how to write, but when I got there, ha! I don't think so. My paper was always, you know, full of red ink and full of 'that is not uh what we asked for.' So, it was a little discouraging.*

It wasn't until after securing her first teaching job at the junior high that she began teaching grammar and literature. As she moved to the 8th grade, she realized she had to prepare students for the state writing assessment, and this was her first experience with teaching writing. When I asked her where her training occurred to do this task, she responded, "We did workshops at RESA (Regional Education Services Association), and our whole department worked together to develop an understanding of what we needed to teach our students in the area of writing."

Mrs. Banks taught the high level language arts class and has been teaching for 26 years. She found college writing to be confusing and without much construct or direction for students to follow. Her papers seemed arbitrarily assigned and assessed. She did not enjoy the experience of writing until she took several journalism courses for fun. She found the authenticity of the assignments to be exciting, and the peer editing that was required helped her understand how to make her writing better without the pressure of a grade. When asked if she was required to take any courses on writing pedagogy or instruction in her teacher preparation program, she replied, "No, no. I did those extra courses and went to conference after conference on my own. In our teacher preparation program, it was all reading and literature. The conferences were on weekends for extra information like the *5 traits of writing* and all these other seminars you can go to."

Participant Advice to Teacher Preparation Programs

Mrs. Abbott, when asked about advice she would give to teacher preparation programs, had several suggestions. First, she talked about teaching teachers to value the entire writing process. Due to curriculum demands and time constraints, she saw this as one area that needs to be re-emphasized in order for students to learn how to approach a

piece of writing. Next, she believed, that teachers need to be taught how to teach their students the skills of editing their own and others' papers. If teachers can learn guidelines and procedures for editing, she said it is "… very, very effective for children." Finally, Mrs. Abbott talked from her years of teaching experience about the phenomenon that exists with many teachers, and she explained this by saying, "It took me years to realize that people are afraid to teach language arts. They feel comfortable with the grammar because that is objective, but they're afraid they might grade a paper wrong without a key." Her advice for teacher preparation programs was for future teachers to be trained to model the kind of writing they expect from their students, and by doing this, they will be more comfortable with recognizing where students need help. She said that it all goes back to teachers coming into the schools having already been instructed in the entire writing process themselves and not just able to look for grammatical errors. In my opinion, this is a systemic issue for undergraduate teacher preparation programs. The change must begin by hiring faculty to instruct the teacher candidates in a writing program that provides models for writing and instruction that are steeped in the most current research along with the writing process.

Mrs. Banks also had a plethora of advice for teacher preparation programs. As the teacher of the gifted students, she first explained that teachers must be capable of giving detailed feedback on student writing. She said that gifted students are so quick to learn from their mistakes, and "…they can look at comments and models and then self-correct." Next, she emphatically stated, "I think teachers are afraid of writing because it's this massive, vague…it's like this closed door that has never been opened for educators. We weren't taught how to teach writing in college, and so most shy away

from it." She continued with her concern about the fact that teacher candidates are not being taught how to teach writing, and they are, therefore, starting their teaching careers as language arts teachers armed with only half of what they will need to guide their students in the areas of literacy. The solution Mrs. Banks offered for teacher preparation programs went like this:

> *I think education majors should have to declare writing as their discipline or major because I think teaching writing is completely different from any other discipline. You need to know the different structures like the back of your hand. You need to know what has to be in an opening paragraph. There are teachers coming out of school who have come here as language arts teachers, and they walk in and ask me what a persuasive paper should include. Many have explained to me that their emphasis in college was on reading, and they have admitted that no one has ever shown them the techniques for teaching writing that I am showing them.*

The Professional Literature

My review of current literature regarding teacher preparation programs and writing instruction brought many interesting ideas to light and supported the concerns that the teachers expressed. My own experiences in a teacher preparation program were also validated by the following ideas from leading scholars in writing instruction research.

Teacher preparation programs and continuing education came under scrutiny by Coker and Lewis (2008) as they made the argument for what is required to strengthen writing instruction in schools. As Graham and Perin (2007) noted, reading research has the larger body of literature available for pre-service teachers, and Coker and Lewis agreed, "before they enter the classroom, pre-service teachers should be well versed in the research on writing development and writing instruction" (p. 246). The call for better communication between the research and practice communities was made in an effort to

bridge the gap between what is written in professional journals and what is taught to teachers before and during their classroom teaching. According to Coker and Lewis (2008) professional development also relied on the reporting of better approaches to teaching writing with data from what is currently occurring in classrooms (p. 246).

Teacher Training in Writing Instruction

One component found in the literature that directly influenced student writing was teacher preparation for writing instruction. Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore (2011) looked at one teacher's writing instruction over 2 years. The first year in this case study was the teacher's student teaching experience, and the second year was the same teacher's first year teaching. The conclusion illuminated that literature-based teacher preparation programs with little or no formal instruction in writing pedagogy yielded a teacher whose writing instruction attempts left students confused and in need of more scaffolding. Furthermore, these educators faced system and school pressures to prepare students for assessments in these areas for which they were underprepared (Smorginsky et al., 2011). In this case, the outcome for the teacher in Smorginsky et al.'s case study was that she focused on mechanical and grammatical instruction with little attention paid to the method of writing instruction.

Grisham and Wolsey (2011) studied teacher candidates to determine the level of writing instruction in preparation programs as well as in student teacher placements. After specific instruction that focused on the writing process and on *Spandel's 6-Trait Writing*, student teachers reflected this knowledge in their lesson plans and implementation. Only after this formal emphasis on writing instruction did teacher candidates decrease their emphasis on conventions when writing lesson plans. This study

also noted that some of the teaching environments for student teacher placement restricted certain lessons on writing because the plans were not aligned with the county's curriculum map. Grisham and Wosley (2011) concluded that, "There appears to be little formal instruction in methodologies for writing instruction occurring in public school classrooms in the area where this study took place, particularly when compared with state content standards and curriculum frameworks that call for explicit instruction in writing" (p. 361). Because my pilot study illuminated the lack of consistent writing instruction models in the school system from my research, I was compelled to seek further insight through my study by focusing on the differences in writing instruction at the middle school level for high achieving and low achieving students. Grisham and Wosley noted that high-stakes testing and pacing guides for instruction are two of many possible variables to be examined as well as the perpetual cycle of teachers who teach what they were taught in the area of writing instruction.

Grisham and Wolsey (2011) discovered that teacher preparation programs were also not utilizing models of good writing as a tool for learning. Researchers, therefore, concluded that future pedagogy in writing for teacher candidates should focus on the teachers' role while students write as well as "…re-emphasize the value of writing as a way of coming to understand concepts and essential questions…" (p. 356). Grisham and Wolsey concluded that teacher preparation programs needed to engage in direct writing instruction to promote and model writing as a tool for learning and not simply an assessment to be dreaded, which dealt directly with teacher candidate dispositions in regard to writing instruction. Grisham and Wolsey (2011) discovered that most teacher candidates were not experienced in writing instruction, and many students were not in

touch with their own writing abilities, habits, and attitudes. Future research could be implemented to bring change in writing across disciplines, according to Grisham and Wolsey, if teacher preparation programs began teaching the value of *writing across the curriculum* to future educators.

Recommendations for Action

After reflecting on my own experiences in my teacher preparation program, graduate courses, and experiences of Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks, I found some common themes. The literature in this area also offered guidelines for improvement in colleges of education. Based on the previously mentioned information, Dr. Simon, I respectfully offer you the following three recommendations to improve your college's teacher preparation program for middle grades language arts instructors based on the previous discussion in this epistle:

1. *Designate a separate track for teachers who wish to teach language arts in middle school.* Within this major, provide students with courses covering writing pedagogy, writing in different genres, writing to learn strategies, process writing, scaffolding, modeling, and feedback. By doing this, the college will adequately prepare teacher candidates for the challenges in writing instruction. The most important component of this major would be the modeling by the faculty on how to teach writing by teaching the candidates in that way. Teacher candidates should write everyday. Faculty members should model the writing to provide clear expectations and use scaffolding for those who struggle. Teacher candidates should experience the

entire writing process. One-on-one conferencing about their writing with a faculty member should occur often.

2. *Teach future language arts teachers the literature on multicultural education in writing.* Teacher candidates must be prepared to work with students from all over the diverse nation, and they must be aware of the issues, biases, and backgrounds of certain cultures with writing. National test results showing little or no progress in African American or Hispanic writing exams every four years need to be examined in teacher preparation programs, and solutions should be formulated. Middle school students' social nature should be explored along with the importance of creating a suitable class climate for all students – not just the ones who are successful or well behaved.
3. *Match language arts student teachers with master language arts teachers who have training in writing instruction.* The experience gained in such a setting could prove invaluable as it did in my own case. In my master's program, I worked for an entire year as an apprentice before receiving my teaching certificate, and the teacher with whom I worked had extensive training and experience in writing instruction. He also was using multiple modalities like computers and video projects to authenticate writing situations for the students. I discovered through my research that some teachers obtained their knowledge and skills in writing instruction outside the university through staff development experiences. These are people who would be excellent resources for student teachers.

Final Thoughts

As I prepare to conclude my epistle to you, Dr. Simon, I realize that research validation is important. I would like to share with you the methods I used during data collection and analysis because I believe it gives credence to the above recommendations. I am not certain, however, that right now is either the time or the place. I refer you, therefore, to the Appendix where you will find an example of my data analysis along with a more technical description of the methodology for my research.

I realize this epistle contains a plethora of information for you to digest. I hope you will take your time in doing so, and determine if any, all, or some of the insights from my own experiences, my research, or the professional literature could be helpful as you assume your new role as Dean of the College of Education. I observed sound writing instruction at the middle school here, and I was privileged to watch and talk with two loving educators who believe, like I do, that every child has something valuable to say on any number of topics. It is our job as educators to equip students with the tools necessary to communicate in writing in ways that are acceptable to themselves, to the schools, and to society.

Sincerely,

Heather Smith Powell

My dearest daughter,

It is time now to conclude my letter to you. Over the last three and a half years, I have spent time away from you to complete my courses, do my research, and write my dissertation. As that process nears its conclusion, I have attempted to explain the importance of this endeavor. After patiently wading through the previous epistles, I understand that you still would like a few questions answered. In fact, you and Nash (2004, p. 57) have the same questions that need to be answered in any document that is either in the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) or Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (ESPN) genre. I will address your final concerns now.

What Exactly am I Trying to Say?

Well, I believe that I want to see better writing instruction for students in middle grades because those are critical years for development. My experiences as a teacher and a parent have given me insights about language development in young people and how background, race, culture, and home life influence learning. When I asked my participants about these influences in students' lives, Mrs. Abbott commented to me during one of the interviews that, "It's like children are not like they used to be, and I'm not sure why. I guess it's the times. There's so much for them to deal with in this day and age. Education is not always a priority…yet. It's coming. You know, it's coming." As she smiled at me, Grace, I realized how important it is to find out where students are coming from before we try to move them forward. Mrs. Abbott had such a good relationship with her students as did Mrs. Banks, and both teachers expressed the importance of caring in the classroom. So, I want to communicate specific ways for writing instruction to be improved at the classroom, school, state, and college levels, but I

most want to remind teachers to look at each individual in their room as a unique person with talents and abilities. I want to encourage teachers to allow students to tell their stories and then help them refine those writings for larger audiences.

What Pivotal Questions Did I Ask in this Endeavor?

Well, Grace, I asked many questions, but the three that were the driving forces behind my study were:

Primary Research Question:

How are two language arts teachers in the 7th grade addressing the needs of strong and struggling writers through their instruction, and what processes are occurring in two 7th grade language arts classes that may impact the students' abilities to learn to write effectively?

Secondary Research Questions:

- What specific practices are these two teachers using when teaching writing, and how do social and learning dynamics in each classroom influence the practices of teaching writing to high and low performing students?
- What changes occur in writing over time in high and low performing groups, and what will writing samples reveal about students' writing over time? How does student writing reflect whether instructional goals and objectives in high and low performing classes are effective?
- What do these two language arts teachers - and their perspectives on teaching high or low performing students - communicate about their own writing instruction and its effectiveness with students? How do these two teachers

reflect on developing, implementing, and thinking about the processes involved with teaching and learning writing?

I do believe that I found answers to these questions, and the answers are contained in my various epistles. I also made discoveries that were unexpected. One such lesson came from Mrs. Banks when she talked about the importance of strong writing instruction in middle school for the advanced students. She explained that once the students reach high school, they must have those foundational skills in grammar and usage or they will not continue in the accelerated track.

> *They have got to know these things – the basic essay structure and a good command of usage and mechanics… you know those foundational skills – because when they do get to high school, it will be expected in the accelerated track. If they can't do like I told them yesterday and use those subordinating clauses in their writing, they will not stay in the accelerated classes. It is absolutely imperative that they master those things.*

Mrs. Abbott discussed middle school writing instruction as well, and she described middle school as a very important step in their development. If her students do not carry with them a basic understanding of the structure of sentences and paragraphs, they will be at risk of not completing high school.

> *What they are now is not what they will be… not by a long shot. I stay on them, but I know they are going to get better. It's going to be a struggle for some. I worry about the non-readers – the ones who, you know – can't read well. They play it off by misbehaving or going to sleep or acting disinterested… but they really can't read. So they struggle and try to hide it. If they don't have the type of resources like parents, mentors, and people who will push, push, push, then… I'm not sure how far they will go.*

Grace, I never thought of the difference between strong and struggling writers in that way before.

Who Was My Intended Audience?

Grace, I intended to write these epistles to offer insights, thoughts, and sometimes advice for new language arts teachers, seasoned language arts teachers, administrators, curriculum directors, college professors, and most importantly, for you. I hope I was able to give meaning to my personal experiences and my research by bringing the broader scholarly community into the story. Without other research to either confirm or refute my thoughts, these epistles would only be one woman's opinion. While that is a valid concept, I hope I was able to substantiate some of my opinions with others' studies and life work. For example, Grace, I found where Flood, Lapp, and Ranck-Buhr (2005) spoke of the writing process as overemphasizing "time-consuming reflections" (p. 127). While I strongly disagree with that characterization, I do agree with the authors when they question whether that is the exact right approach for middle school teachers to use due to the time constraints on their schedules. My participants definitely echoed that they do not have enough time to fully use the entire writing process with their students, but they both emphatically acknowledged the importance of reflection, one-on-one conferencing, and true editing and revising. Regardless of who reads my letters, Grace, I want each person to leave with some idea that I am open to varying points of view, but my experiences and research create a strong voice on the subject of writing instruction in middle grades and for the use of appropriate strategies combined to address the specific needs of each individual or group.

What Personal Passions for My Topic Sustained Me During My Writing?

In case you did not already know, Grace, let me remind you about why writing is so important to me. As a student, a teacher, a parent, and now a researcher, I realize that writing is invaluable. Whether expressing, reflecting, persuading, creating, or learning,

the tool that allows individuals to make sense of their ideas and to communicate those appropriately for the intended audience is *writing*. What does that mean? It means that students should graduate from high school with the ability to fulfill the writing requirements of the technical school, college, university, graduate school, or employer of their choice. It means that students who speak other languages should still be taught Standard English, because it remains the gatekeeper for the aforementioned institutions. This is not a negative reflection on any language or culture, but unfortunately it is a reality in how educational institutions reward students' efforts when speaking or writing. It means that red pens bleeding only to denote grammatical errors without any substantive, productive feedback about content on student papers should be a thing of the past. Finally, Grace, it means that students need to develop multidimensional views of writing rather than the one-dimensional preparation for the state writing exam or college entrance essay. Writing can allow you to define who you are, and I hope this study has illuminated some of these issues for further research and reflection.

Why, in the End, Does Any of It Really Matter, Short- or Long-term?

Grace, this is the heart of the matter: Writing is something we do all our lives. Those who do not have some method or instruction for writing will have a very difficult time in school, at a job, and with life's required paperwork and procedures. Literacy skills - namely reading and writing - allow us to function in society as we pay bills, file taxes, read the newspaper, write a letter to the editor, and many other daily needs and desires. It matters that some 7th graders are reading and writing on a 2nd grade level while others on the same hall are functioning on a 12th grade level. Mrs. Abbott's advice to teachers that we must "always start with the end in mind," is certainly sound, yet we

must change the way we do instruction or the end for some students will not include college or technical school or reading classic literature or writing a book of poems or authoring a dissertation. In the end, Grace, the written word has power for us in our personal and professional lives, and I do not like to think of any person without it. As you continue your educational quest, remember to keep writing everyday!

Most sincerely and with all my love,

Mom

Chapter III

THE WORK – IN THE FUTURE

As I conclude my qualitative dissertation, my final thoughts turn to the future. After being consumed with this study for over 2 years, I find myself wondering, "Will my work matter?" While case studies are not designed to create generalizations for future practices, I do see significant implications from this study for the field of writing instruction research and practice. Because my recommendations for future study and action were embedded in the five epistles, I would like to provide a summary of why I believe this work does and will continue to have significance. The following are conclusions, recommendations, and implications from my research:

For Teachers

Let me tell you, the reader, a little more about my thoughts regarding the participants in this study. Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks were both delightful individuals, and I thoroughly enjoyed working with them. As an educator myself, I was fascinated by so many elements of their classroom interactions, lesson plans, and general organization of tasks. I want to acknowledge at this time that I realize how fortunate I was to work with two veteran teachers. Some results from my study might have been different with newer teachers involved, and I think future researchers – possibly even myself – would want to see what the younger generation is doing with writing instruction in middle grades. The literature, however, still stands. Students are graduating from high school without necessary writing skills to succeed at a variety of tasks in a multitude of post-

secondary and employment settings (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007). While the literature on writing instruction drove the formulation of my inquiry, the following recommendations for language arts teachers came directly from the interviews and observations with my two participants. From their perspectives, the following are the most important aspects of being an effective writing teacher, and I heartily agree based on my own experiences as a researcher and teacher as well as my time spent with the professional literature:

- Let your students know that you care about them.
- Find time to conference with your students one-on-one about their writing as often as possible.
- Be excited about writing everyday!
- Make sure your students actually WRITE everyday!
- Model each writing task that you want your students to do.
- With middle school students, use the entire writing process as much as possible.
- Be aware of the different cultures and languages of your students, and tailor your instruction based on individual needs.
- Reflect on your own writing and on your students' writing often, and monitor your instructional expectations through these reflections.
- Always remember that your students are not – during the year they are in your room – where they will end up.
- "Begin each day with the end in mind" (Mrs. Abbott, 2013).
- As a member of a middle school faculty, you can encourage your fellow teachers to use writing in their classes as a tool for learning.

- If you teach the strong writers, I hope you will strive to make them stronger with detailed feedback and high expectations. The assumption should not be made that strong readers equal strong writers because Mrs. Banks specifically explained that is not the case.
- If you teach the struggling writers, I hope you will waste no time in making them stronger with short, quick writes, writing models, power writing, daily interactive writing, generative sentences, and independent writing to improve fluency, accuracy, and length of responses (Fisher & Frey, 2003). The assumption should not be made that struggling writers cannot be critical thinkers because many can.

For Middle School Administrators

My letter to Mr. Taylor, the middle school principal, was an attempt to enlighten administrators about the difficulty of teaching writing and to offer suggestions for how they can be helpful to their language arts teachers. I was very fortunate to work years ago under an administrator who taught secondary English before returning for his leadership degree. For many language arts teachers, that will not be the case. I hope, therefore, that this letter outlines the findings from my study and can instigate a collegial conversation among administration and faculty members. My participants were positive when speaking of their administrator, but those discussions were brief. Through observations and interviews, however, I discovered a discrepancy in the amount of time the two different classes spent in the computer lab. When asked why she did not take her low level class to the lab, Mrs. Abbott explained that her students would take too long on the typing part of the experience, and she could not spare that instructional time. I started thinking back to the research and remembered that sometimes students who struggle with

writing can find success, which can escalate interest in the writing process if allowed to delve into the world of technological creativity (Heitin, 2011; Pope & Golub, 2000; Wood, 2000). I, therefore, devised this list of recommendations for administrators as a compilation of my research study, the professional literature, and my own experiences. This triad is at the heart of Scholarly Personal Narratives (Nash, 2004). Another example involved the teacher – student conferencing as part of the writing process. Both participants talked about the critical importance of one-on-one conferencing with students about their writing, but Mrs. Banks was the only one who secured a substitute for a day in which to accomplish this. Because both teachers found extreme value in these private feedback sessions with each student, I felt compelled to include the idea in the following recommendations. While this list could be much longer, I decided to focus on these five areas from my research as starting points for administrators:

- Arrange for the language arts teachers to have a substitute teacher while he or she does one-on-one conferencing with students about their writing at least once during each grading period.
- Schedule the computer labs for equal time and access amongst the language arts teachers so that each student gets the opportunity to do some writing in the digital genre.
- Provide teacher training on available software and other technology options for language arts teachers.
- Conduct faculty training about writing instruction as a multidimensional task rather than the one-dimensional writing test preparation. Emphasize the

importance for all teachers to be aware of Writing to Learn strategies as well as race and cultural issues related to writing.

- Encourage teachers to create comfortable environments in which students can write.

For Curriculum Directors

Dr. Dory Leighten was a combination of curriculum directors from my years as an educator, as a graduate student, and now as a researcher. In this epistle, I tried to establish a basis for fewer curricular requirements in essay writing to allow for more teacher feedback as well as more variety in writing genres. The literature talked about the problem of teachers assigning writing and assessing writing but not really *teaching* writing (Fisher & Frey, 2003). My participants, however, reported that the new Common Core Curriculum held too many writing assignments for much instructing or assessing to occur. Both Mrs. Abbott and Mrs. Banks told me that they did not have enough time to assess a piece of writing before they had to introduce a new type of essay. Mrs. Abbott particularly explained that,

> *These students need more support and time in learning how to write an entire essay. When they come to me, some are only able to string a few sentences together. So, we start trying to improve from where they are. We go from writing two sentences to five. Then, we go from 5 - 10, and so on. The curriculum does not allow us enough time to give them feedback on one piece before they have to write another one.*

My letter to Dr. Leighten also addressed the need for language arts teachers to be knowledgeable about race and culture issues as they relate to student writing. In this doctoral program, I was fortunate to take the *Race, Culture, and Schooling* course. My eyes were opened to a multitude of truths I had never quite considered before, and I am a better educator already for that experience. My own research during that course led me

to look at how Standard English is the gatekeeper to educational and professional opportunities. Students who speak other languages, including African American languages, are at a disadvantage (Delpit, 2006; Esters, 2011). Language arts teachers, whether new or old, need to learn to acknowledge and accept each student's uniqueness while at the same time recognizing the fact that student writing for assessment purposes will generally be graded for correctness. I recommend, therefore, that curriculum directors become leaders in assisting school systems with this type of staff development as well. The following is a list of the implications from my study for curriculum directors:

- Allow language arts teachers more time to engage in the entire writing process with fewer pieces of writing rather than require a set number of lengthy essays that frustrates both teachers and students alike. Give teachers more autonomy to decide when isolated skill instruction will enhance the writing.
- Give language arts teachers more diversity of writing assignments to allow writing to be learned as multidimensional instead of a one-dimensional essay preparation for the state writing exam.
- Establish guides for language arts and literature to be taught as an integrated approach by one teacher in lieu of departmentalization that supports specialization by teachers in only one subject.
- Expect language arts teachers to be knowledgeable about race and culture issues in the writing class, but hold all students to the expectation of learning Standard English as the gatekeeper to college and the workplace.

- Provide each school district with a list of texts written by authors such as Delpit and Howard so that faculty study groups can be created to fully examine the issues of race, culture, and schooling.

For Teacher Preparation Programs

The epistle to Dean Molley Simon was the most fun to write for a variety of reasons. The research in this area displayed a gaping hole in teacher preparation programs (Coker & Lewis, 2008; Graham & Perin, 2007; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Smagorinsky, Wilson, & Moore, 2011). My participants echoed the fact that they were never taught to *teach* writing. My own experience was unique because I was able to choose writing courses in my masters program, and I was very prepared for teaching writing. The following recommendations for teacher preparation programs were derived directly from my participants' words as they described their experiences in teacher preparation programs and offered advice for colleges of education.

- Designate a separate track for teachers who want to teach language arts in middle school.
- Teach future language arts teachers the literature on multicultural education as it relates to writing instruction.
- For student teaching assignments, match language arts student teachers with master language arts teachers who have training and experience with writing instruction in middle grades.

The Decision – Revisited

In Chapter 1, I described the route that led me to choose the Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (ESPN) format for writing my dissertation, and as I mentioned, it was

a serious commitment. As I reflect now on the end product, I realize that I made the right decision. While some in academe may not be comfortable with this type of deviation from traditional, scholarly discourse, I hope, along with Nash (2004), that future researchers will consider variations, such as this one, when writing about research. The criteria for writing a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) or an ESPN are actually quite rigorous, and I encourage anyone who enjoys research to include Nash (2004) and Nash and Bradley (2011) in their professional libraries of scholarly methodology. Nash quickly pointed out that these methods were not for everyone, but neither were other forms of scholarly writing. In fact, he views SPN and ESPN writing to be a type of "…counternarrative to the dominant research and scholarship narratives in professional schools" (Nash, 2004, p. 6). For me, it was much more than that. In my search to find the appropriate format for conveying the intricacies and intimacies of my research journey, the ESPN format allowed the scholarship of writing instruction research to mesh with my own professional experiences and be told as a story. For a writer – like myself – this process extended the boundaries of what was possible in scholarly discourse. Nash redefined the term *scholar*, and I found the inspiration and courage necessary to step outside of the academic box, and attempt to instruct, inspire, and include many people in the conversation about writing instruction in middle grades.

> *You are a scholar if you are willing to play with ideas. You are a scholar if you can build on the ideas of others. You are a scholar to the extent that you can tell a good, instructive story. You are a scholar if you capture the narrative quality of your human experience in language that inspires others. You are a scholar if you can present your story in such a way that, in some important senses, it rings true to human life. You are a scholar if you can help your readers reexamine their own truth stories in light of the truths you are struggling to discern in your own complicated story.*

You are a scholar if you have a passion for language and writing. You are a scholar if you are driven to understand what makes yourself and others tick. You are a scholar if you can feel and think at the same time. You are a scholar if you are willing to allow your students, and your readers, to enter your heart as well as your head. You are a scholar if you can help your readers and students to realize that their lives signify, that they matter more than they will ever know (Nash, 2004, pp. 45-46).

Final Reflections

I now realize that this portion of my journey must come to an end, and I have mixed emotions as I close my story. My time at the middle school was precious, and I found myself missing the teachers and students after my study was complete. As is common in work settings, I had personal interactions with both participants that will remain in my heart forever, and several students approached me at the end of school to say goodbye.

This study was a lengthy commitment, however, and I realized that I did not necessarily discover everything I had hoped. Some days, I was even disappointed after spending three hours in the research setting to discover that I did not see anything relevant to my purposes – or so I thought. I learned, however, to be patient. Eventually, the patterns began to emerge, and I attribute that to the length of the study and my ability to blend in as a *regular* in both classes. I also dealt with a certain amount of self-doubt with my research methods. Was I doing this correctly? Would my study be judged as valid? Nash (2004) explained that with validity, "Everything is up for grabs" (p. 41). He insisted, however, that researchers must "Be willing to surrender your truth to a better truth, if only for the moment, or maybe even for a longer while" (p. 64). It is in this spirit that I now proclaim - I am certain I made mistakes! My observation notes and researcher journal are certainly full of my own subjectivities and biases, and my interpretation of

certain comments made by my participants may be quite different from their intentions. I also recognize the opinion of someone who told me that students were writing well in this county because 90% were passing the high school writing proficiency exam. Perhaps, she is right. So, I began thinking. Even though this study only scratched the surface of what occurred in these two classes, maybe the point of doing research is to participate in the broader conversation. And right now, that is enough.

Professionally, the research environment was invigorating, and I definitely plan to continue formal exploration of writing instruction in future endeavors. The language arts classroom was always an inviting place when I taught 8th grade, and I learned from my students much more than I ever taught them. It is, therefore, with renewed enthusiasm for disseminating my epistles to a larger audience that I intend to seek their publication in peer reviewed journals. In Appendix H, I have included journal titles and the specific epistles, which I plan to submit. I enjoyed my time with my participants and their students immensely, and the experience allowed the joys and struggles of my own teaching days to flood my mind. Perhaps the best way to close is with an excerpt from my researcher journal as I prepared to conclude my data collection:

> *5/2/13 - I was quite saddened that today was my last observation in both classes. Over the weeks and months, I became very comfortable in both environments, and Teachers A and B always welcomed me. Neither instructor hovered or intervened with my observations. They were more than cooperative when we set up our interviews and meetings. In fact, teacher A always said she felt it was a privilege to assist me, and teacher B enjoyed setting aside her planning time and lunch if necessary to meet with me. Although the students were not participants in my study and I had very little personal interaction with them, I will remember them. I will probably see them again as this is a very small town in some ways. I know I'm not supposed to become attached to my research environment, but the human side of qualitative research allows me to name my feelings and own them in a very real way.* [Peshkin (1991) explained that acknowledging and owning one's subjectivities were critical steps in managing the personal bias that enters into data gathering and analysis.] *The problems for the field of writing instruction will*

continue but hopefully with some improvement over time from contributions of studies like this one. For these students, however, the future has possibilities and pitfalls for all of them. I hope these writers will find other teachers who will nurture them with productive feedback, and I hope they will have teachers with strong foundations in teaching writing. I hope these budding writers will not give up or give in to outside pressures and endeavors that may draw them away from academic life because the tasks are difficult. I hope they will also encounter future teachers who understand who they are and where they are coming from and can continue to move them forward. I hope both teachers continue to challenge students to get it right even though it may not come naturally to them. I hope they will be diligent with their efforts to provide detailed feedback so that all groups can be motivated by the authenticity of assignments. Retirement for both teachers is close, and I certainly know they have earned it. I can say without a doubt, however, that they will be missed. The school will miss them. The students will miss them. Hopefully, the new generation of writing teachers can take some lessons from them as a result of my study and continue to meet students where they are and help them progress.

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Appendix A

My Dissertation Proposal

Dissertation Proposal

Writing Instruction in Two Middle School Classes: A Comparative Case Study

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Overview

The purpose of this research is to discover which instructional strategies are being employed and which pedagogical choices are being made by teachers of writing in middle school classrooms (Lacina & Block, 2012). Research in writing instruction has led me to multiple frameworks and themes, and I intend for this case study to examine closely the actual practices that are occurring in Colquitt County, Georgia. The pilot study for this dissertation took place in the spring of 2012 when I interviewed and observed 6 English teachers of secondary grades, and the proposed dissertation study would be conducted in the same south Georgia school system, which is unique in that it houses all 6th and 7th graders in one middle school, all 8th and 9th graders in one junior high school, and all 10th – 12th graders in one high school. Data from the pilot study will be considered archival data and included with the dissertation research data. Based on the interviews and observations from the pilot study in secondary grades, the intention of the dissertation research is to focus closely on two language arts teachers and their instructional strategies at the middle school in this southern, rural school system. I plan to observe and interview these teachers during the 2012 fall semester. Selection of the two teachers resulted from my intent to focus on writing instruction with higher scoring students and lower scoring students on standardized placement tests. My interest here is derived from Coker and Lewis (2008) and their challenge for writing instruction research to recognize the differences between struggling and strong writers and to develop

instruction for both. This study will compare and contrast writing instruction in two classrooms on the same 7th grade hall, and the focus will be on the instructional decisions made by each teacher and the reasons behind those choices. I hope that the data and subsequent conclusions drawn will add to the scholarly debate about how writing is being taught currently, the forces that motivate instruction, and the benefits of this instruction.

Table of Contents

Introduction to the Study

Background of the Study

The purpose of this study is to closely examine writing instruction in two middle school classrooms to search for effective teaching strategies, areas of difficulty in writing instruction, and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about writing and writing instruction. The objectives of this proposed research are divided into three categories: intellectual, practical, and personal. The intellectual goal of this study is to understand the process of writing instruction from the teacher's perspective. The practical goal for this proposed research is to ultimately assist in identifying problem areas and ways to improve the practice of writing instruction and student writing. Maxwell (2005) explained that, "Generating results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible, both to the people you are studying and to others" gives credence to research studies that strive to inform educational practices (p. 24). Finally, the personal goal of this proposed research is to find answers to questions I struggled with as an 8th grade teacher in Athens, Georgia. I questioned, and continue to question, why writing is so difficult to teach and why students struggle with the components that are necessary for successful, written communication. Through this proposed research, I hope to glean some understanding about the state of writing instruction in two middle school classrooms in one Georgia town.

Statement of Problem

Writing, according to Grisham and Wolsey (2011), was described as an art form that required skill and was as difficult to teach as it was to learn. Kutney (2010) explained that research in writing was scattered across disciplines and age groups and that various departments were not listening to one another as to the best way to approach writing instruction. According to Faulkner (2005), the knowledge and skills required to write were described as complex and that finding the best way to accomplish the writing task was not easy for teachers or students. While all components of good writing may never be achieved completely, the National Writing Project reported in 2006 that educators were beginning to examine students' needs as well as "…how teachers and administrators must support and sustain effective writing instruction" (NWP & Nagin, 2006, p. 12). According to Flood, Lapp, and Ranck-Buhr (2005), middle school challenged the writer with increased difficulty when students tried to balance physical, cognitive, emotional, and language developments that occurred simultaneously (p. 120). Flood, Lapp, and Ranck-Buhr explained that because the middle school student experienced multiple demands for written language in a variety of settings - such as school, home, with peers, and through technology - the choice of strategies used to develop literacy in middle school classrooms was important to students' development as writers. This proposed study will examine the problems that teachers and students seem to have with writing for a variety of reasons.

Research also focused on struggling writers' literacy development in and out of the school setting. Faulkner (2005) explained that schools were being blamed and exonerated in the professional debate of how to solve the writing crisis, and certain case studies as well as other pedagogical research illuminated problem areas for writing

instruction in some schools. Coker and Lewis (2008) highlighted the fact that teacher preparation programs fell under scrutiny for lack of sufficient writing research instruction, and Vacca (2002) explained that students were developing a "one-dimensional view of writing" (p. 8). He went on to say that students were receiving explicit instruction in how to write a certain type of essay or story, but they really were not able to use writing to "…explore and interpret meaning that they encounter in texts or class discussions" (Vacca, 2002, p. 8).

Research in writing instruction supported further study into the problems that arose in writing instruction, and many entities reported that progress in writing was needed. In 2002, the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) gave a writing exam to students in grades 4, 8, and 12, and the results indicated that only "…22%-26% of students scored at the Proficient level…" with high percentages of students not even meeting the basic level of proficiency (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 8). In addition to these alarming statistics, Graham and Perin (2007) elaborated further on the literacy crisis as including writing along with reading for many students. They explained that reports by the National Commission on Writing in 2004 and 2005 showed concern by employers in the work force in both public and private sectors when asked about applicant's written communication skills; in fact they considered the skills critical for succeeding in the hiring process. The National Commission on Writing reported that, "…about 30% of government and private sector employees require on-the-job training in basic writing skills" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 9). Furthermore, students were not entering colleges and technical schools with the necessary level of writing preparation, and the National Center for Education Statistics reported in 2003 that, "at least a quarter

of new community college students enroll in remedial writing courses" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 9).

Both, the writing skills assessment process and equal access to quality instruction were identified by multiple sources as issues when reporting students' overall writing achievement. In their report on *The State of Writing Instruction in America's Schools*, Applebee and Langer (2006) looked at the statistical differences in writing achievement among subgroups of the population. After examining writing achievement in grades 4, 8, and 11, it was noted that, "Black and Hispanic students and those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch remain relatively the same as four years earlier" (Applebee & Langer, 2006, p. 3). This same report looked closely at several issues as being crucial for future study such as time spent on writing, different genres of writing, technology in support of writing, professional development for teachers, and approaches to instruction. Sperling and Freedman (2001) recommended that future research in writing must look at the diversity in student populations as well as examine "…patterns in writing and learning to write that are influenced by particular differences" in sociocultural and linguistic contexts (Sperling & Freedman, 2001, p. 17). The challenge of mastering written language in the classroom is difficult enough even for those students whose first language is English, but students who speak other languages including African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or African American Language (AAL) found writing in school particularly challenging (Delpit, 2006; Flood, Lapp, & Ranck-Buhr, 2005; Greenfield & Rowan, 2011). Rose (1989) discussed the state of writing instruction for students placed in college remedial classes who were only taught grammar and skills in the effort to improve their writing. Rose explained that students in those courses did not

write "…anything longer than a sentence" because that would be encroaching on the task of the English Department (p. 207). Because those students were not engaged in the *writing process* - which refers to the process of drafting, editing, and revising writing in a collaborative setting - the isolated skills at the sentence-level were not adequate to improve students' writing.

To address the future of writing instruction, Coker and Lewis (2008) discussed several barriers to effective approaches. Recognizing and expanding on several of Graham and Perin's (2007) conclusions, the following were recommended. Coker and Lewis noted that writing instruction must address the difference between *strong* and *struggling* writers, and much more research is needed to determine effective strategies for both groups. To elaborate on Graham and Perin's assertion that the writing instruction concern is not limited to grades 4-12 as suggested by the NAEP tests, Coker and Lewis suggested stronger instruction for early elementary grades might "avert" or "reduce" problems in the later grades (p. 245). Finally, instructional strategy recommendations included assisting students in developing flexibility as writers because "…writing instruction needs to bridge the gap between school and workplace writing" (Coker & Lewis, 2008, p. 245).

Teacher preparation programs and continuing education came under scrutiny by Coker and Lewis (2008) as they made the argument for what is required to strengthen writing instruction in schools. As Graham and Perin (2007) noted, reading research has the larger body of literature available for pre-service teachers, and Coker and Lewis agreed

that "before they enter the classroom, pre-service teachers should be well versed in the research on writing development and writing instruction" (p. 246). The call for better communication between the research and practice communities was made in an effort to bridge the gap between what is written in professional journals and what is taught to teachers before and during their classroom teaching. According to Coker and Lewis (2008) professional development also relied on the reporting of better approaches to teaching writing with data from what is currently occurring in classrooms (p. 246).

The final and perhaps most important problem with writing instruction in secondary schools was the loss of writing for the sheer joy of writing. Yagelski (2012) explained that the problem really was not with the way many schools were teaching writing because some were doing it quite well. The problem, Yagelski contented, was that most educators had a very narrow view of writing and its role in shaping lives. He explained that, "…we simply don't teach writing in ways that give students access to its transformative power; we don't allow them to experience writing as a way of making sense of themselves and the world around them" (Yagelski, 2012, p. 189). Applebee and Langer (2009) looked at how writing instruction had changed due to the influences of assessments and new technologies as well as new state standards and mandates, and they came to the ultimate conclusion that teachers were responsible for not only preparing students for writing tests but assisting them in becoming "…the writers they will need to be as they leave our secondary schools at the cusp of their lives as adults and citizens" (Applebee & Langer, 2009, p. 27). The problem, therefore, for this proposed research is that scholars do not agree on which approach to writing instruction is most effective, and teachers are using a variety of methods in an attempt to tackle the overwhelming task of

improving students' thinking and writing. The following research goals focus this study on two 7th grade language arts teachers in the same middle school to allow writing instruction strategies to be observed, teachers' perceptions to be explored, and students' writing to be examined.

Research Goals

The primary research goal for this study is to examine the instructional strategies being used and the pedagogical choices being made in 2 middle school language arts classes and to ultimately reach some conclusion about the effectiveness of these various strategies and decisions. Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of various writing strategies used by secondary students as opposed to college students. They discovered that writing strategies, similar to learning strategies, provided middle and high school students with the tools necessary to bridge the gap between the writer and the writing task (p. 400). Lavelle, et al., also determined that students used different strategies for writing tasks depending on many factors such as developmental level, language level, and for assessment situations to name a few. According to Lavelle, et al., "The term 'approach' was originally used to describe college students' personal experiences with learning," and the meaning had morphed over the years to include the ways that students engage with the learning material (2002, p. 401). The research suggested that when teachers were focused on the strategies that students used to complete a learning task that the "…instructional climates [were] richer, and approaches deep" (Lavelle, et al., 2002, p. 401).

By examining the approaches to writing instruction taken by secondary students, Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) were able to recommend useful strategies for writing

instruction. For students whose approach to writing was just to "get it finished" because it was an assignment that would carry a grade, the *Achieving-Competitive* approach was often adopted (p. 412). For these students, Lavelle, et al. suggested using writing assignments that encourage students to see the relevance in the assignments such as writing in content areas, using the Internet, email, collaborative writing, and using graded and non-graded assignments (p. 412). The *Planful-Procedural* approach was often utilized by students whose focus was on rules and grammar (p. 412). These students needed writing instruction and assignments that encouraged more scaffolding, carefully constructed assignments, use of concept mapping, and the structure provided by expository writing. Finally, the *Elaborative-Expressive* approach was shown by students who demonstrated basic competency in all areas of written expression with the one exception of revision skills (p. 412). According to Lavelle et al., writing instruction for these students included diverse genres, self-regulatory strategies, and writing assignments that were both timed and untimed.

Derived from their study, Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) found three implications for improving secondary writing instruction. Revision, self-regulatory strategies, and expository writing all surfaced as needed areas for improving secondary students' writing. The researcher asserted that revision strategies must be integrated and "embedded" in the entirety of writing instruction for secondary students rather than being viewed as something to be done near the conclusion of an assignment (p. 412). While they admitted that more research was needed to determine which self-regulatory strategies assisted most in certain writing situations, Lavelle et al. agreed that self-regulatory strategies should be integrated throughout writing instruction. Expository

writing assignments should be utilized in secondary writing instruction as a way to increase the complexity of thought required of secondary students, which would also introduce the complex self-regulatory and revision strategies. Finally, Lavelle et al. determined that students should be involved in reflective writing through journals and collaborative activities. They asserted, "Too often the emphasis has been on the acquisition of skill as separate from intentionality and writing self-hood" (Lavelle et al., 2002, p. 413). The strategies outlined by Lavelle et al. will serve as potential categories of data analysis for this qualitative research. The research goal for this study is to examine two language arts classes to determine which strategies are most and least effective for strong and struggling writers. The following research questions address the scope of inquiry for this study.

Research Questions

Question 1: How are writing instruction strategies being implemented for high and low performing students in two middle school language arts classes, and how are writing instruction strategies implemented for students whose first language is not English?

Question 2: What are these two teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of *writing to learn* strategies in each of these language arts classes?

Question 3: What do the work samples of middle school students reveal about student writing and possibly writing instruction strategies in these 2 language arts classes?

Conceptual Framework

In order to address the research goals and questions of this study, the traditions of writing instruction must be examined to determine the best foundation for this research study. According to Sperling (1996), writing cannot be completely separated from the

social context in which it is created, and learning to write involves understanding the world and its interactions. The social cognitive view of composition was attributed to Flower and Hayes (1980) who explained that meaning was derived from a variety of sources that students bring to situations whether the influences were from social and cultural backgrounds, understanding of grammar and usage, as well as the purpose of the assignment. Prior (2008) explained that the *sociocultural theory of writing* perceives writing as not mere communication but instead as an avenue for *social action* (p. 58). It is this social aspect of writing that brings the theoretical framework of this proposed research to the concept of process writing.

Yagelski (2006) examined the underlying theories and pedagogies of three pieces of literature that he considered closely related in their aims for writing instruction in K-12 settings, and I found these theorists along with the accompanying analysis to be particularly relevant to the frame of the proposed qualitative case study. He compared and contrasted Peter Elbow's (1998) *Writing without Teachers* with Paulo Freire's (2001) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* alongside Donald Murray's (2004) *A Writer Teaches Writing*. The driving force behind Yagelski's review was the implementation of a required writing component on the college admissions exam, the SAT. As a member of the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) task force designed to examine the new SAT writing exam, Yagelski and others authored a report that expressed concern. The NCTE task force thought that, "…the SAT writing test would likely send to students, parents, school administrators, and teachers questionable messages about what constitutes 'good' writing" (Yagelski, 2006, p. 531). Yagelski continued to parallel the task force's concern about timed writing assessments, and he explained that most schools in this country hold

a similar definition for acceptable writing as being "…organized, formulaic, rule-governed, and relatively straight-forward…" (p. 532). Yagelski, therefore, felt compelled to review these three pieces in response to a colleague's comment about Murray's (2004) article *Teach Writing as a Process Not Product* as being "radical" (p. 532).

To connect the seemingly unrelated authors' works, Yagelski (2006) reviewed the works of Murray (2004), Elbow (1998), and Freire (2001) in an attempt to explain how writing instruction is not without political and economic implications for students, teachers, administrators, school systems, policy makers, and the world. By focusing on the current trend of educational reform and accountability measures, Yagelski (2006) argued that the writing process movement lost momentum it was due. According to Yagelski, the common thread between these three works was "purpose of writing" (p. 533). When considering the times in which each book was written, the three works also represented times of change. Murray, Elbow, and Freire all wrote during the political and social unrest of the 1960s with varying experiences yet all continuing a tradition promoting change and rectifying injustices. Yagelski pointed out that at the time he was writing this article, the world was reeling from social "inequalities" revealed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 (p. 533).

Yagelski (2006) explained that Murray (2004) questioned "conventional writing instruction, which positions the student as passive direction-follower, as disengaged from the world around him or her, as un-self-reflective" (p. 534). Elbow (1998) also was portrayed by Yagelski as being in support of *process writing*, and Elbow taught that the topic for student writing is irrelevant as long as students are writing. For Elbow, according to Yagelski (2006), writing was about the individual's experiences and not the

teacher or the teachings. Elbow thought that the problem with current "conventional" writing instruction was that, "they remove the experiential- and therefore the epistemic – component from school-based writing;…" (Yagelski, 2006, p. 537). Elbow's experience stemmed from the era following the assasinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy when he volunteered as an instructor in the Black community of Boston helping with the children and teaching writing to adults. Yagelski explained that Elbow's perspective stemmed from a time with multiple political and social complexities, and Elbow wrote, "Many people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words" (p. 539).

Finally, Paulo Freire's (2001) work was portrayed by Yagelski as being down on the current educational system and its motives to maintain the status quo, but Freire's work is also driven by "his deep sense of hope" (Yagelski, 2006, p. 542). Stemming from his own experience with oppression, Freire was able to point out the inequalities in education while finding a way to overcome them at the same time. Yagelski (2006) suggested that, "we teachers of writing can draw from Freire – as well as Murray and Elbow – to address the ills we see in the education system" (p. 542). Yagelski encouraged teachers of writing to remember the legacies of these three scholars when looking at the writer as an individual, when not ignoring the "struggling student writer" who is only concerned with the required length of a paper, or when facing the inequalities of poverty or race in writing or schooling in general (p. 543).

Process writing and its encompassing demands on the individual writer's cognitive ability to develop, draft, edit, revise, and publish written work is the foundation from which this study springs. Lavelle, Smith, and O'Ryan (2002) examined the various perspectives of secondary writing instruction in recent years and found that the writing process was highly recursive in nature (p. 402). Stemming from the problem-solving perspective, Lavelle et al. found that writing cannot be separated from the writer's intentions and the way meaning is created. They also discovered that the development perspective was motivated by the work of Fiztgerald and Shanahan (2000) and that literacy development increased in intensity and difficulty from the elementary to the middle grades and on to high school and college (p. 402). Literacy development, therefore, was a critical area for all students from all backgrounds. This study seeks to recognize the complexities of such a task by recognizing certain resistance to the *process writing* movement for students whose first language is not English. According to Delpit (2006), students of color and particularly African American students need a balance between *process writing* and direct instruction due to the complexities of *Standard English* in order to obtain the language of power and success in school and beyond. Delpit contended that regardless of how a writer produced a piece, the student's paper ultimately would be judged or graded on the final product and its *correctness*. When teaching Black children and poor children, Delpit advocated neither the *skills* approach nor the *process* approach but rather a combination of the two (p. 46). The intention, therefore, of this research study is to acknowledge differing forms of writing instruction while maintaining the framework for middle school writing instruction as comprised of

the social, cognitive, and linguistic processes that are most appropriate for each student involved when drafting, editing, revising, and publishing written assignments.

Significance of the Study

First, as the study will examine writing instruction strategies used in two middle school classrooms in a particular Georgia school, the teachers, administrators, and stakeholders will have access to the results of this dissertation and may find the information useful in planning for professional development opportunities for teachers in the future. Second, the participants of the proposed study hopefully will gain further insight into their own teaching practices and perhaps even gain a sense of accomplishment if change occurs as a partial result of this study. I hope that the results of this study can contribute to the broader discussion of writing instruction pedagogy relative to teacher preparation programs and cultural awareness for teachers and teacher candidates. Finally, I have found personal significance from the exhaustive process of researching current practices and believe that I have a useful and more complete understanding of writing instruction pedagogy as well as an educated opinion of where we need to be on the current continuum.

Summary

Writing is a difficult task, and students do not appear to be graduating from high school with a level of competency or foundation for future endeavors. Scholars in writing instruction explored the possible reasons behind writing difficulties, and social and cognitive components were required for development in writing to occur. From the social and cognitive theories of writing came the idea that writing is a process that engages the student with creating, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing written

pieces based on a variety of literature and prior knowledge and experience. Strategies to improve writing were examined, and agreement among teachers in the area of writing instruction was not evident. The goal of this proposed study is to determine how writing is being taught in one middle school, which strategies are being used, and how two teachers of 7th grade language arts view the effectiveness of the strategies. The following literature review will examine issues related to writing instruction and research that precedes this study.

Literature Review

Introduction

The literature on writing instruction in secondary grades is actually plentiful, and current sources echo the sentiments, theories, and discussions of scholars in past decades. The following review looked at the history of writing instruction, the importance of knowing one's students well, the influence of technology on writing instruction, teacher preparation and professional development, the effects of writing assessments and high-stakes testing on writing instruction, and the future of the writing process. What I have tried to do is give a general understanding of how writing instruction has been viewed by educators in the past and then look at current theories to decipher where the future of writing instruction needs to go as well.

The History of Writing Instruction

Formal schooling, according to Bazerman (2010), was originally the product of the state's need to promote and continue religious texts and tenets. Olson (2010) explained that many of the first schools were limited to the elite society, and the focus remained on reading and writing of the Bible and other religious materials for the purpose

of public readings. The Puritans were the first group to have influence on reading and writing for private consumption of literature such as the *Bible, Paradise Lost*, and *Pilgrim's Progress* (Olson, 2010, p. 284). The British reading public increased in the mid to late 1700s as newspapers became popular, and "…the essay and the sermon became distinctive genre" (Olson, 2010, p. 285). Writers in the nineteenth century reached many new readers with the birth of popular medias, and *audience directedness* was the future direction for literature (p. 285). Schools in America quickly grew in importance in order to educate children in the disciplines of reading and writing (Olson, 2010). Textbooks were produced to provide students with the correct model for writing structure at sentence and textual levels. Students began writing to aid in memory of lessons and primarily as a note taking activity. As students became more familiar with written texts, the more critical they became when examining texts.

The study of composition became integrated into curriculum in the 1960s as textbooks were combined to represent lessons in grammar as well as writing instruction (Hillocks, 2010). Prior to this time, according to Applebee (2006), writing in the nineteenth century was devoted to the teaching and learning of penmanship to the exclusion of any content-based instruction (NWP & Nagin, 2006, p. 1). The shift occurred after centuries of debate over appropriate rhetoric and its relationship to writing. As scholars pondered the virtue of expository writing versus narratives, poetry, and prose, the conclusion by Berlin and others was that all forms of writing required similar elements of paragraph and sentence structure (Hillocks, 2010). In the 1970s, many scholars attempted to determine the best way to instruct writing, and the writing process movement was born. Emig (1971), according to Hillocks (2010), studied 12th grade

students during the prewriting stage of the composition process. Hayes and Flower (1980) were attributed with a paradigm shift in writing instruction, and the idea that writing required many stages had a significant impact on school curriculum (Hillock, 2010).

Writing has since gone through multiple foci for instruction from self-regulated learning to connections through literature, and the challenge to improve student writing addressed several key questions. The National Writing Project along with Nagin (2006) asked much more than "why does writing matter" (p. 3)? They also wanted educators to examine the following: the research on teaching writing; ways to define *writing processes*, deciphering what makes a writing classroom effective; ways that writing fosters critical thinking skills; how writing aids in learning across disciplines; types of professional development for teachers of writing; how school-wide writing works; and assessment of writing in fair ways (p. 3). As these issues were explored by Nagin and the NWP (2006), one high school case study explained how Elbow helped the faculty realize that teachers must "…look at their own writing, share, and discuss their own process as writers. It would help them better understand what kids need to know to develop as writers" (p. 98). This high school's staff also wrote daily with the students, assessed writing using commonly agreed-upon rubrics, and attended professional development centered on writing as well as the teaching of writing.

Writing to Learn

Lance and Lance (2006) explained that writing was an integral part of life, both professionally and personally. Traditionally, writing was taught within the confines of an English or language arts class, but these two scholars contended that, "As teachers of a

discipline, we should not overlook the value of having students write for both learning and assessment purposes as they work their way through the curricula" (Lance & Lance, 2006, p. 18). Yeats, Reddy, Wheeler, Senior, and Murray (2010) reported that writing was a vital part of making meaning and was an active process that assisted with students' growth intellectually. Therefore, writing was viewed as a critical capability for secondary students, and Graham and Perin (2007), when they authored *Writing Next* for the Carnegie Corporation, focused on secondary students' difficulties with writing.

According to Graham and Perin (2007) writing occurred in every context of life, and students were lacking the abilities necessary for successful communication in school, work, and in the community. They contended that students needed to write well for two reasons: First, students had to master the processes involved in writing, such as planning, evaluating, and revising because these skills were critical to expressing opinions and creating arguments with supporting evidence in all classes; Second, writing served to deepen and extend knowledge gained from content as well as acted "…as a tool for learning subject matter" (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 9). In their report, Graham and Perin detailed data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2002 that placed only 22% to 26% of students in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades writing at or above the proficient level (p. 8). They also cited the National Center for Education Statistics in 2003 that documented one quarter of students attending community college for the first time were enrolled in remedial writing courses. This report highlighted the problem for 2-year institutions because they really did not have the time or resources to teach writing, but the issue needed to be addressed. Graham and Perin noted that community colleges were forced to address poor writing because a lack of ability in that area would

"undermine" the colleges' ability to provide quality academic courses (p. 9). Graham and Perin noted a sense of urgency in developing strategies to improve adolescents' writing as a preemptive measure for post-secondary and workforce issues but also to provide more opportunities for students to learn content through writing.

Daniels (2007) worked with middle school students in an effort to improve their overall writing and their feeling about their own writing by establishing a *Literacy Café*. According to Daniels, students grew to enjoy sharing writing and participating in the discussions as they developed a true understanding of writing as an important avenue to learning. Knipper and Duggan (2006) found that learning logs, structured note-taking, and guided writing were effective strategies to improve content area learning with students in grades 4-8. Knipper and Duggan contended that *writing to learn* techniques did not need to be isolated in English class because these strategies help students express and reflect upon their learning of any content material. Lacina and Watson (2008) looked at middle schools and determined that reading and writing in content classes were often used by teachers who were deemed highly effective. While this proposed research will explore writing in two middle school, language arts classes, one driving question relates to how these two teachers use *writing to learn* strategies that students could utilize in content area courses as well.

Writing, according to Knipper and Duggan (2006), was a way to help students construct meaning in all content classes. This construction of meaning allowed students' cognitive processes of critical thinking, synthesis, and reflection to evolve, and the process required active rather than passive participation (Knipper & Duggan, 2006). According to Lacina and Watson (2008), literacy instruction in content classes required

that every teacher become an *enabler* who assists students in learning from and thinking about each text. Because of the cognitive processes involved, the use of reading and writing "…can lead to improved understanding and retention of content area knowledge" (Lacina & Watson, 2008, p. 160). All of these scholars were operating under "…the cross-disciplinary theory of writing instruction…" known as *writing across the curriculum*, or WAC (Lance & Lance, 2006, p. 18).

Writing and reading, according to Graham and Perin (2007) were often viewed as similar tasks, and many assumed that students who were good at one were automatically good at the other. While researchers contended that writing and reading do compliment each other, the cognitive processing for reading a text was different from creating and organizing thoughts for writing (Graham & Perin, 2007). *Writing to learn*, which evolved from *writing across the curriculum*, called for content-area teachers to "…provide instruction and practice in discipline-specific reading and writing" because these tasks would increase students' knowledge and vocabulary as well as argumentative and evaluative abilities (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 23). Yagelski (2012) viewed writing as "practice for living," and he reported that writing in many content and English classes was often focused on technique as correctly informative or argumentative (p. 190). Writing, according to Yagelski who expressed similar vision to Freire (2005), was a transforming act of students interacting with their own thinking about subjects and with the world to foster a deeper understanding of content material.

Writing across the curriculum, or *writing to learn*, not only assisted in content knowledge acquisition but was viewed also as a social act requiring interaction between students, texts, and ideas (Lacina & Watson, 2008). Melzer (2009) noted that *writing to*

learn was merely one approach to writing across the curriculum. Due to this social nature of communication that Vygotsky described, Lacina and Watson (2008), Daniels (2007), and Tobin (2010) promoted collaboration as an integral component to successful learning through writing. Daniels (2007) reported improved student writing as a result of a *Literacy Café* where middle school students shared their own writing because it was "…in the larger context of learning and social constructs…" (p. 18). Daniels stated that Gee (1999) connected sociocultural theory as an avenue for middle school students to use contexts and language to determine and develop meaning.

Strategies for Writing Instruction

The literature was extensive in the declaration of a problem with writing instruction research and strategies, but solutions were harder to come by. Certain lessons that I found most useful were derived from first-hand knowledge and experiences with struggling writers. Fisher and Frey (2003) reported that teachers were requiring or *causing* writing to occur in secondary grades rather than instructing students in how to write while scores on writing assessments were not improving. The cause for this, Fisher and Frey contended, was that teachers were missing the *instruction* component as they went straight from assigning writing to assessing it. Therefore, the gradual release model of teacher-directed scaffolding, which eventually turns the responsibility over to the student, was tested on Fisher's class of struggling high school students. With a class of students termed "significantly below grade level," Fisher embarked on a semester-long quest to improve writing (p. 397). Through strategies such as the Language Experience Approach (LEA), writing models, power writing, daily interactive writing, generative sentences, and independent writing, Fisher and Frey contended that students improved

"writing fluency, accuracy, and length of response" (p. 403). While many lessons were learned, this case study concluded among other important findings about choice in writing and daily experience with writing that "Too often instructional minutes are wasted when students are given independent writing prompts for which they are unprepared" (Fisher & Frey, 2006, p. 404).

Further, knowledge of approaches to writing instruction can be gleaned from Coker and Lewis (2008) in their discussion of literacy development in adolescents. Coker and Lewis indicated similar findings from additional perspectives from researching a small selection of qualitative literature on writing instruction, and they explored their own literature analysis to determine which theoretical frames favored the various approaches to instruction. Conclusions drawn from the research of Graham and Perin (2007) determined that strategy instruction continued to be *effective* while word processing, teacher modeling, and behavioral reinforcement were found to be examples of *somewhat* effective practices (Coker & Lewis, 2008). While process writing was not specifically mentioned, Graham and Perin identified 10 themes where they concluded that, "most themes reflect the necessity of approaching writing as a process" (Coker & Lewis, 2008, p. 241). Many of the themes resulting from the analysis of qualitative literature indicated that many instructional strategies such as providing scaffolding and teaching self-monitoring are not in conflict with process writing. Graham and Perin also called for future research to focus on a more extensive qualitative analysis of writing instruction, which necessitates more qualitative research be conducted (Coker & Lewis, 2008).

Upon reflection, authors Coker and Lewis (2008) looked at the debate among writing researchers as a dichotomy between those with backgrounds in educational psychology and those versed in composition studies. While cognitive-based researchers tend to favor quantitative methods and composition practitioners prefer qualitative research, Coker and Lewis explained that, "many of the *Writing Next* recommendations should be familiar to members of both groups" (p. 243). They expounded on the issues raised by Graham and Perin and focused on making recommendations of their own for writing instruction, teacher preparation, and assessment. Stating as their rationale for the necessity of future research in these areas, Coker and Lewis (2008) explained that, "Another substantial divide exists when we compare the kinds of writing required of adolescents in school with those required of adults in the workplace" (p. 244). Some of the desired abilities included being able to adapt a piece of writing for designated audiences as well as work collaboratively (p. 244).

Another critical aspect found in the literature for becoming an effective writing instructor was to know the students well. Kutney (2010) discussed important lessons derived from elementary writing instruction that were most useful for secondary and post-secondary instructors. Among these components was one that he thought was worthy to be singled out: "Perhaps the most important lesson elementary school composition can offer secondary and post-secondary writing instructors is the need to make a careful study of their students" (Kutney, 2010, p. 41). Kutney explained that Cruz (2008) gave teachers a guide of questions to assist in this endeavor. Teachers were called to notice patterns of student behavior surrounding writing activities, and the message for teachers was clear: they must pay close attention to the writer who covered

the blank page with an arm as the teacher walked by. Kutney persisted that students need choice in topics, and teachers should not place too much emphasis on errors. He concluded that "…[writing] is largely a recursive process in which the writer relearns his craft with every new skill, subject, and draft" (Kutney, 2010, p. 42).

When searching for effective writing instruction strategies, another case study surfaced that offered a unique view of student writing. This study recognized that certain student literacies also come from time outside of school instruction, which was the crucial component in an Australian case study of an eighth grade class. Faulkner (2005) discovered that public and private literacies complement each other, yet, "The public literacies valued by teachers, schools, and systems tend to be representative of a narrow representation of what it means to be literate…" (p. 109). This case also emphasized other important skills necessary for constructing meaning through writing, and these literacies included "linguistic, visual, audio, multimodal, and technological" (Faulkner, 2005, p. 112). As students brought outside experiences into the classroom, teachers were faced with the challenge of integrating writing instruction for the school assignments with the multimodalities of their students. This led me to the next section as I explored how technology has impacted writing instruction.

Impact of Technology on Writing Instruction

According to Bruce and Comstock (2005), technology has grown in its role as a major influence on the practice of writing. By looking at writing as a tool for reflection on one's self, on others, and on the community, Bruce and Comstock contended that technology and its influence on these purposes is nothing more than "…an integral part of the human experience that demands thoughtful and critical understanding" (p. 195).

While the change in form of writing due to texting, emails, blogs, and webpages may seem extreme from the pencil to paper form of old, it was not unlike the feeling of scholars after the invention of the printing press (Bruce & Comstock, 2005). The concept of image replacing written word was viewed as extreme, but the basic function of writing remained the same. Bruce and Comstock maintained that "…the same issues of making sense of experience and communicating that to others, developing identity, and solving problems have not substantially changed" (p. 202). Technology enhanced the ability to continue to tell the story but through a different lens (Bruce & Comstock, 2005).

Heitin (2011) examined technology's impact on the teaching of writing in middle school language arts classes, and she determined three benefits for this new type of discourse for students. Writing to collaborate, writing for an audience, and motivation to master the conventions were all listed as having positive impacts on student writing – both digitally and traditionally (p. 5). With the advent of blogs and Google Docs, Heitin found that writing became a collaborative effort for students rather than the isolated act of drafting with pencil and paper. Teachers and students also had the opportunity for closer and easier collaboration during the writing process when feedback was provided. In contrast to traditional writing, Heitin discovered that digital writing often provided students with an immediate and truly authentic audience rather than the normative writing for personal reflection. One middle school teacher told Heitin that digital writing had assisted students' clarity and purpose for writing because it added "power" to their language (p. 5). Heitin explained that teachers, partly due to assessment criteria and pressure, would teach standard and even "formulaic" writing structures and then allow students to branch out creatively with digital writing. The finding, however, was that

students would return to their knowledge of conventions and "fundamentals" even when composing digitally, and this served as a motivating factor for many students to edit and revise correctly (p. 5). One word of caution came from Heitin as she reminded that teachers needed to maintain instructional objectives when integrating technology into the lessons and not utilize a tool for the sole purpose of using technology.

Teacher Training in Writing Instruction

One component found in the literature that directly influenced student writing was teacher preparation for writing instruction. Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore (2011) looked at one teacher's writing instruction over 2 years. The first year in this case study was the teacher's student teaching experience, and the second year was the same teacher's first year teaching. The conclusion illuminated that literature-based teacher preparation programs with little or no formal instruction in writing pedagogy yielded a teacher whose writing instruction attempts left students confused and in need of more scaffolding. Furthermore, these educators faced system and school pressures to prepare students for assessments in these areas for which they were underprepared (Smorginsky et al., 2011). In this case, the outcome for the teacher in Smorginsky et al.'s case study was that she focused on mechanical and grammatical instruction with little attention paid to the method of writing instruction.

Grisham and Wolsey (2011) studied teacher candidates to determine the level of writing instruction in preparation programs as well as in student teacher placements. After specific instruction that focused on the writing process and on Spandel's 6-Trait Writing, student teachers reflected this knowledge in their lesson plans and implementation. Only after this formal emphasis on writing instruction did teacher

candidates decrease their emphasis on conventions when writing lesson plans. This study also noted that some of the teaching environments for student teacher placement restricted certain lessons on writing because the plans were not aligned with the county's curriculum map. Grisham and Wosley (2011) concluded that, "There appears to be little formal instruction in methodologies for writing instruction occurring in public school classrooms in the area where this study took place, particularly when compared with state content standards and curriculum frameworks that call for explicit instruction in writing" (p. 361). Because the pilot study illuminated the lack of consistent writing instruction models in this school system, I am compelled to seek further insight through my study by focusing on the differences in writing instruction at the middle school level for high achieving and low achieving students. Grisham and Wolsey noted that high-stakes testing and pacing guides for instruction are two of many possible variables to be examined as well as the perpetual cycle of teachers who teach what they were taught in the area of writing instruction.

Grisham and Wolsey (2011) discovered that teacher preparation programs were not utilizing models of good writing as a tool for learning. Researchers, therefore, concluded that future pedagogy in writing for teacher candidates should focus on the teachers' role while students write as well as "…re-emphasize the value of writing as a way of coming to understand concepts and essential questions…" (p. 356). Grisham and Wolsey concluded that teacher preparation programs needed to engage in direct writing instruction to promote and model writing as a tool for learning and not simply an assessment to be dreaded, which dealt directly with teacher candidate dispositions in regard to writing instruction. Grisham and Wolsey (2011) discovered that most teacher

candidates were not experienced in writing instruction, and many students were not in touch with their own writing abilities, habits, and attitudes. Future research could be implemented to bring change in writing across disciplines, according to Grisham and Wolsey, once teacher preparation programs began teaching the value of *writing across the curriculum* to future educators.

Writing Instruction and Assessment

Mandatory writing assessments in secondary grades have permeated instruction in the last few decades, and this reality has forced writing, like other test-based subjects, to fall victim to the concept of teaching a set of skills to pass the test (Bloodgood, 2002). Bloodgood contended that the writing process became a shortened version of itself with more attention paid to the mechanical structure and teaching a prescribed type of paper where certain steps in the process were glossed over or omitted (p. 31). All of these modifications came as a result of accountability testing through writing tests (Bloodgood, 2002). Hillocks (2005) concurred when he described that the methodology employed by teachers to teach writing was greatly influenced by states' exams, and further research into the rubrics used as scoring guides primarily indicated that form more than content earned higher scores. Bloodgood, however, continued to promote teaching writing as a process, and she explained that the movement should not be "abandoned" (p. 41). In fact, she advocated that teaching students to write through the writing process allowed for collaborative efforts between parents, teachers, and community, and "Helping students learn to express real ideas clearly and correctly would be part of that process" (Bloodgood, 2002, p. 41).

Casey (2007) studied one middle school literacy teacher to determine how current assessment in writing altered instruction. The participant teacher believed that literacy encompassed reading and writing as well as creativity and critical thinking skills. Because of literacy assessments with teacher accountability standards, the teacher's pedagogical beliefs were not fully realized due to specific lessons that were needed to assist students with performance on standardized tests (Casey, 2007). One conclusion of this study indicated the need for more study and reflection on middle school teachers' ability to teach the necessary literacy for success in the world and not be forced to focus on assessment skills.

The National Association for Education Progress (NAEP) and the National Writing Project (NWP) found that certain instructional practices did increase achievement and scores on national writing assessments (NWP & Nagin, 2006). According to NAEP, teacher-student discussions and the use of student-kept portfolios increased scores on writing assessments by providing opportunities for collaboration and reflection during the writing process. The NWP and Nagin (2006) also advocated for the use of *writing to learn* strategies and *writing across the curriculum* as being critical to the success of student writing by exemplifying the communication needs found in every assignment. Teachers of English were encouraged to teach writing to learn strategies with specific genres of writing as well as for students to develop learning strategies to use in diverse content areas (NWP & Nagin, 2006, p. 51).

Recommendations for Improving Student Writing

The future of successful writing instruction depends on several key elements. First, as Kutney (2010) contended, teachers need to pay close attention to the behaviors

of their students during writing. Next, teachers need to examine their own writing and processes of writing in order to understand their students' development as writers (NWP & Nagin, 2006). In addition to teacher reflection, Fisher and Frey (2003) purported that students should write each day, and teachers should use scaffolding strategies with struggling writers in secondary grades. Fisher and Frey also emphasized that helping struggling secondary students achieve success should occur immediately, which was the reasoning behind the intensive, semester-long intervention for high school students in their study. Finally, Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore (2011) framed teacher preparation and instruction in writing pedagogies to be critically important in preparing students for writing assessments using sound writing processes rather than focusing only on grammatical and structural issues. Faulkner (2005) also challenged school reform initiatives to understand that students use multiple modalities outside of school for communication, and that "knowledge of those factors that affect adolescent literacies helps to develop, expand, and inform those pedagogic choices made by teachers when supporting the literacies of young adolescents" (p. 117). Future case studies will illuminate more into these and other practices in the conversation of writing instruction pedagogy, and the NWP and Nagin (2006) put it succinctly when they stated, "In short, if students are to learn, they must write" (p. 104).

Summary

Based on the literature presented here, writing instruction research has defined the concerns of future researchers quite well. Kutney (2010) emphasized that communication between stakeholders in K-12 and post-secondary institutions must improve. Coker and Lewis (2008) echoed that sentiment with the challenge for writing

instructors to increase research in the classrooms in order to tell a more complete story of actual writing instruction practices. Nagin and the NWP (2006) as well as Fisher and Frey (2003) charged that struggling writers have specific needs, and Faulkner (2005) insisted on writing instruction that was inclusive of multiple literacies in the classroom. Finally, Yagelski (2006) recommended that writing instruction return to its roots that once were steeped in the writing process in an attempt to teach all students the necessary literacies for overcoming adversities. While this may seem like an enormous task, Coker and Lewis (2008) asserted that,

> In our opinion, there is no greater object than building effective writing programs that will equip young people to succeed in school, contribute to a vibrant global economy, and to participate in an increasingly pluralistic civic life – all facilitated by the power of the written word. (p. 249)

This literature review, therefore, substantiates the need for research like this proposed study to uncover effective teaching strategies for struggling writers, strong writers, and writers whose first language is not English. As emphasized in the literature on writing instruction, the need for increased dialogue among and between stakeholders exists, and this study seeks to bring new experiences to that discussion.

Research Design

Proposed Study

The review of literature on writing instruction in secondary settings suggests that a qualitative case study design would be most appropriate for this proposed research. In seeking a better understanding of actual practices that are occurring in language arts classrooms, I will need to observe teachers as they engage in writing instruction and

interview those teachers about their instructional choices. Along with the proposed interviews and observations, I intend to gather student writing samples throughout the study to be used as archival or document data that will hopefully shed some light on where student writing is and where it needs to be. Stake (1995) explained that, "we study a case when it itself is of very special interest," and this study's interest stems from the pilot study as it yielded more focused questions and willing participants (p. ix).

Introduction

The current proposed research would be best situated in the qualitative tradition based on the data to be gathered, the number and location of the participants, the questions to be answered, and the community to understand. The chosen location for this case study proved to be open to research, as I learned from my time spent there during the pilot study. Stake (1995) explained that case study research gains much from a willing environment. For this study, data would be derived from field observation notes of classroom practices, interview data from teachers, document or archival data from student work samples, and researcher journaling and memo-writing throughout the study. Participants for this study would be two teachers in the middle school in one county's school system, and selection would be limited to one teacher of high-performing students and one teacher of low-performing students. The assessment data being used by the school to determine the level of each class and subsequent placement of students was the CRCT. Students work samples would be selected from emerging data from interviews, observations, and researcher journaling. The research questions, similar to the one discussed by Burton (2010) in the study by Beaufort and Soliday, would be aimed at discovering the actual practices occurring in these two language arts classes and how

teachers perceive these practices of writing instruction. Qualitative case study methods would be the natural selection, as indicated by Stake (1995) when he described *instrumental case study* as attempting to understand something other than the individual.

According to Merriam (2002), a case study is "…an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community" (p. 8). Merriam continued to explain that it was not the topic of a study but rather the unit of analysis that makes a study characteristically a case study. To be classified as a case study, Merriam contended that the unit of analysis would be one specific program, person, or situation selected as *a bounded system* (p. 8). Merriam discussed a specific case study where researchers immersed themselves in a large high school in order to create a description of the community, and that type of study would be particularly relevant to this proposed research. In this case, I am seeking to gain an understanding of what strategies and pedagogies are being in two language arts classrooms, and the classroom climates will be observed weekly and documented in my researcher journal. I have chosen two teachers who represent opposite ends of the achievement spectrum with regards to the students they teach, and Merriam noted that, "The selection depends upon what you want to learn and the significance that knowledge might have for extending theory or improving practice" (2002, p. 179). Purcell-Gates, Perry, and Briseno (2011) examined and coded case study data from multiple research projects related to literacy in schools, and the data included researcher memos, interview transcripts, field notes, pictures, and "scanned artifacts" (p. 45). This proposed case study would include most of the aforementioned data as well.

Maxwell (2005) discussed the researcher's decision to pursue a qualitative study, and he explained that the goals of the research determined the methodology taken. Particularly relevant to this study would be several of Maxwell's aims for qualitative research. First, I would be seeking to learn how these two participants teach writing to either the higher achieving group of students or the lower achieving students, but I would also be seeking to understand how the participants regard their own decision-making process for teaching writing. Maxwell explained this as the researcher's need to understand how the process affects the participants. Secondly, I would be seeking an understanding of the *context* of the participants' teaching environments and how this context influences their thoughts and actions (Maxwell, p. 22). Maxwell explained that qualitative research used small numbers of participants in order to discover these relationships among participants and their environments, and Stake (1995) advocated that studying one unit, whether teacher, student, or situation, by nature constituted a case study. The final objective of this proposed study, which validates the qualitative nature of the study, would be my desire to inform future practice for teachers in middle school language arts classes. Maxwell said that the qualitative approach "…emphasizes the perspective of teachers and the understanding of particular settings, as having far more potential for informing educational practitioners" (2005, p. 24).

Rationale

The need for a qualitative case study, such as the one proposed here, stems more from a lack of available data about actual classroom practices in writing instruction. The following studies indicate that literacy research fits well within the qualitative tradition, and case study methods can yield relevant data for classroom teachers as well as for

scholars in writing research. Purcell-Gates, Perry, and Briseno (2011) looked at literacy research and practices while using the context of literacy as a social act. Through the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS), Purcell-Gates et al. looked at preferred research methods of qualitative studies in the area of literacy by doing a cross-case analysis. CPLS found many research inquiries that used specifically designed case studies with related research questions, and all studies functioned within the framework that, "…literacy is always situated within social and cultural contexts…" (Purcell-Gates et al., 2011, p. 441). By creating a database of literacy practices and responses to cultural influences, Purcell-Gates et al. established a resource of catalogued qualitative data in anticipation of further case study research in this area. This proposed case study, I believe, is the type of research being sought when examining literacy in schools within social and cultural parameters.

Burton (2010) examined literature that was written previously about research in the area of *writing across the curriculum* and discovered effective work as well as gaps in the field. First, Burton looked to exemplary models and found Thaiss and Zawacki's work, *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Researchers looked at how writing across disciplines was perceived by instructors and students, and Burton declared this study to be an excellent model for qualitative researchers. Another source provided by Burton was Beaufort and Soliday's case study analysis on understanding genre in the content class, and the core question for these researchers was to examine how teachers were or were not teaching genre writing. Burton (2010) also reviewed Gilles's study in 2001 that focused on specific use of

writing to learn strategies in nursing students, and the primary method of data collection was the nursing students' journals.

Burton (2010) concluded that *writing across the curriculum* "rhetoric of experience" was often told through personal narratives (p. 590). As researchers struggled to find ways for *writing across the curriculum* to continue as a worthy endeavor for scholarship, collaboration among scholars as well as publishing studies in scholarly literature were viewed as the best plan for continuing the research tradition for writing in content areas (Burton, 2010). Dressman, McCarthey, and Prior (2009) noted that selection of case study as a research design matched a researcher's purpose to follow one student's "literate practices" through school, community, and outside interests as this graduate student attributed her journey to *writing-to-learn* strategies from high school. Burton also reviewed the dialogue of gaps in the literature, and researchers were encouraged to examine English as a second language (ESL) students to determine ways to attend to the conventions of the new language without abandoning the old culture. Finally, Lacina and Block (2012) examined how middle school writing instruction was viewed throughout the United States by large, urban districts but specifically noted that they did not look at single classrooms to gain understanding of how writing is actually being taught (p. 10).

These studies exemplify the potential and the problems of qualitative research in the areas of writing instruction and the use of writing as a teaching and learning tool. For this proposed research study, I attempted to draw from the past foci of qualitative research on writing instruction, the use of writing as an instructional aide, and the lack of attention in the research to teaching writing to students whose first language is not

English. This study proposes to address the lack of single classroom studies in writing instruction as well as the need for writing research with ESL students. The following research questions, therefore, emerged from my review of the literature on writing as well as on qualitative research endeavors in this area.

Research Questions

Question 1: How are writing instruction strategies being implemented for high and low performing students in two middle school language arts classes, and how are writing instruction strategies implemented for students whose first language is not English?

Question 2: What are these two teachers' beliefs about the effectiveness of *writing to learn* strategies in each of these language arts classes?

Question 3: What do the work samples of middle school students reveal about student writing and possibly writing instruction strategies in these two language arts classes?

Methodology

-Setting and Participants

The participant population will be two writing teachers in 7th grade from one school system, and student work from each class will be identified after the study begins for use as work sample data. Maxwell (2005) discussed *purposeful selection* as a viable option for qualitative research. Maxwell explained that one goal that can be met through purposeful selection of participants is "…to establish particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals" (p. 90). The participants for this proposed study would be purposefully selected because of their particular level of students, one teaches high-achieving students and the other low-achieving students, as

well as for their professional reputations as being open to collegial discourse and continual professional learning. After meeting with the curriculum director for primary grades in this county, I narrowed my participant pool to two teachers who met the requirements of my design. I will assure that participation is voluntary by having teachers sign an Informed Consent stating that they understand the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants of this study will not be compensated, and deception will not be necessary for this proposed study.

The specific procedures for fieldwork and data collection are as follows: Data collection will involve interviews with each teacher concerning their writing instruction three times throughout the semester-long study, and the interviews would be based on Seidman's (2006) three interview series. Guiding interview questions will be established, and both participants will be asked the same questions. I will, however, use follow-up questions based on the direction of the interview, and I would expect that those questions would vary between participants. Each interview should be approximately one hour in length, and the interviews will be audiotaped for transcription purposes. Each teacher-participant will also be observed once each week during the semester while they are engaged in writing instruction. The lessons to be observed will be the choice of each individual participant and will vary in length somewhere between 50-75 minutes, but observations will be set for the same time each week. I plan to work with the teacher-participants so that the observations coincide with specific writing instruction based on the teachers' curriculum plan each week. Every effort will be made to observe similar lessons in both classes each week. I will utilize the same observation guide that was used during each pilot observation. Based on Patton's (2002) fieldwork continuum, I will be a

participant observer who is more of an *onlooker observer* in this study with more of an *etic*, or *outsider*, perspective because I will not be actively engaged in the teaching process with these students (p. 277). As a *solo researcher* on Patton's continuum, I will conduct more of a *long-term* study lasting three to four months, and I will fully disclose my role to those being observed (p. 277). Finally, the focus of my observations will be narrowed to the *single topic* of writing instruction but will move along the emergent continuum as themes are discovered.

The participants will not be identified by name, but the employer of each of the two teachers will be aware of their participation in the study. Teachers will be cautioned that they do not have to provide any information about their teaching practices or training/background that they would not want their employer to know. Detailed wording of confidentiality through the Informed Consent Forms will be used. Any risks for participants in this study would be minimal because participation is voluntary and answers to any uncomfortable questions can be withheld. Both teachers will be made aware that their employer may read the study, and the employer will be aware of which teachers are the participants. The benefits for the two teacher-participants in this study would be minimal. The research study will focus on writing instruction, and the teachers will have the opportunity to reflect on their own practices through the formal interviews and informal debriefing, which may serve as a benefit for the participants similar to a professional development experience. The teachers will be participating in research that aims to supplement the current pedagogical debate surrounding writing instruction in secondary schools.

-Data Collection

For this study, data collection would occur through interviews with teachers, observations of writing instruction, document data in the form of student work samples, and a researcher journal, including memos by the researcher. Seidman (2006) discussed the three interview series as being appropriate for qualitative studies where the researcher plans to spend a significant amount of time with the participants. The three interview series was designed to look first at the participant's experience and background to gain context for how the participant arrived in the current situation (Seidman, 2006). The second interview, according to Seidman, should focus on the details of the participant's involvement in the current topic of study, and the third interview consists of asking the participants to reflect on the experience of the study related to the two previous interviews. Seidman explained that through the reflection process, participants are "making meaning" as the center objective (p. 19). Seidman recommended that each interview should last approximately 60 minutes, and the three interviews should be spaced at least a week a part from one another. He noted, however, minor deviation was allowed as long as the general structure of each interview is kept intact. For this study, the two teacher participants will be interviewed approximately every four weeks, and Seidman's three-interview structure will be the model for each interview.

Observation, according to Patton (2002), requires preparation of the researcher in order to produce accurate descriptions of the physical setting along with the purpose and impacts of the observed activity (p. 262). Fieldwork in the form of observation has multiple strengths, which include capturing experiences as they occur, observing the phenomenon that might normally escape attention, understanding the context of a situation, and learning about what many might not care to disclose in an interview

(Patton, 2002). Patton explained that limitations to observation data included but were not limited to the fact that observations can only record surface or observable behavior or environment along with researcher interpretation, which may be clouded with subjectivity. Peshkin (1991) explained that acknowledging and owning one's subjectivities were critical steps in managing the personal bias that enters into data gathering and analysis. Debriefing with the participants can alleviate some of this concern, which will be discussed in greater length along with other safeguards as related to validity of the proposed study. Observations for this study should occur once each week for the projected 10 weeks of the project, and each observation should be approximately 50 minutes in length. Patton explained that observation length "…depends on the purpose of the study and the questions being asked," and this particular study will focus on the ongoing instructional writing practices of these two classroom teachers throughout an entire semester (p. 275). Maxwell (2005) also addressed the need for data collection methods to address the research questions, and he even suggested a *pretest* of the methods to ensure that they will provide the data required (p. 93). Based on the data collected during the pilot study, I do believe that observations will provide appropriate data. I will request that each teacher communicate to me through notes or emails any relevant information that occurs in my absence. I will also be available to debrief with the teachers following each observation and will record any information from those conversations in my researcher journal.

Documents in the form of student writing samples will be obtained at the beginning of the fall semester and at the end of the fall semester. Work samples from students who emerge as interesting from a writing standpoint, on either end of the

academic spectrum (Coker & Lewis, 2006), will be solicited as document data. It is the hope of this research and researcher that these papers in the form of essays, narratives, letters, and other projects will provide a "behind-the-scenes" view of the writing instruction in each language arts classroom (Patton, 2002, p. 307).

I will protect the identity of the individuals by being the sole data collector, and I will use pseudonyms when writing about the participants in the dissertation. All data will be collected, managed, stored, and accessed by one researcher, and storage will be on the researcher's private computer that is password-protected. I will remove identifiable information from any documents collected. The researcher journal will be an ongoing record of my insights along the way. The most important component of all data will be the idea that each piece of information adds diversity, complexity, and wholeness to the research study (Patton, p. 307).

-Data Analysis

My data analysis will consist of coding interview and observational data according to procedures described by scholars in the qualitative data analysis field. Miles and Huberman (1994) provided a guide for *students and other novice researchers* that will serve as guidance for my endeavors (p. 14). At the start of data analysis, I will engage in both *first level coding* by summarizing portions of data, and then I will categorize or group the data based on themes, which is referred to as *pattern coding* (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Because the process of transcribing and coding can be overwhelming to the researcher, Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended that researchers participate in *memoing* as a way to record interesting, confusing, or enlightening moments. Maxwell (2005) also advocated writing memos to *facilitate*

analytical thinking about the data, which will assist with coding of data as well. According to Ravitch and Riggan (2012), research memos assist the researcher in focusing on important or *strategic moments*, and this process adds depth to data analysis (p. 154).

Data analysis, according to Creswell (2009), requires an ongoing and reflexive process of questioning, recording, organizing, describing, and coding. Qualitative researchers initiated the process by understanding general themes from each interview, observation, or document by reviewing the data in search of categories (Creswell, p. 186). Once the overall sense of the study is clear to the researcher, the process requires further "coding" or categorizing with descriptive words for topics, and these topics might surface from related literature, emerging and unanticipated data, and the "unusual" status of certain data (Creswell, p. 186-187). Patton (2002) explained that qualitative data analysis carries the monumental challenge of organizing and "…making sense of massive amounts of data" (p. 432). Because each qualitative study is different from any other, Patton reminds the researcher that the approach for analysis would vary as well. For a case study, however, Patton suggested categorizing and coding data into any of three categories: people, critical incidents, and various settings (p. 439). If the individuals who are being studied were the focus of the research, then the "primary unit of analysis" would be the people (p. 439). This would be appropriate for the current proposed study. Patton also explained that case study research often requires "cross-case" analysis and "individual case" analysis (p. 440). By grouping answers from several participants, for example, who were asked the same interview questions, the researcher would be doing a cross-case analysis, and an individual case analysis might also be completed within the

same study by focusing on a single participant, event, or setting (Patton, p. 440). It is critical note here the distinction made by Maxwell (2005) between *organizational* and *substantive* or *theoretical* categories (p. 98). In this proposed study, I plan to categorize my data organizationally, at first, and then into substantive and theoretical groups as themes emerge.

Another crucial element of qualitative research data analysis is generating *thick, rick description*, and this allows the reader to become involved with the setting and participants in ways that quantitative research might not (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The caution, however, is to distinguish between descriptions and interpretations (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Maxwell (2005) explained that the two are linked because interpretation requires *inference* from descriptions (p. 94). Interpretation occurs, according to Creswell (2009), as the final stage of data analysis after the data are described, coded, and presented. The interpretation of data attempts to discover what lessons are learned from the study, and Creswell explained that the technique of questioning can allow qualitative studies to look for future measures of change (p. 189-190).

-Threats to Data Quality

Internal validity, according to Merriam (2002), attempts to find out "how congruent are one's findings with reality" (p. 25). Creswell (2009) explained that qualitative research does not utilize the concepts of *validity* and *generalizability* in the same ways that quantitative research does. Creswell, therefore, advocated that qualitative validity refers to the researcher looking for "accuracy of the findings," while qualitative reliability shows a consistency of research approach when compared with other studies

(p. 190). Maxwell (2005) noted *bias* and *reactivity* as two threats to validity of a study. *Bias* as described by Maxwell was the subjectivity with which a researcher approached the data collection and analysis based on the preconceived ideas about what the data should reflect. *Reactivity* in qualitative studies dealt with understanding and using the influence of the researcher on the study rather than attempting to "eliminate" it (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109). Peshkin (2001) offered that the researcher should use alternative lenses, which would encourage other perceptions to enter into the discussion in an attempt to manage researcher bias (p. 242).

In reflecting on my proposed study, I want to address the ways that I will attempt to ensure valid conclusions. With this in mind, I will focus on two main components of my proposed research design to deal with threats to validity, which are "intensive, long-term involvement" and "rich" data (Maxwell, 2005, p. 110). By engaging in weekly observations and intensive interviews throughout a three to four month period, I hope to reduce the threat of being dependent on my own inferences by being able to have more and varied data. According to Maxwell (2005), this length of involvement along with three interviews of each participant should also allow the data collected to be "rich" in order to give the reader a fairly accurate picture of the two classroom teachers and their instructional practices being studied. Miles and Huberman (1994) also discussed length of time in the research environment and how this begins to eliminate bias that occurs based on the researcher's presence in the environment.

I will also focus on triangulation through multiple sources of data as one strategy to address data quality (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Merriam (2002) discussed *member checks* as an important strategy to demonstrate

qualitative validity of a study, and even though the exact language may be different, the participants should be able to "recognize" the information from the original encounter (p. 26). *Member checks* will be particularly important when interviewing teachers to be certain that the participants accept the accuracy of the meaning from the interviews. Maxwell (2005) referred to member checks as *respondent validation*, which offers validity in the accuracy of the researcher's account of what was said or done (p. 111). Researcher memos offer opportunity for self-reflection and critique of self, and Merriam explained that this process, termed *reflexivity*, offers the reader some insight into the researchers motives and thought processes. Reflexivity through researcher memos will be an integral part of this process along with the length of the data collection period. In this case study, I plan to be engaged in data collection for most of the fall semester.

Finally, *thick, rich descriptions*, as discussed previously, will be employed to create a more realistic picture of the study for the reader (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). To create such description requires being in the setting for an extended period of time, which helps address the issue of external validity. The more "prolonged" an interval of data collection, the deeper the researcher becomes in understanding of the setting, participants, and "phenomenon" being studied (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). Maxwell (2005) reiterated the need for *verbatim* interview transcripts and *detailed, descriptive note taking* (p. 110). In this proposed study, these strategies will be used as well as debriefing with the teachers after observations, which will provide yet another perspective for richness of data.

Ethical Issues

Merriam (2002) stated that "examining the assumptions one carries into the research process – assumptions about the context, participants, data, and the dissemination of knowledge gained through the study – is at least a starting point for conducting an ethical study" (p. 30). By following the Institutional Review Board procedures for Informed Consent, participants will be fully aware of the nature of the study as well as any potential harm (Merriam, p. 29). For this proposed research, I will utilize the researcher journal as way of clarifying the *bias* that I bring to the study through self-reflection (Creswell, 2009). As Peshkin (1991) explained, learning to "manage" one's subjectivity is critical for researchers, and I will attempt to recognize my own subjectivities through my researcher journal (p. 294). Peshkin continued to emphasize the importance of researcher subjectivities, and he insisted that recognizing potential bias was not sufficient in attempting to safeguard against influencing the outcomes of research (p. 285). He explained, therefore, that researchers must be deliberate in seeking out subjectivities. Peshkin (2001) also encouraged researchers to perceive experiences and data through alternate lenses in an attempt to stimulate the senses in ways that were not typical for the researcher (p. 251). The areas of bias that I will explore include but are not limited to my own gender, race, culture, socioeconomic status, as well as the reasons behind the site and participant selection for this study (Creswell, 2002).

Summary

The proposed qualitative case study will use data from interviews, observations, student work samples, and the researcher's journal in its exploration of two language arts classes and the writing instruction occurring in the 7th grade in one middle school in rural, south Georgia. The literature in writing instruction supports further research in the

qualitative tradition that focuses on actual practices in secondary classrooms, and the proposed research questions would be best served through the case study methodology. As a novice researcher, I will rely heavily on the expertise of my dissertation committee as well as scholars in the field to ensure that the subjectivities and biases brought to the process will be recognized, acknowledged, and incorporated into any analysis of and conclusions drawn from the study. It is my true intent that this process will be meaningful to the two teacher-participants, myself as the researcher, the stakeholders of this school system, and to the broader field of writing instruction research and literature. As I proceed with this research endeavor, I plan to follow Wolcott's (2009) advice when he reminded researchers, "do not rule out any approach that helps you tell the story you have to tell and to maintain your focus as the account becomes more complex" (p. 88).

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Appendix B

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Based on Seidman's (2006) Three Interview Series

Interview 1: *Focused Life History*

Please tell me about your earliest memory or experience with writing.

Can you talk about you as a writer in your formative years – pre-school/elementary/middle school?

Did you enjoy writing when you were growing up?

What was college writing like for you?

In your teacher preparation program, what do you recall about writing or writing instruction?

What type of writing, if any, do you engage in now – as an adult and as a teacher?

Interview 2: *The Details of Experience*

What is your approach to teaching writing?

I want to focus on the details of your writing instruction. How do you develop writing tasks for your students?

What motivates your instructional decisions?

What are some favorite stories about teaching writing?

Interview 3: *Reflection on the Meaning*

Given the experiences that you have had with writing and with teaching writing, how do you reflect on those tasks? How would you describe the reasons that you are doing this job?

How well do you think that your instructional choices are working with these students? What do you believe works with high or low students and why? What doesn't work so well with high and low students and why?

What do you see as issues for these students in their future writing, whether in school, college, or the workplace?

Note:

Seidman suggested that each interview be 90 minutes in length. Every effort was made to adhere to this, but teachers' time schedules did not allow quite that length. The interviews were spaced approximately four weeks apart. These questions were representative of what I wanted to know, and each set of questions was in keeping with the theme for that particular interview. As in my pilot study, these questions served as a guide, and I asked follow up and probing questions depending on each interview.

Appendix C

Observation Guide

Observation Guide

Teacher's Name:

Grade:

School:

Class Meeting Time:

Lesson Overview:

Length of time spent on writing or writing activities (description of activity):

Role of teacher during class:

Role of students during class:

Student seating chart:

Room décor:

Observation notes: (Here I include specific information related to writing instruction as well as other information derived from interactions between students/ interactions between teacher and students/ classroom climate issues/ overall function and feel of the room and the group/)

Appendix D

Mrs. Abbott's Work Samples

504

[redacted]

3/6/13

1st

Student News Today

On CNN News today learn that Sinkholes any where to over 20ft wide and 60 or more feet deep and that it can be small on top but huge underneath. Dow Jones milestone has 30 major stocks and it's been a law for years and it's was the all time high yesterday.

And I learn that sharks can swim more than 15 mph and on the Florida coast they cought a great white shark and ran test to see if it was having babies and tagged it to warn beaches if a great white sharks is on shore.

[redacted] SPED

3/26/13
P-1

CNN NEWS Today
Dow Jones is 30 major stock been low for years. all time high Yesterday.

Sinkhole 20ft wide 50ft deep look like cave underground.

In the news today I learned that the Dow Jones is 30 major stocks. It has been low for years. Yesterday it hit its all time high. It bottomed out in 2009.

ESOL

Rdg

In CNN News Today there use to be a war between North Korea & South Korea. North Korea wants to punish South Korea. North Korea doesnt like South Korea & some other countries. North Korea is butting nuclear weapons. North Korea has a border between South Korea & North Korea. The United states has help South Korea in the war and China helped North Korea.

Dear Jennifer,

Do you know kids watch TV and they look up to the people on TV? Role models are people who others imitate, emulate or look up to for guidance. When kids think of role models, they think about celebrities, athletes, or teachers. Celebrities are bad role models because they use bad language and make bad choices.

First of all, some celebrities use bad language. Celebrities show this when They rap some rapper's show this like 2 Chain, Lil Wayne. If you listen to their music, And if kids hear this, they might repeat their songs and get in trouble for using bad language.

In addition, some celebrities show this when they do bad things. One specific celebrity who dose this is Chris brown and made Bad choices He was on channel ten news for hitting his girlfriend Rihanna. And he ran from the police. Chris brown is a terrible person for kids to look up to.

In conclusion, some celebrities are bad role models they make bad choices and They use bad language. So, Jennifer, you should not look up to them for role models.

Sincerely,

Argumentive # 5

Hey do you know the book called the giver? The book is about a boy named Jonas's, and he became the new receiver of memory, and he found out that release is a bad thing and that it means to be killed. When he found out this he found out that his dad lied to him about what release meant. So Jonas makes a great diction and decides to run away from the community. The community, has known love or compassion and because he has to go through all the bad good and ugly memories.

The first reason why Jonas left the community is because "he asked is mom and dad do you love me and they said they enjoy you" (Lowry, 2002, pg152) Instead of saying they love him, and I understand why Jonas would leave the community for that because I would want my parents to say that they love me instead of saying they enjoy me.

In addition, he left because he wanted the community to "receive all the memories that he has received" (Lowry, 2002, pg132) Jonas wanted the whole community to feel the pain, and love that he has been through so they will feel bad when they release another person or baby.

In conclusion, it is very clear ~~in my paper~~ that the choice that Jonas made to leave the community is a good idea. I would do the same thing if my parents said that they don't love me they just enjoy me, and if I had to hold all the memories in the world.

Feb 13, 2013
1st Period

Argumentative #1

Have you ever thought of choosing the right choice, but it felt like the wrong choice also? Jonas is one of the charcter in the book, The Giver. He made a choice to leave the community, but he felt that it was the wrong choice. Jonas is the receiver of the community. Jonas made the right choice in leaving the community. Some people may disagree and think that Jonas should have stayed, but Jonas didn't want the community to be miserable. The rules for the community were to brutal, and people had no freedom.

First, the main reason is the rules for the community were to brutal. The people in the community didn't know how pain, love, care, sadness or any other feelings. The only one who did was the receiver. On page 149-150 (Lowry) "His head fell to the side, his eyes half open. Then he was still." This shows that they didn't care about the baby. The person who killed the baby didn't cry.

The second reason he made the right choice is people had no freedom. The people could not choose their jobs, how many children they want, or what food they want to eat. On page 65 (Lowry) "Jonas",

She said, speaking not to him, but to the entire community of which he was a part, you will be trained to be our next Receive Of Memory." Jonas ~~couldn't~~ Couldnt choose what he wanted to be. He didnt want that. After Jonas done his trainning for a year, He thought that it was unfair.

In Conclusion, Jonas made the right chocie in leaving the community. In the community people had rules, but the rules were to strit, and the community had to live with rules and had no chocies. Jonas is the ~~receive~~ receiver of the community. Jonas has been receiving ~~memories~~ memories that have feelings, but he thought that it was unfair. Jonas had feelings but others didn't. Jonas knew if he had ran away that all the memories would go out to the community, and the community would have all the memories.

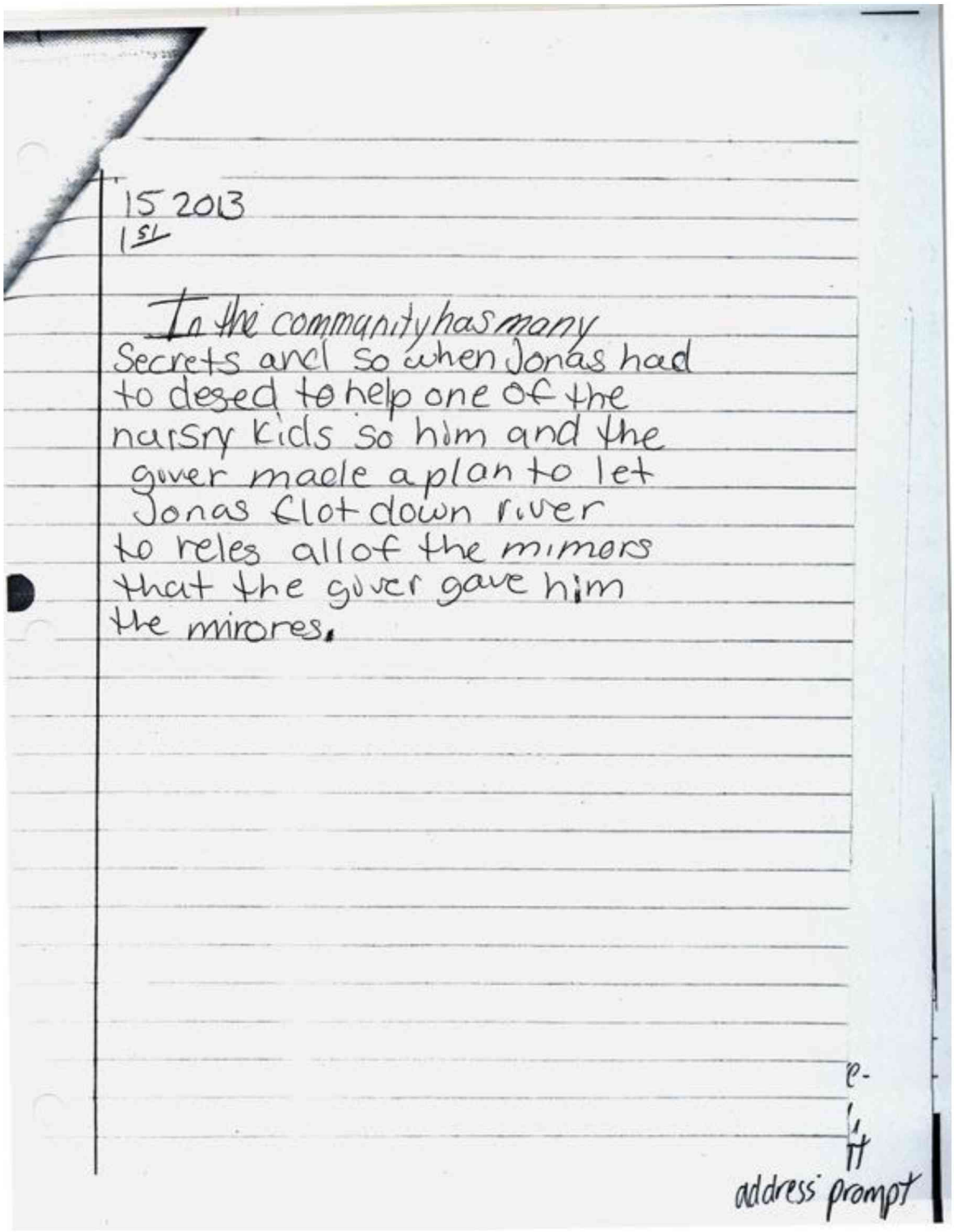
Too much rewind

15-2013

The book the giver theres a boy named Jonas is a boy that becomse the next recever. In ther community they only see and blacK and white. Also people in there community see only in that they felling and no pain. background

I think that they there commanty is a licke crazy mean ther are crazy beccause relice means death. Jonas hael witheness his father kill on of the naursy twins. So I think that Jonas had made a good choice to leave. ← Thesis

The book kinda manly talkes about ther community and that they have lots of rules and if your break the rules three times you are googin to be rele;
Also relese means means dethe.


15 2013
1st

In the community has many
Secrets and so when Jonas had
to desed to help one of the
naisry kids so him and the
giver maele a plan to let
Jonas flot down river
to reles all of the mimors
that the giver gave him
the mirores.

address prompt

Appendix E

Mrs. Banks' Work Samples

M
7.9

It was August, 1997, on a hot, musky day, and Hunter had his opening day for DYB recreation league game. Majority of his friends were mildly moody, although Hunter had a second reason. His mom, Amanda, had just gotten a boyfriend, Dale, who would soon be living with the Hunter and his mom. As far as they knew, Hunter was the thirteenth man on the Pirates, that is, until something totally wild occurred, and his life completely changed.

On opening day, Hunter's team, the Pirates, were going to play the Mariners, another team in this league. Hunter sat the bench for three straight innings, until Heath Jernigan, their right fielder felt queasy; he started to sneeze and his eyes- hot, dry, and itchy. Hunter was the apparent choice over Jeremy Dickens, who was also sitting on the bench. Hunter went in the bottom of the sixth, and he wanted to prove that he's a starter. With a runner on second base, two outs, and the Mariners best hitter up, Hunter was a little scared, but he was hoping for a noble chance such as this one. Tommy Bartt, a lefty, was up to bat. Tommy had an astounding average of .639 during the fall season before this spring.

male 9.4

It was spring, March, 1997, on a muggy, musky morning, and Hunter had opening day for D.Y.B. (Dixie Youth Baseball) recreation league game. Majority of his friends were mildly moody, although Hunter had another reason. His mom, Amanda, had just gotten a fresh boyfriend, Dale, who would soon be living with Hunter and his mom. As for as they knew, Hunter was nothing but an extra man on the Pirates, that is, until something totally wild happened to him, and it completely changed his life.

On opening day, Hunter's team, the Pirates, were going to play the Mariners, which are another team in the league. Hunter was glued to the bench for three straight innings, until Heath Jernigan, their right fielder, felt queasy; he started to sneeze and his eyes- scorched, droughty, and

itchy. Hunter happened to be the apparent choice compared to Jeremy Dickens, who was also warming the bench. Hunter finally entered the game in the bottom of the sixth inning, and he sure wanted to prove that he's a starter. With a runner on second base, two outs, and the Mariners best hitter up, Hunter was a little frightened, but he was hoping for a noble chance such as this one. Tommy Bartt, a towering lefty, walked with swagger into the batter's box, ready to bat, as if he knew he was going to end this in one hit. Tommy had an astounding average of .639 during the fall season before this spring, and everyone knew it.

Female, 7.8

This was the kind of place with character. Graffiti, cars, trash, and food trucks line and litter the community. A city staple was something quick and easy, which could usually be found as far as the eye could see, while the delicious and enticing aroma of cheesy deep dish pizza, sweet, creamy cheesecake, and flavorful Italian intertwine through the city. Honks from car horns, taxi drivers shrieking at other drivers to move out of the way, and noisy neighbors were not out of the ordinary. The blazing hot sun and blistering frosts danced around as the seasons changed. This was Chicago.

"What if they don't like me?" This was the ultimate query that was pestering Nicole Simpson before she questioned her mother, because she was a newbie in town. Nicole is just almost a regular girl. She's 16, being fairly elevated at 5'7", with long, luscious, straight dark brown hair around the small of her back. She has piercing, crisp emerald eyes that are vast and dazzling. Nicole is a little more extraordinary though, because she has OCD.

Female, 6.0

This was the kind of place with character. Graffiti, cars, trash, and food trucks line and litter the community. A city staple was something quick and easy, which could usually be found as far as the eye could see. The delicious and enticing aroma of cheesy deep dish pizza, sweet, creamy cheesecake, and flavorful Italian intertwine through the city. Honks from car horns, taxi drivers shrieking at other drivers to move out of the way, and noisy neighbors were not out of the ordinary. The blazing hot sun and blistering frosts danced around as the seasons changed. This was Chicago.

"What if they don't like me?" This was the ultimate question Nicole Simpson asked her mother; she was a newbie in town. Nicole is just almost a regular girl. She's, 16, being fairly tall at 5'7", with long, luscious, straight brown hair around the small of her back. She has piercing, crisp green eyes that are big and bright. Nicole is a little more special though, because she has OCD.

(4.7) M

The musty-dusty room was filled with the foul odor of a teenager. The room was completely filthy; dirty clothes piled the floor. It was a miracle the splintered rotten floorboard did not give in. The shelves dusty like were lined with all kinds of knick knacks and objects off all kinds. This room was a pile of horse du- actually horses wouldn't even want live here. The only cheerful thing was the miniscule children playing and laughing and toying and teasing outside in the town square.

"MIKKEL," cried the young adult's mother. "GET UP THE CHOOSING IS TODAY." The choosing how could I define that? Well it's basically the joining of men that have come out of adolescence. Anyways back to the tale. Mikkel was jumping about trying to put on his clothes, wash his face, and comb his all at the same time. When he was completely ready he entered the kitchen to the find his mom Sonya. This was not just any woman; she was resourceful, a thinker, a planner, and a looker as well. She had deep and luscious brown wavy hair. There was no question why she had so many suitors. "Before you go make sure to tend to the plants."

7.0 (Male)

The musty-dusty room was filled with the foul odor of a teenager. The room was completely filthy; dirty clothes piled the floor. It was a miracle the splintered putrid floorboard did not give in. Although the shelves dusty like were lined with all kinds of knick knacks and objects off all kinds, this was cozy- and that meant home. This room did not have fresh linens every morning, or a huge mirror, but it was his and that's how he likes it. Although it was just turning to blooming spring his room was an engulfed incinerator. The only cheerful thing was the petite miniscule children playing and laughing and toying and teasing outside in the town square and domesticated animals playing around the very serene and calming fountain of the mountains. The mountains, as it is referred to, are steep rocky life-threatening mountains.

"MIKKEL," cried the young adult's mother. "GET UP THE CHOOSING IS TODAY." The choosing how could I define that in a way that could be understood? Well it's basically the joining of men that have come out of adolescence into the military. It was a great honor to be accepted into the Markarth military, yet many of the soldiers died in war. The men of Markarth naturally had deep soil looking hair with aquatic blue eyes. Anyways back to the tale. Mikkel was jumping about, so very sleepily to and fro trying to put on his clothes, wash his face, and comb his all at the same time. When he was completely ready he entered the kitchen to the find his lovely mom Sonya. This was not just any woman; she was resourceful, a thinker, a planner, and a looker as well. She had deep and luscious brown wavy hair with metallic silvery eye that made them look like they were reflected off the moon. There was no question why she had so many suitors. "Before you go make sure to tend to the plants,"

F
6.5

Welcome to Texas. This little patch of heaven is home to many- the free, the brave, the old, the, young, the southerners- all intensely important people in Texas. While riding through town, you call people by name. Respect is always given to anyone and everyone. Freshly tilled land, accompanied by sweet Magnolias, send fresh scents straight up your nostrils. To hear mules braying and horses neighing is not an embarrassment. You are always welcomed with open arms and gracious hearts. A home cooked meal is not far behind- grits, cornbread, beacon, corn, pork slabs. Pats on the back send kids bragging on their job well done. The heat can about kill you. It's always a good idea to have a hat or a bonnet, for the ladies, on while doing all your outside yard work. Texas was the "wanted" state in 1910.

The late evening pickers spent the last drops of sun finishing their rows. The grand sycamore trees, recognizing what time of year it finally was, began dropping their many leaves- yellow, red, and orange- onto the ground. Dew was starting to collect upon the tender blades of grass. Although the evening sun gave a calming, tranquil look to the farm, this particular family was in mourning. Savage Sam, son of the wonderful lab Old Yeller, had just passed away, and Travis, owner of the farm, was to bury him.

Female
7.7

Welcome to Texas. This little patch of heaven is the residence of multiple people- the free, the peaceful, the brave, the powerful, the old, the young, the southerners, the rule followers, even the juvenile- all intensely important people to the Texan lifestyle. While riding through town, you call people by name. Respect is always given to anyone and everyone. Although freshly tilled land, accompanied by sweet Magnolias is a faint smell, it still sends fresh scents straight into your nostrils. To listen and hear mules braying and jarring and to hear the horses neighing and whinnying is not an embarrassment. You are always welcomed with open arms and gracious hearts. A home cooked meal is not far behind- grits, cornbread, beacon, corn, and pork slabs- with the exception of dessert- biscuits and honey, pound cake. Even though pats on the back send kids bragging on their job well done, it does not make them big headed. The heat can about exterminate any chances you have about breathing, but it's a great state. It's always a good idea to have a hat or a bonnet, for the ladies, on while doing all your outside yard work. Texas was the "wanted" state in 1910.

The late evening pickers spent the last drops of sun finishing their rows. The grand sycamore tree, recognizing what time of year it finally was, began dropping its countless amount leaves- yellow, red, and orange- onto the dense ground. Dew was already starting to collect upon the tender blades of grass. Although the evening sun gave a consoling, tranquil look to the farm, this particular family was in mourning. Savage Sam, son of the wonderful lab Old Yeller, had just passed away, and Travis, landlord of this particular farm, was to bury him on this evening of grieving. The two brothers, Travis and Arliss, lived in an old, run down shack in the middle of an extremely large land plot, full of

rolling hills and budding cotton. They cared for and about Sam for five years, from being a puppy until his adulthood. Soon after Sam's passing, Travis got word that there were six pups found in an abandoned badger hole, and they might belong to Savage Sam. Of course Travis and Arliss gained ownership over one of the young pups, and honored him with the name Big Buck. Even though just a pup, he was not going to be an ordinary one. He was a monster. When the boys got him at two weeks of age, he most likely wouldn't fit into a five gallon bucket. His paws were vast- chunky, extensive, broad, encompassing. He weighed just as much as a little, youthful colt. Other than his abnormal size, he was abnormally beautiful- stunning, striking, good looking. Golden waves rolled throughout his body as he ran. Although his ears were soft to the touch, they were incredibly miniature. Big Buck was beautiful, gorgeous, and wonderful.

F
8.4

Ah, rain. It's quite a beautiful thing. Especially when its magnificent nature appears as it lands on my windshield, running off of it like a river in a steady stream refusing to stop. I can almost feel the freezing, odorous, water-filled rain hit my body in a harmony so soft that I feel a simple rush of goose bumps spread throughout me. I come back to reality with the warmness concealed in my purple Jimmy, along with the chocolate cappuccino I purchased from the campus mess hall. At night, the college campus of UGA seems as brilliant as in the day. I've only been here of 30 days-I'm on my 30th night-, but it feels like years. Oh well, I better head to my apartment before the rain gets too terrible.

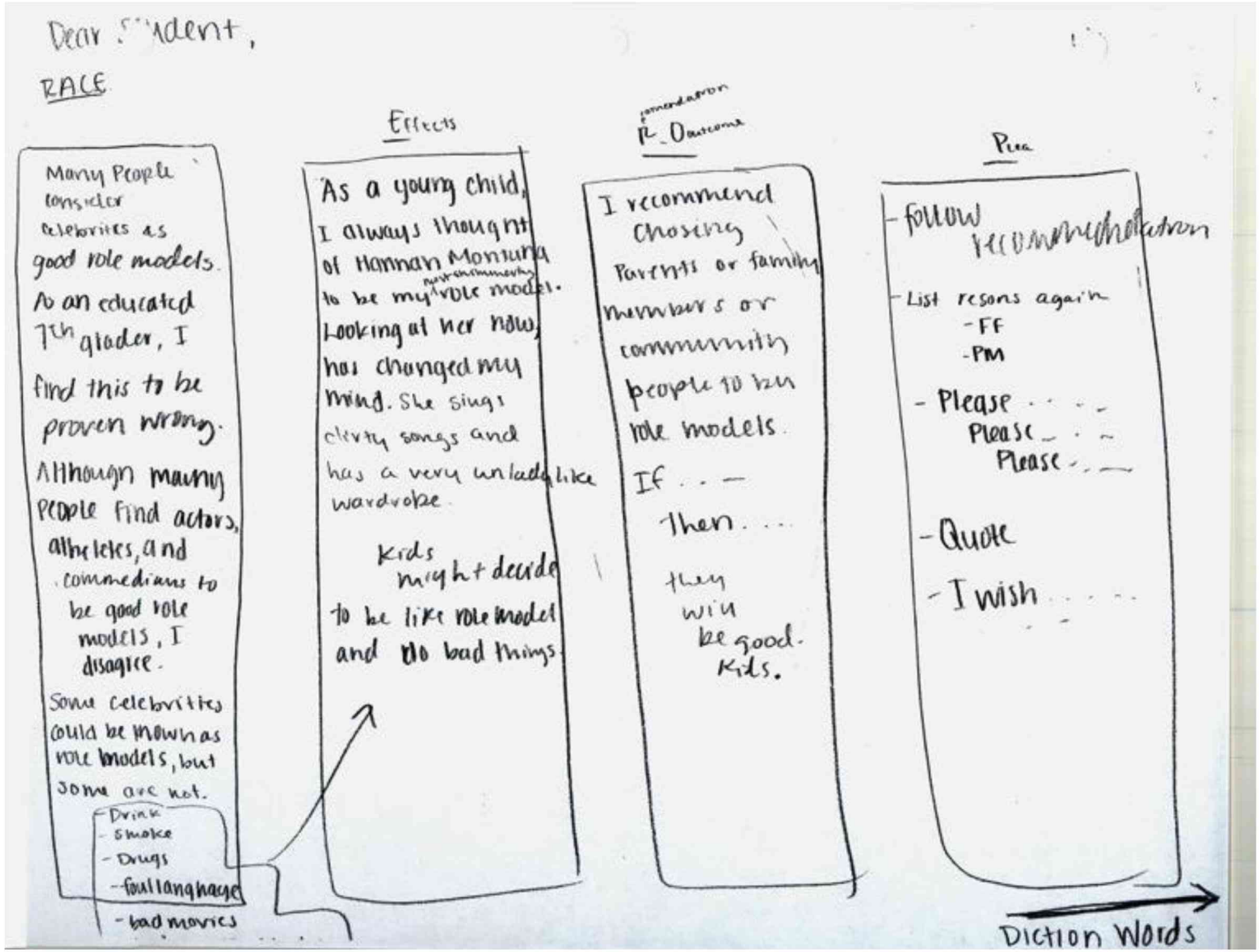
I pull out my key ring, which holds the key with "Janey Mae Davis" engraved in the room key, and start my engine. Calissa, my beloved friend and roommate, is probably waiting on me before she locks up the apartment that we share. As I'm passing over the speed bump that separates me from my 10 minute journey home, some pictures fall out of my wallet and onto the floor. I pick of variations of Jane and me, my twin, Marcus, my ten year old brother, April and June, my adopted sisters who are four, and my parents, who just retired last year.

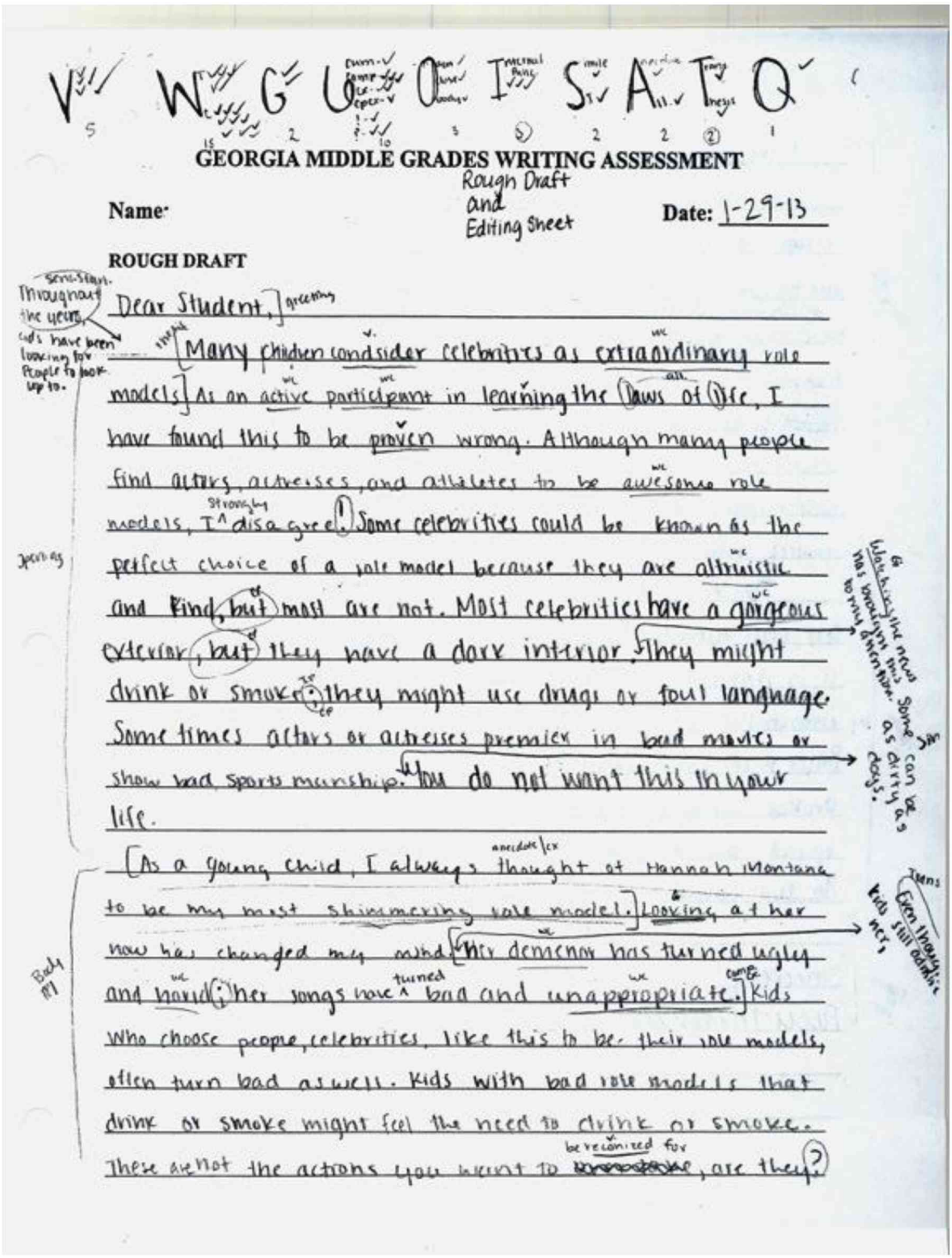
Female, 11.8

Ah, sweet, useful, refreshing rain. It's quite a beautiful thing, and not just a beautiful thing, but the best type of nature occurrence I can think of. Especially when it's magnificent nature appears as it lands on my crystal clear windshield, running off of it like a fast paced river in a steady stream refusing to stop under all circumstances. I can almost feel the freezing, odorous, water occupied rain hit my body in a physical harmony so gentle and soft that I feel a simple rush of goose bumps, partnered by chills, spread throughout me. I come back to reality with the warmness concealed in my purple Jimmy I got last year, along with the chocolaty, whip creamy cappuccino I purchased from the campus mess hall. At night, the college campus of UGA seems as brilliant as in the day with the help of beautiful architecture arranged all over it. I've only been here of 30 days, to which I'm on my 30th night, but it feels like years. Oh well, I better head to my apartment before the rain gets too terrible and begins to blur my vision and robs me of the gift of sight.

I pull out my key ring, which holds the key with "Janey Mae Davis" engraved in the room key, and start my engine. Calissa, my beloved friend and roommate, is probably waiting on me before she locks up the apartment that we share. As I'm passing over the caution yellow speed bump that separates me from my 10 minute journey home, some pictures fall out of my wallet and onto the floor. I pick of variations of Jane and me, my twin who looks so much like me it's hard to tell the difference, Marcus, my ten year old

brother who is also the best soccer player I know in the whole region, April and June, my adopted sisters who turned four last month the day before I left for college, and my parents, who just retired last year at the same age of 49.


Dear Student,
RACE
Many People consider celebrities as good role models. As an educated 7th grader, I find this to be proven wrong. Although many people find actors, athletes, and commedians to be good role models, I disagree.
Some celebrities could be known as role models, but some are not.
- Drink
- Smoke
- Drugs
- foul language
- bad movies
Effects
As a young child, I always thought of Hannah Montana to be my role models. Looking at her now, has changed my mind. She sings dirty songs and has a very unladylike wardrobe.
Kids might decide to be like role model and do bad things
R_Omendation Outcome
I recommend Chosing Parents or family members or community people to be role models.
If . . .
Then . . .
they will be good. Kids.
Plea
- follow recommendation
- List resons again
-FF
-PM
- Please . . .
Please . . .
Please . . .
- Quote
- I wish . . .
Diction Words



GEORGIA MIDDLE GRADES WRITING ASSESSMENT

Rough Draft and Editing Sheet

Name:

Date: 1-29-13

ROUGH DRAFT

Dear Student,

Many children consider celebrities as extraordinary role models. As an active participant in learning the laws of life, I have found this to be proven wrong. Although many people find actors, actresses, and athletes to be awesome role models, I strongly disagree! Some celebrities could be known as the perfect choice of a role model because they are altruistic and kind, but most are not. Most celebrities have a gorgeous exterior, but they have a dark interior. They might drink or smoke, they might use drugs or foul language. Some times actors or actresses premier in bad movies or show bad sportsmanship. You do not want this in your life.

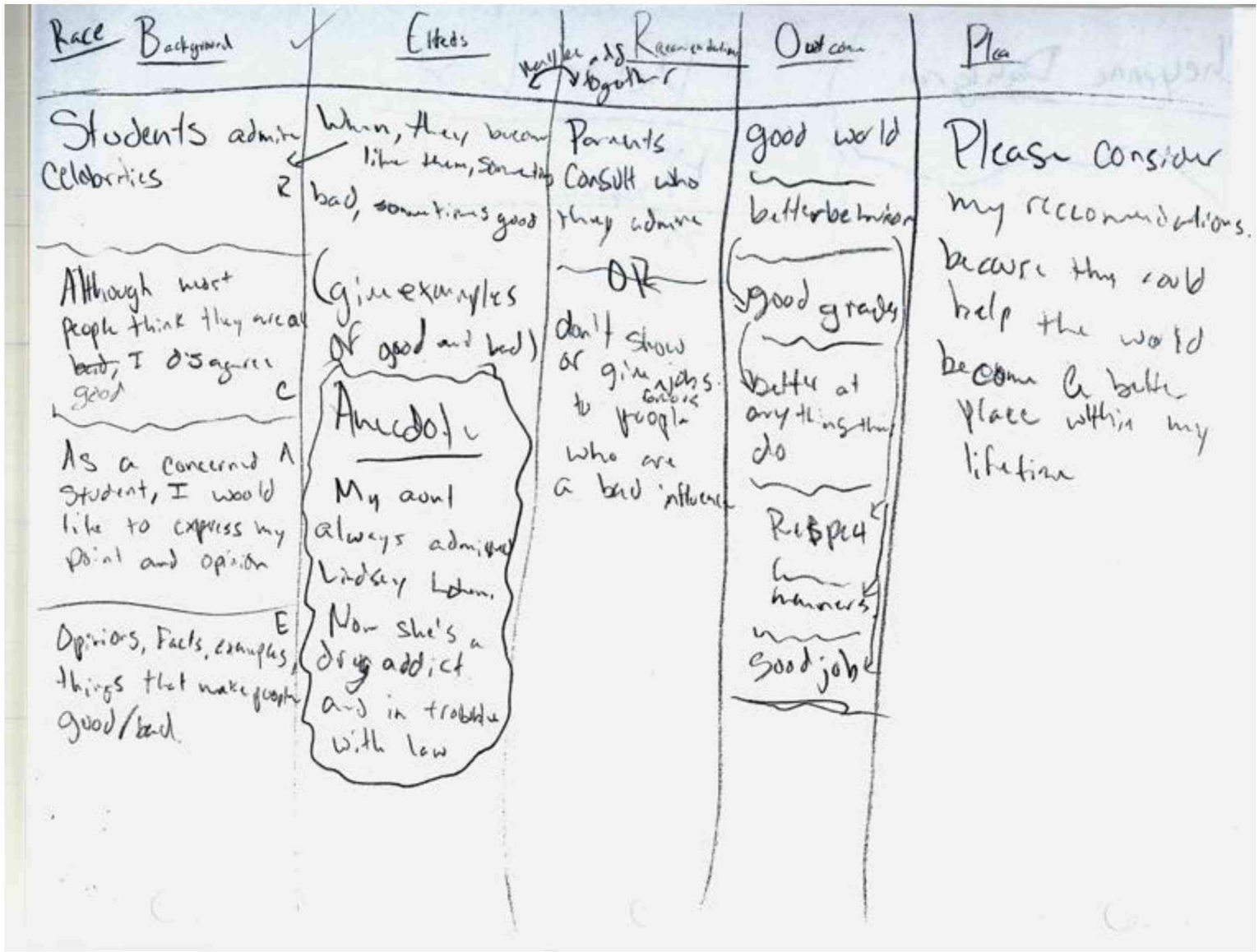
As a young child, I always thought of Hannah Montana to be my most shiny role model. Looking at her now has changed my mind. Her demenor has turned ugley and horrid. Her songs have turned bad and unappropriate. Kids who choose people, celebrities, like this to be their role models, often turn bad as well. Kids with bad role models that drink or smoke might feel the need to drink or smoke. These are not the actions you want to be recognized for, are they?

PAGE 1 **FINAL DRAFT**

Dear Student,

Throughout the years, Kids have been looking for people to look up to. As an active participant in learning the laws of life, I have found this to be a bad choice made by the children. Although many people find actors, actresses, and athletes to be awesome role models, I strongly disagree. Some celebrities could be known as the perfect choice of a role model because they are altruistic and kind, but most are not. Most celebrities have a gorgeous exterior, but they might have a dark interior. Watching the news has brought this to my attention. They might drink or smoke; they might use drugs or foul language. Sometimes actors or actresses premier in bad movies or show bad sportsmanship. Some can be as dirty as dogs. You do not want this in your life.

As a young child, I always thought of Hannah Montana to be my most shimmering role model. Looking at her now has changed my mind. Even though kids still admire her, her demenor has turned ugly and horid; her songs have turned bad and unappropriate. Kids who choose people, celebrities, like this to be their role models, often turn bad also. ~~well~~ Kids with bad role models that drink or smoke might feel the need to drink or smoke to be like their role model. These are not the actions you want to be recognized for, are they? I recommend chosing people more prepared for the job of being a role model for ~~young~~ younger generations like you. I believe that you should choose a


Race
Background
Effects
Recommendation
Outcome
Plea
Students admire Celebrities
When, they become like them, Sometimes bad, sometimes good
Parents Consult who they admire
OR
don't show or give rights to people who are a bad influence
good world
better behavior
good grades
better at anything they do
Respect
manners
Good job
Please consider my recommendations because they could help the world become a better place within my lifetime
Although most people think they are bad, I disagree
good
C
As a concerned A student, I would like to express my point and opinion
E
Opinions, Facts, examples, things that make people good/bad
(give examples of good and bad)
Anecdotal
My aunt always admired Lindsay Lohan. Now she's a drug addict and in trouble with law

GEORGIA MIDDLE GRADES WRITING ASSESSMENT

Name. ____________ **Date:** 1/29/13

ROUGH DRAFT

Dear young student/,

I am here to tell you about the [illegible] influence. Most students in this country admire Someone such as a celebrity, athletes, etc. As a concerned student as yourself, I would like to express my point and opinion to you. Although most adults and parents think they are all good, I strongly disagree. On a [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

When the students admire Celebrities, their [illegible] [illegible] with their life [illegible] occasions. When students admire young, [illegible] celebrities, they, most of the time, make good decisions themselves. My aunt, Sheree, always admired Lindsay Lohan. Now, Lohan is into trouble with the law and hooked on drugs, and now aunt is as well. My recommendations to this shameful thing is the adults or guardians around this child should consult them about their choice. Another suggestion is for casting agencies to [illegible] and not give famous jobs to people who are a bad influence on a young. My reccomendations are [illegible]

If my recomendations are followed, many great things will [illegible] better behavior, good grades, respect, manners, good job, and good college. [illegible]

PAGE 1 **FINAL DRAFT**

940 4th St. SW
Wartburg, GA. 37708
January 31, 2013

Dear young student,

Celebrity influence is common with both adults and children. Some people should ask themselves, "Are my choices good for my life?" Most students and children in this country admire someone such as a celebrity, athlete, etc. As a concerned student as yourself, I would like to express my point and opinion to you. Although most adults and parents think they are all good, I strongly disagree. On an opposing point- some are good, and some are bad.

To Admiring ~~people~~ can have many different views. When the students admire bad, foolish celebrities, their admiration leads them to be wrongful with their life on occasions. When students admire good, non-harmful celebrities, they make great decisions with their own lives. My aunt, Sheree, always admired Lindsay Lohan. Now, Lohan is into trouble with the law and "hooked" on drugs like fish to bait, and so is my aunt. My recommendations to this shameful thing is for the adult(s) or guardian(s) of this child should consult them about their choice. Another suggestion is for casting agencies to fire, or for them not to give jobs who are a bad influence on anyone. My recommendations are cheetahs- fast moving, growing, and can't be touched.

If my recommendations are followed, many great things will happen; better behavior, good grades, respect, manners, good jobs, and good colleges. Better behavior leads to good grades, and good grades lead to the child being better at anything. Behaving well also leads to a

Voice / [illegible] / 6 / [illegible] Sentences / T / Q

GEORGIA MIDDLE GRADES WRITING ASSESSMENT

Name: ______ **Date:** 1-29-13

ROUGH DRAFT

Dear Princess banana-hammock,

Celebrites are role models to mostly everyone. E-
ven some people want to be like that person. It just depen-
ds on which celebrity you pick, because some famous
people could be the world's most kind-hearted pop-star
living, but in the inside they could be a psychopathic,
serial killer/terrorist/spy which is why I am here to help
you pick.

Being a tween, (twelve year old plus teen) I have plenty
role models myself, but I choose mine more wisely. I
stay updated on almost everything they do and make sure that
they do nothing bad. I'm recommending to not be a stalker
or anything, just know your facts. I am sure that
you are into princess peach, because you're a princess
and all that. cut out sentence?

Although, maybe it is best to not choose
a celebrity as a role model. You could pick your mom
or dad, your friend or teacher, even your mimmm! Cele-
brities could mold you into a big selfish? jerk. With all the
cash, chaching that is going to their head and driving

PAGE 1 **FINAL DRAFT** 1/31/13

~~Dear Princess banana-nammach~~

~~Celebrities are role models to nearly everyone. Even some people want to be like that person. It just depends on~~

Willie J Williams middle school Moultrie, GA 31768

January 31, 2013

Dear Princess banana-nammach

Celebrites are role models to nearly everyone. Some people even want to be like that person. It just depends on which celebrity you pick, because some famous people could be the world's most kind-hearted pop-star living, but inside, they could be a psycho-pathic serial killer! Which is why I am here to help you.

Being a tween (twelve year-old almost teen) I have plenty role models myself, but I choose mine more wisely. I stay up dated on almost everything ~~I~~ they do, just incase they do something bad. Don-ot be a stalker or anything, just know your facts. I am sure though that you love princesses and queens on cartoons, since you are a six year-old.

Although, maybe it is best to not choose a celebrity as a role model. You could pick your mom or dad, your friend or teacher even y-our mailman! Celebrities could turn you into a ~~[illegible]~~ spoiled jerk. With all that cash going cha ching, right to their head, and driving them insane with greed. They are just bad examples.

To conclude this letter, I suggest you Do choose a celebrity, just choose the right kind. A athlete I could be on steroids, which would persuade you to take steroids and looks like a man. A singer could be lip-syncing, which can make you base your whole career on lip-syncing. Just remember, know your facts! Then you will have a sucessful future.

Sincerely

R restate the prompt - celebrations
A as a middle school tween...
C outer-argument
E Everything will be explained in paper

Background	Effect	Reason	Opinion	Idea for help
Good celebrations	of the problem	Better future	is Halloween?	
	consequences; money-making; rules		famous, happiness, rich	

1/31/13

Georgia Grade 8 Writing Assessment
2011 Writing Topics and Sample Papers

Expository Writing Topic 8204

Writing Situation
Celebrities are often considered role models simply because they are famous. Many younger students in your school admire entertainers and athletes. Think about the qualities you look for in a role model.

Directions for Writing
In a letter to a younger student, explain what makes a good role model. Include specific details that a younger student would understand.

Persuasive Writing Topic 8104

Writing Situation
Celebrities are often considered role models simply because they are famous. Many younger students in your school admire entertainers and athletes. Decide whether you think celebrities make good role models for students.

Directions for Writing
Write a letter to a younger student expressing your opinion about whether celebrities make good role models. Support your position with specific details and examples.

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

1/31/13

(BMS) Georgia Grade 8 Writing Assessment: Scoring Rubric

Student: _____ Date: _____ Persuasive/Expository

5- full command, **4**- consistent control, **3**- sufficient control, **2**- minimal control, **1**- lack of control

Domain 1: IDEAS- The degree to which the writer establishes controlling ideas and elaborates the main points with examples, illustrations, facts, or details that are appropriate to assigned genre.

__ controlling idea is focused to topic/purpose
__ supporting ideas are relevant
__ supporting ideas are fully developed
__ fully addresses readers concerns/perspective
__ sense of completeness
__ awareness of genre (expository or persuasive)

Domain 2: Organization- The degree to which the writer's ideas are arranged in a clear order and the overall structure of the response is consistent with the assigned genre.

__ organization strategy is appropriate to topic for communication
__ logical sequencing of ideas
__ engaging introduction/ conclusion provides resolution
__ introduction &conclusion fit purpose and genre
__ supporting ideas are grouped in a logical manner
__ effective/varied transitions (ideas and paragraphs)

Domain 3: Style- The degree to which the writer controls language to engage the reader.

__ phrases and sentences create a tone to advance purpose
__ writer is aware of audience
__ engaging language is appropriate to assigned genre
__ use of figurative and technical language used for rhetorical effect
__ sustained attention to audience
__ varied sentence length, structure, beginnings
__ variety of genre-appropriate strategies to engage the reader

Domain 4: Conventions- The degree to which the writer demonstrates control of sentence formation, usage, and mechanics.

__ clear and correct simple, complex, and compound sentences with correct end punctuation
__ variety of subordination and coordination strategies
__ correct usage in a variety of contexts: subject-verb agreement, word forms, pronoun-antecedent agreement
__ correct punctuation within sentences, spelling, capitalization, and paragraph indentation

Ideas ____ X 2 = ___
Organization ____ X 1 = ___
Style ____ X 1= ___
Conventions ____ X 1= ___

Total Score ☐

Final Grade ☐

Points Conversion to Percentage Grade

Total Score	% Grade
125	100
95	119
90	113
85	107
80	100
75	94
70	88
65	81
60	75
55	69
50	63

QUICK GRADE 145

RAW SCORE/PERCENTAGE	RAW SCORE/PERCENTAGE
145 = 100	108 = 74
144 = 99	107 = 74
143 = 99	106 = 73
142 = 98	105 = 72
141 = 97	104 = 72
140 = 97	103 = 71
139 = 96	102 = 70
138 = 95	101 = 70
137 = 94	100 = 69
136 = 94	99 = 68
135 = 93	98 = 68
134 = 92	97 = 67
133 = 92	96 = 66
132 = 91	95 = 66
131 = 90	94 = 65
130 = 90	93 = 64
129 = 89	92 = 63
128 = 88	91 = 63
127 = 88	90 = 62
126 = 87	89 = 61
125 = 86	88 = 61
124 = 86	87 = 60
123 = 85	86 = 59
122 = 84	85 = 59
121 = 83	84 = 58
120 = 83	83 = 57
119 = 82	82 = 57
118 = 81	81 = 56
117 = 81	80 = 55
116 = 80	79 = 54
115 = 79	78 = 54
114 = 79	77 = 53
113 = 78	76 = 52
112 = 77	75 = 52
111 = 77	74 = 51
110 = 76	73 = 50
109 = 75	72 = 50

Appendix F

Data Analysis Example and Explanation

Research Methodology

Setting and Participants

The participant population was two writing teachers in 7th grade from one school system. Maxwell (2005) discussed *purposeful selection* as a viable option for qualitative research. He explained that one goal that can be met through purposeful selection of participants is "…to establish particular comparisons to illuminate the reasons for differences between settings or individuals" (p. 90). The participants for this study were purposefully selected because of their particular level of students - one teaches high-achieving students and the other low-achieving students - as well as for their professional reputations as being open to collegial discourse and continual professional learning. After meeting with the curriculum director for primary grades in this county, I narrowed my participant pool to two teachers who met the requirements of my design. I assured that participation was voluntary by having teachers sign an Informed Consent stating that they understood the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants of this study were not compensated, and deception was not necessary for this proposed study.

The specific procedures for fieldwork and data collection were as follows: Data collection involved interviews with each teacher three times throughout the semester-long study, and the interviews were based on Seidman's (2006) three interview series. Guiding interview questions were established (See Appendix C), and both participants were asked the same basic questions. I did, however, use follow-up questions based on the direction of the interview, and those questions varied between participants. The interviews were audiotaped for transcription purposes. Each teacher-participant was observed once each week during the months of the study while they are engaged in

writing instruction. The observations were the choice of each individual participant and the researcher based on scheduling, and observations were approximately an hour each week with each teacher. I worked with the teacher-participants so that the observations coincided with specific writing instruction based on the teachers' curriculum plan each week. Every effort was made to observe similar lessons in both classes each week. I used the same observation guide that was used during my pilot study observations, which can be viewed as Appendix D. Based on Patton's (2002) fieldwork continuum, I was a participant observer who was more of an *onlooker observer* in this study with more of an *etic*, or *outsider*, perspective because I was not actively engaged in the teaching process with these students (p. 277). As a *solo researcher* on Patton's continuum, I conducted more of a *long-term* study lasting four to five months, and I fully disclosed my role to those being observed (p. 277). Finally, the focus of my observations was narrowed to the *single topic* of writing instruction but moved along the emergent continuum as themes were discovered.

The participants were not identified by name, but the employer of each of the two teachers was aware of their participation in the study. Teachers were cautioned that they did not have to provide any information about their teaching practices or training/background that they did not want their employer to know. Detailed wording of confidentiality through the Informed Consent was used. Any risks for participants in this study were minimal because participation was voluntary. Both teachers were made aware that their employer might read the study. The benefit for the two teacher-participants in this study was also minimal. The research study focused on writing instruction, and the teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their own practices through

the formal interviews and informal debriefing, which I believe did serve as a benefit for the participants similar to a professional development experience. The teachers participated in research aimed to supplement the current pedagogical debate surrounding writing instruction in secondary schools.

Data Collection

For this study, data collection occurred through interviews with teachers, observations of writing instruction, document data in the form of student work samples, and a researcher journal, including memos by the researcher. Seidman (2006) discussed the three interview series as being appropriate for qualitative studies where the researcher plans to spend a significant amount of time with the participants. The three interview series was designed to look first at the participant's experience and background to gain context for how the participant arrived in the current situation (Seidman, 2006). The second interview, according to Seidman, should focus on the details of the participant's involvement in the current topic of study, and the third interview consists of asking the participants to reflect on the experience of the study related to the two previous interviews. Seidman explained that through the reflection process, participants are "making meaning" as the center objective (p. 19). Seidman recommended that each interview should last approximately 60 minutes, and the three interviews should be spaced at least a week a part from one another. He noted, however, minor deviation was allowed as long as the general structure of each interview is kept intact. For this study, the two teacher participants were interviewed approximately every four weeks, and Seidman's three-interview structure was the model for each interview.

Observation, according to Patton (2002), requires preparation of the researcher in order to produce accurate descriptions of the physical setting along with the purpose and impacts of the observed activity (p. 262). Fieldwork in the form of observation has multiple strengths, which include capturing experiences as they occur, observing the phenomenon that might normally escape attention, understanding the context of a situation, and learning about what many might not care to disclose in an interview (Patton, 2002). Patton explained that limitations to observational data included but were not limited to the fact that observations can only record surface or observable behavior or environment along with researcher interpretation, which may be clouded with subjectivity. Peshkin (1991) explained that acknowledging and owning one's subjectivities were critical steps in managing the personal bias that enters into data gathering and analysis. Debriefing with the participants can alleviate some of this concern, which will be discussed in greater length along with other safeguards as related to validity of the study. Observations for this study occurred once each week for almost five months but with some weeks off due to scheduling conflicts. Each observation was approximately an hour. Patton explained that observation length "…depends on the purpose of the study and the questions being asked," and this particular study focused on the ongoing instructional writing practices of these two classroom teachers throughout the school year (p. 275). Maxwell (2005) also addressed the need for data collection methods to address the research questions, and he even suggested a *pretest* of the methods to ensure that they will provide the data required (p. 93). Based on the data collected during the pilot study, I do believe that observations provided appropriate data. I requested that each teacher communicate to me through notes or emails any relevant

information that occurred in my absence, which they did on several occasions. I was also available to debrief with the teachers following each observation, and I recorded any information from those conversations in my researcher journal.

Documents in the form of student writing samples were obtained during the fall and spring semesters. Collecting these samples was more difficult in Mrs. Abbott's class than in Mrs. Banks' class, but I managed to obtain early and later samples from each class. Work samples from students who emerged as interesting from a writing standpoint, on either end of the academic spectrum (Coker & Lewis, 2006), were solicited as document data. It was the hope of this research and researcher that these papers in the form of essays, narratives, letters, and other projects provided a "behind-the-scenes" view of the writing instruction in each language arts classroom (Patton, 2002, p. 307).

I protected the identity of the individuals by being the sole data collector, and I used pseudonyms when writing about the participants in any of my letters or epistles. All data was collected, managed, stored, and accessed by one researcher, and storage was on my private computer that was password-protected. I removed identifiable information from any documents collected. The researcher journal was an ongoing record of my insights along the way. The most important component of all data was the idea that each piece of information added diversity, complexity, and wholeness to the research study (Patton, p. 307).

Data Analysis

My data analysis consisted of coding interview and observational data according to procedures described by scholars in the qualitative data analysis field. Miles and

Huberman (1994) provided a guide for *students and other novice researchers* that served as guidance for my endeavors (p. 14). At the start of data analysis, I engaged in both *first level coding* by summarizing portions of data, and then I categorized or grouped the data based on themes, which was referred to as *pattern coding* (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Because the process of transcribing and coding can be overwhelming to the researcher, Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended that researchers participate in *memoing* as a way to record interesting, confusing, or enlightening moments. Maxwell (2005) also advocated writing memos to *facilitate* analytical thinking about the data, which will assist with coding of data as well. According to Ravitch and Riggan (2012), research memos assist the researcher in focusing on important or *strategic moments*, and this process adds depth to data analysis (p. 154).

Data analysis, according to Creswell (2009), requires an ongoing and reflexive process of questioning, recording, organizing, describing, and coding. Qualitative researchers initiated the process by understanding general themes from each interview, observation, or document by reviewing the data in search of categories (Creswell, p. 186). Once the overall sense of the study is clear to the researcher, the process requires further "coding" or categorizing with descriptive words for topics, and these topics might surface from related literature, emerging and unanticipated data, and the "unusual" status of certain data (Creswell, p. 186-187). Patton (2002) explained that qualitative data analysis carries the monumental challenge of organizing and "…making sense of massive amounts of data" (p. 432). Because each qualitative study is different from any other, Patton reminds the researcher that the approach for analysis would vary as well. For a case study, however, Patton suggested categorizing and coding data into any of three

categories: people, critical incidents, and various settings (p. 439). If the individuals who are being studied were the focus of the research, then the "primary unit of analysis" would be the people (p. 439). This was appropriate for my study. Patton also explained that case study research often requires "cross-case" analysis and "individual case" analysis (p. 440). By grouping answers from several participants, for example, who were asked the same interview questions, the researcher would be doing a cross-case analysis, and an individual case analysis might also be completed within the same study by focusing on a single participant, event, or setting (Patton, p. 440). It is critical to note here the distinction made by Maxwell (2005) between *organizational* and *substantive* or *theoretical* categories (p. 98). In this study, I categorized my data organizationally, at first, and then into substantive and theoretical groups as themes emerged.

For my analysis, I used *in vivo* codes because I derived the codes from language used in the field and from the interviews and observations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32). My *categorical aggregation* developed from the nature of the research and my questions for the study (Stake, 1995, p. 77). I organized my data around the themes identified from the literature along with the data itself. As my study is about writing, I also used writing as a learning and reflecting tool during analysis, and I discovered that the process did "…deepen the level of analytic endeavor" as I re-read my memos and wrote addendums as themes continued to emerge (Coffey & Atkinson, p. 109).

Another crucial element of qualitative research data analysis is generating *thick, rick description*, and this allows the reader to become involved with the setting and participants in ways that quantitative research might not (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The caution, however, is to distinguish between descriptions and interpretations

(Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Maxwell (2005) explained that the two are linked because interpretation requires *inference* from descriptions (p. 94). Interpretation occurs, according to Creswell (2009), as the final stage of data analysis after the data are described, coded, and presented. The interpretation of data attempts to discover what lessons are learned from the study, and Creswell explained that the technique of questioning can allow qualitative studies to look for future measures of change (p. 189-190). This process led me to the recommendations in this epistle.

Threats to Data Quality

Internal validity, according to Merriam (2002), attempts to find out "how congruent are one's findings with reality" (p. 25). Creswell (2009) explained that qualitative research does not utilize the concepts of *validity* and *generalizability* in the same ways that quantitative research does. Maxwell (2005) noted *bias* and *reactivity* as two threats to validity of a study. *Bias* as described by Maxwell was the subjectivity with which a researcher approached the data collection and analysis based on the preconceived ideas about what the data should reflect. *Reactivity* in qualitative studies dealt with understanding and using the influence of the researcher on the study rather than attempting to "eliminate" it (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109). Peshkin (2001) offered that the researcher should use alternative lenses, which would encourage other perceptions to enter into the discussion in an attempt to manage researcher bias (p. 242).

In reflecting on my study, I addressed the ways I attempted to ensure valid conclusions. I focused on two main components of my research design to deal with threats to validity, which were "intensive, long-term involvement" and "rich" data (Maxwell, 2005, p. 110). By engaging in weekly observations and intensive interviews

throughout a four to five month period, I reduced the threat of being dependent on my own inferences by being able to have more and varied data. According to Maxwell (2005), this length of involvement along with three interviews of each participant should also allow the data collected to be "rich" in order to give the reader a fairly accurate picture of the two classroom teachers and their instructional practices being studied. Miles and Huberman (1994) also discussed length of time in the research environment and how this begins to eliminate bias that occurs based on the researcher's presence in the environment.

I also focused on triangulation through multiple sources of data as another way to address data quality (Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). Merriam (2002) discussed *member checks* as an important strategy to demonstrate qualitative validity of a study, and even though the exact language may be different, the participants should be able to "recognize" the information from the original encounter (p. 26). *Member checks* were particularly important when interviewing my participants that I was able to be certain that the participants accepted the accuracy of the meaning from the interviews. Maxwell (2005) referred to member checks as *respondent validation*, which offers validity in the accuracy of the researcher's account of what was said or done (p. 111). Researcher memos offer opportunity for self-reflection and critique of self, and Merriam explained that this process, termed *reflexivity*, offers the reader some insight into the researchers motives and thought processes. Reflexivity through researcher memos was an integral part of this process along with the length of the data collection period. In this case study, I engaged in data collection for four to five months, which spanned parts of fall and spring semesters.

Finally, *thick, rich descriptions*, as discussed previously, were employed to create a more realistic picture of the study for the reader (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). To create such description requires being in the setting for an extended period of time, which helps address the issue of external validity. The more "prolonged" an interval of data collection, the deeper I became in my understanding of the setting, participants, and "phenomenon" being studied (Creswell, 2009, p. 192). Maxwell (2005) reiterated the need for *verbatim* interview transcripts and *detailed, descriptive note taking* (p. 110). In this study, these strategies were used as well as debriefing with the teachers after observations, which provided yet another perspective for richness of data.

Ethical Issues

Merriam (2002) stated that "examining the assumptions one carries into the research process – assumptions about the context, participants, data, and the dissemination of knowledge gained through the study – is at least a starting point for conducting an ethical study" (p. 30). By following the Institutional Review Board procedures for Informed Consent, participants were fully aware of the nature of the study as well as any potential harm (Merriam, p. 29). For this study, I used my researcher journal as a way of clarifying the *bias* that I brought to the study through self-reflection (Creswell, 2009). As Peshkin (1991) explained, learning to *manage* one's subjectivity is critical for researchers, and I recognized my own subjectivities through my researcher journal (p. 294). Peshkin continued to emphasize the importance of researcher subjectivities, and he insisted that recognizing potential bias was not sufficient in attempting to safeguard against influencing the outcomes of research (p. 285). He explained, therefore, that researchers must be deliberate in seeking out subjectivities.

Peshkin (2001) also encouraged researchers to perceive experiences and data through alternate lenses in an attempt to stimulate the senses in ways that were not typical for the researcher (p. 251). The areas of bias that I explored included but were not limited to my own gender, race, culture, socioeconomic status, as well as the reasons behind the site and participant selection for this study (Creswell, 2002).

TABLE 1

Summary Data Table - Adapted from Summary Table (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 181)

	COMMONALITIES IN DATA	DIFFERENCES IN DATA
INTERVIEWS	• Lack of Time to Complete Full Writing Process • Lack of Time to do Personal Writing due to Grading Constraints • Lack of Writing Instruction in Teacher Preparation Programs • Import of Modeling and Feedback • Inspiration for Students • Belief in Full Writing Process • Feedback with One-on-One Conferences • Curriculum too Demanding • Basic Essay Structure • Advice for Teacher Preparation Programs	• Role of Technology in the Writing Classroom • Experiences Before College with Writing and with Teachers • Integrated Approach for Teaching Writing and Reading • Emphasis on Writing Test Preparation • Advice for Teacher Preparation Programs
OBSERVATIONS	• Direct Instruction • Emphasis on Grammar • Teacher Passion for Content and Students • Comfortable Class Climate • Class Motto (Presence of One) • Modeling/Scaffolding	• Teacher B's Students Very Grade Conscious • Level of Grammar Instruction • Reading/Writing Levels • Discipline Problems in Teacher A's class • Class Motto (Content) • Multicultural Music and Art in Teacher A's class
DOCUMENT SAMPLES	• Assignment • Difficulty with Structure • Legibility	• Assignment • Vocabulary Level • Sentence Structure • Grammar • Ease in Obtaining Samples • Depth of Writing • Length of Writing

Appendix G

Institutional Review Board Information

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants

REPORT ON EXPEDITED REVIEW OF PROTOCOL CONTINUATION

PROTOCOL NUMBER:	**IRB-02795-2012**	**CURRENT EXPIRATION DATE:**	**03/08/13**
RESPONSIBLE RESEARCHER:	**Heather Powell**	**DEPARTMENT:**	**CLT**
PROJECT TITLE:	**Writing Instruction in Secondary Classrooms**		

IRB ADMINISTRATOR ASSESSMENT: This continuation request qualifies for expedited review because it meets the following criterion *(check one)*:

- ☒ The initial review was expedited and risk remains no greater than minimal
- ☐ Expedited Review Category 8 applies: Continuing review of research previously approved by the convened IRB where *(check one)*:
  - ☐ The research is permanently closed to the enrollment of new participants, all participants have completed all research-related interventions, and the research remains active only for long-term follow-up of participants
  - ☐ No participants have been enrolled and no additional risks have been identified
  - ☐ The remaining research activities are limited to data analysis
- ☐ Expedited Review Category 9 applies: Continuing review of research, not conducted under an investigational new drug application or investigational device exemption, where Expedited Categories 2 through 8 do not apply but the IRB has determined and documented at a convened meeting that the research involves no greater than minimal risk and no additional risks have been identified

IRB CHAIR/VICE-CHAIR DETERMINATION *(check one)*:

- ☒ This continuation request is **approved** for 12 (or 12) months
- ☐ This request is referred for **convened** review for the following reason(s):

SIGNATURE: Wilson Huang — **Reviewer *(Type Name)*** ; 3/1/2013 — **Date**

Revised: 12.13.12

Please return signed form to irb@valdosta.edu

VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

Consent to Participate in Research

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled "Writing Instruction in Secondary Classrooms." This research project is being conducted by *Heather Powell, a student in the Curriculum and Instruction doctoral program* at Valdosta State University. The researcher has explained to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask the researcher any questions you have to help you understand this project and your possible participation in it. A basic explanation of the research is given below. Please read this carefully and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. The University asks that you give your signed agreement if you wish to participate in this research project.

Purpose of the Research: This study involves research. The purpose of the study is to explore writing instruction in secondary English classes to determine effective strategies for improving student writing in multiple genres and across disciplines.

Procedures: Participants in this pilot study will English teachers in secondary grades. Each teacher-participant will be interviewed once about their writing instruction. Teacher-participants will also be observed one time while teaching a writing lesson. The duration of the pilot study is two weeks, and each participant will only be interviewed and observed one time by the researcher. Each interview should be approximately 30 minutes in length, and each class observation should last approximately 50 minutes. The pilot study does not seek any outside involvement from the participants, and deception is not needed in this pilot study.

Possible Risks or Discomfort: *Although there are no known risks associated with these research procedures, it is not always possible to identify all potential risks of participating in a research study. However, the University has taken reasonable safeguards to minimize potential but unknown risks.*

By agreeing to participate in this research project, you are not waiving any rights that you may have against Valdosta State University for injury resulting from negligence of the University or its researchers.

Potential Benefits: *Although you may not benefit directly from this research, your participation will help the researcher gain additional understanding of writing instruction in secondary classrooms, and the knowledge gained may contribute to addressing the literacy needs of all students as they journey through secondary schools and move on to college, technical schools, and the workforce.*

Costs and Compensation: *There are no costs to you and there is no compensation (no money, gifts, or services) for your participation in this research project.*

Assurance of Confidentiality: Valdosta State University and the researcher will keep your information confidential to the extent allowed by law. Members of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a university committee charged with reviewing research to ensure the rights and welfare of research participants, may be given access to your confidential information.
The information gained from the interviews and observations may appear in the researcher's dissertation for Valdosta State University, and the interviews and observations would be intertwined with the data from the actual research study that would take place over several months. Pseudonyms will be used for any participants

from the pilot or the research studies. The information gained from the pilot study interviews and observations will be transcribed and kept on the researcher's personal computer that is password-protected. Names will not be used, but the pilot study will be made up of only six teachers, and the administrators of each facility will know which teachers were participants.

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in this research project is entirely voluntary. If you agree now to participate and change your mind later, you are free to leave the study. Your decision not to participate at all or to stop participating at any time in the future will not have any effect on any rights you have or any services you are otherwise entitled to from Valdosta State University. Participants in the pilot study can withdraw from participation at any time.

Information Contacts: Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Heather Powell at hspowell@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-333-7837 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Agreement to Participate: The research project and my role in it have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, I am indicating that I am 18 years of age or older. I have received a copy of this consent form.

I would like to receive a copy of the results of this study: _____ *Yes* _____ *No*

Mailing Address: _____

e-mail Address: _____

_____
Printed Name of Participant

_____
Signature of Participant Date

_____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

This research project has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Research Participants through the date noted below:

Appendix H

Dissemination Plan

Dissemination Plans

Epistle to Liz

The Journal of Writing Teacher Education

Submission Deadline: July 1, 2014

Publication Date: January 2015

Abstract

The following letter was written to a new language arts teacher fresh from her teacher preparation program. The text stemmed from a qualitative case study in middle grades writing instruction. Written as an Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (ESPN), this dissertation excerpt attempted to offer advice for new language arts teachers as they embarked on the journey of teaching middle school students to become writers. Teaching writing was viewed as a multidimensional task for teachers, and the research – along with the teacher-participants in this study – examined the social and cultural components of middle school writing (Delpit, 2006; Faulkner, 2005; Fisher & Frey, 2003; Graham & Perin, 2007; Sperling, 1996). While the focus of this letter was on the specifics of the data gathered and subsequent implications from two 7th grade classes, the research in writing instruction was woven throughout the epistle along with the author's own experiences teaching writing.

Epistle to Dean Simon

Language Arts Journal

Topic: "Information is Power"

Submission Deadline - November 15, 2013

Publication Date: March 2015

Abstract

The following letter was written to the dean of a college of education, and the text stemmed from a qualitative case study in middle grades writing instruction. Written as an Epistolary Scholarly Personal Narrative (ESPN), this dissertation excerpt attempted to offer advice for teacher preparation programs in the training of middle school, language arts teachers. The professional literature found that most college and university education programs offered a literature–based curriculum for language arts teachers in training (Graham & Perin, 2007; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Miller & McCardle, 2011). Both teacher-participants in this study admitted that they were not taught how to teach writing, and they offered advice for preparation programs in light of constant changes in curriculum. The author's own experiences as a student, teacher, parent, and researcher offered further anecdotal evidence that teachers needed to be taught multicultural issues in the classroom as well.