An investigation into urban elementary teachers' educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing: comparing experiences and self-reported beliefs to teacher practices

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO URBAN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS’ EDUCATIONAL BELIEFS IN REGARDS TO TEACHING WRITING: COMPARING EXPERIENCES AND SELF-REPORTED BELIEFS TO TEACHER PRACTICES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

The School of Education

by

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December 2012
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ABSTRACT

This six week study investigated six urban elementary teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing, comparing their personal histories as writers with their self-reported beliefs on writing and teaching writing, with that of their teacher practices. A further analysis examined how closely aligned their teacher practices were to research-validated practices. During this ethnographic case study, three questions were explored. These questions were: (a) How do teachers’ personal histories with writing inform their beliefs regarding writing in general, as well as their beliefs on teaching writing?, (b) How do teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing inform their instructional decisions?, and (c) What impact do teachers’ personal histories with writing and their educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing have on how closely aligned their teacher practices are to research-validated practices? The participants in this study were six primary grade teachers, a first, second, and third grade teacher respectively, from two Title 1 schools in neighboring school districts.

This ethnographic case study followed the Developmental Research Sequence Method, an ethnographic method of analysis designed by James Spradley (1980), in his book *The Participant Observer*. The data collected included written autobiographies concerning the teachers’ histories as writers, interviews, and classroom observations. There was evidence to suggest that teachers’ histories with writing informed some general held beliefs regarding writing, as well as beliefs regarding teaching writing. There was an indication that the histories and beliefs then
informed the teachers’ instructional decisions in the classroom and how closely aligned those practices were to current, research-validated practices.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

But words are things, and a small drop of ink, falling like dew upon a thought, produces that which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think. ~Lord Byron

The ability to communicate in writing separates us from the other animals. To be able to adequately and succinctly state an opinion, a matter of fact, or to create emotion where before there was none tells the power of the written word. Writing, how it is defined, and the best ways to teach it have been a topic of controversy over the history of education in our country (Burrows, 1977; Graves, 1994; Hatfield, 1935). What is not controversial however, is its importance.

Statement of the Problem

Writing instruction has now infused every portion of the curriculum in America’s public schools (Graham & Hebert, 2010). Gone are the days of math tests that only have computational questions. Now first graders are being asked to explain their thought processes through constructed response when adding two plus two. The emphasis on writing instruction can be linked in part to our nation’s poor performance in respect to this area (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007), and also to the importance being placed on it by America’s businesses (National Commission on Writing, 2006).

According to the National Commission on Writing (2006), more than eighty percent of blue-collar workers reported their writing skills were important to their job success. This percentage is even higher for white-collar workers. Proficiency in writing has become a necessary skill in America’s job force, with reason for non-promotion often linked to poor writing skills. As a result, American corporations are spending approximately $3.1 billion
dollars annually to provide remediation and professional development for their employees in the areas of business and technical writing (National Commission on Writing, 2004).

According to the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only thirty-three percent of America’s eighth graders and twenty-four percent of twelfth graders scored in the proficient range on the writing exam, leaving the majority of students scoring at the basic level or below. As fourth graders were not tested in 2007, the most recent available writing scores for fourth grade students report that only twenty-eight percent scored at the proficient level (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). According to the definitions provided by the NAEP, a “basic” level of achievement denotes only “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge” (p. 2), whereas a proficient level of achievement is indicative of “solid academic performance” (p. 2). All of these reports support the idea that writing is a weakness in our country and speak to the importance of writing instruction in our nation’s schools.

The nature of writing is extremely personal, in that students are asked not only to learn the mechanics of writing, but also to internalize knowledge in such a way as to produce written work in a meaningful way so they may communicate a message (Graham & Hebert, 2010). It is the portion of the curriculum where we ask students to reflect on their personal experiences and observations, to make inferences, to persuade, or explain. Ultimately, a student’s writing is a reflection of self on paper.

Over the years, due to the low number of students considered proficient and the importance placed on it by America’s job force, writing instruction has been closely investigated, not only to ascertain the best ways to teach it, but also to explore the factors that could influence the way it is taught (Graham & Hebert, 2010; National Commission on Writing, 2004). Many theories have surfaced regarding this issue, but one that is yielding a good amount of research
falls back to the idea of writing as self reflection, with the idea of self leading some researchers to believe that one factor that could possibly play a role in decision making involving writing instruction is teachers’ educational beliefs (Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2001; Lipa & Harlin, 1990; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Watson & Lacina, 2002). Does how we view ourselves as writers affect how we believe writing should be taught, or the instructional decisions we make when teaching writing? If so, how closely aligned are our belief-influenced decisions to research-validated practices?

According to M. Frank Paraje (1992), renowned for his research on the power of teacher beliefs:

Few would argue that the beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom, or that understanding the belief structures of teachers and teacher candidates is essential to improving their professional preparation and teaching practices. (p. 307)

Therefore, if it is possible that teachers’ educational beliefs are informing their instructional decisions in regard to something as vital as writing instruction, then it becomes necessary to examine them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing, comparing their personal histories as writers and self-reported beliefs on writing and teaching writing, with that of their teacher practices. This was done in order to examine any possible connections among the three areas of histories, beliefs, and practices. The researcher also examined how closely aligned teachers’ instructional practices were with research-validated practices in the hopes of answering the following questions: How do our personal histories with writing inform our beliefs regarding writing in general, as well as our beliefs regarding teaching writing? How do our educational beliefs in regards to teaching
writing inform our instructional decisions? What impact does either of those have on how closely aligned our teacher practices are to research-validated practices?

Teacher autobiographies exploring how the teachers viewed themselves as writers were collected. The autobiographies were based on personal experiences, both positive and negative, in regards to writing. Teacher interviews and classroom observations were also conducted in order to triangulate the data in an attempt to answer the aforementioned questions.

Setting

The study took place in two urban elementary schools in neighboring school districts in Louisiana. Both schools are Title 1 schools and serve a high number of students in the low socioeconomic range as judged by the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Individual district and school data are provided below in Table 1.1.

It is important to note that the district and school performance scores assigned by the state are a combination of students’ scores on standardized tests, as well as attendance, graduation, and dropout rates (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). The districts and schools performance scores are now being assigned letter grades according to the following scale:

Table 1.1 Grade Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
<th>SPS Range</th>
<th>Students Below Basic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>120.00-200.00</td>
<td>0-12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>105.00-119.9</td>
<td>13-24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>90-104.9</td>
<td>25-36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>65-89.9</td>
<td>37-61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>0-64.9</td>
<td>62-100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data for the Louisiana Education Assessment Program (LEAP) scores for fourth and eighth grade English Language Arts will also be reported. LEAP, a criterion-referenced assessment, is the high-stakes standardized test given to all fourth and eighth grade students in Louisiana’s public schools (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). Overall district scores as well as individual school scores will be provided. The LEAP scores are divided into five categories: advanced, mastery, basic, approaching basic, and unsatisfactory. In 2011, the majority of students in both districts fell into the basic level of performance. LEAP defines a basic level of performance as having “demonstrated only the fundamental knowledge and skills” (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011, “What are the LEAP tests,” para. 2).

Oakton School District

Oakton School District Mission Statement

The mission of the Oakton School District is through collaboration among all stakeholders, the district will ensure that all students attain the knowledge and skills necessary in order to become productive citizens.

Demographic Data

Oakton School District serves approximately 19,662 students in Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade. There are currently twenty-two elementary schools, seven middle schools, and five high schools, with 33.6% of those students being African American, 64.5% Caucasian, and 1.2% Hispanic. Currently 56% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

Standardized Data for the District

According to the 2012 LEAP test results for fourth grade, the percentage of students who scored in the advanced range in English Language Arts was 9%; those who scored in the mastery
was 31%, basic was 45%, approaching basic was 11%, which left 4% to score unsatisfactory (Louisiana Department of Education, 2012). The eighth grade LEAP results for English Language Arts showed 7% of students scored in the advanced range, 24% in the mastery level, 45% at the basic level, 21% at the approaching basic level, leaving 3% to score in the unsatisfactory range. The 2012 district performance score for the Oakton School District was 105.3, resulting in the letter grade of B.

Roosevelt Elementary

Roosevelt Elementary, located in the Oakton School District, is a Title 1 school with approximately 500 students, with over 95% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The mission of Roosevelt Elementary is to provide all students with a challenging learning environment. According to the 2011 LEAP test results for fourth grade, the percentage of students who scored in the advanced range in English Language Arts was 1%; those who scored in the mastery was 5%, basic was 49%, approaching basic was 36%, which left 9% to score unsatisfactory (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). The 2011 school performance score was 77.2, resulting in a letter grade of D.

Macon School District

Macon School District Mission Statement

The Macon School District is committed to excellence in teaching and learning by holding high expectations for all students, faculty, and parents. It is the philosophy of the school system that it takes the community as a whole to educate and nurture a child, and the school district owns its burden of that responsibility.
Demographic Information

Macon School District serves approximately 8,273 students in Pre-Kindergarten through twelfth grade. There are currently twelve elementary schools, three middle schools, and three high schools, with 86.7% of those students being African American, 12.2% Caucasian, 0.6% Asian, and 0.3% Native American. Currently 82.6% of students receive free or reduced lunch.

Standardized Data for the District

According to the 2012 LEAP test results for fourth grade, the percentage of students who scored in the advanced range in English Language Arts was 6%; those who scored in the mastery was 22%, basic was 52%, approaching basic was 15%, which left 6% to score unsatisfactory (Louisiana Department of Education, 2012). The eighth grade LEAP results for English Language Arts showed 2% of students scored in the advanced range, 14% in the mastery level, 37% at the basic level, 36% at the approaching basic level, leaving 10% to score in the unsatisfactory range. The 2012 district performance score for the Macon School District was 88.7, resulting in the letter grade of D.

Chesapeake Elementary

Chesapeake Elementary, located in the Macon School District is a Title 1 school with approximately 520 students, with over 95% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The mission of Chesapeake Elementary is to commit to excellence in teaching and learning for all students. According to the 2011 LEAP test results for fourth grade, the percentage of students who scored in the advanced range in English Language Arts was 4%; those who scored in the mastery was 20%, basic was 47%, approaching basic was 23%, which left 6% to score unsatisfactory
(Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). The 2011 school performance score was 96.6, resulting in a letter grade of C-.

Significance of the Study

This investigation into teachers’ beliefs in regards to teaching writing was a qualitative study comparing teachers’ personal experiences and self-reported beliefs to teacher practices in a case study of six primary grade teachers at two elementary schools, first, second, and third grade teachers respectively. It provided an analysis of the differences among how the teachers viewed themselves as writers, to their beliefs about teaching writing, to their instructional decisions when teaching writing. A further component included the analysis of how closely related their instructional practices were to research-validated practices.

As research suggests, there is a “strong relationship between teachers’ educational beliefs and their planning, instructional decisions, and classroom practices” (Paraje, 1992, p. 326). It is the hope of the researcher that this study will contribute to the understanding of the impact of teachers’ educational beliefs on classroom practices, specifically focusing on their writing instruction. The significance therein lies in the importance for teachers to examine what their beliefs are in regards to teaching writing in order to determine whether those beliefs inform their instruction, and if that instruction conflicts with research-validated practices.

Research Questions

The following research questions served to guide the direction of the study:

1. How do teachers’ personal histories with writing inform their beliefs on writing in general, as well as their beliefs on teaching writing?
2. How do teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing inform their instructional decisions?

3. What impact do teachers’ personal histories with writing and their educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing have on how closely aligned their teacher practices are to research-validated practices?
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to fully understand the trends and issues pertaining to writing instruction and teacher beliefs, three essential components of research literature were examined. The first area of literature to be reviewed was the historical view of writing instruction, the second, the current research-validated practices in writing instruction, and the third being teachers’ beliefs and their impact on decision making in the classroom.

Historical View of Writing Instruction

A view of the history of composition in the United States, offered by Alvina T. Burrows (1977), a leading researcher in the history of writing instruction, states there was not much evidence of children writing independently constructed compositions in schools during the nineteenth century. The focus on instruction for elementary students during this time in America’s school, in regards to writing instruction, dealt with handwriting skills and the quality of penmanship. Compositional writing was not part of the curriculum until secondary school, and in some cases compositional writing was not taught until college, which at that time only a few privileged people were able to attend.

Even though elementary students were not being taught how to write compositions independently, that is not to say they were not being exposed to compositional writing. However, the closest they came to constructing one was in the copying of their teacher’s compositions. In Burrows’ (1977) work, Composition: Prospect and Retrospect, she includes a copy of a letter written by a ten year old girl named Sophie, and explains the process as to how the letter was written as reported by Sophie’s classmate H. L. Mencken, who wrote a memoir of
his life titled *Happy Days*, where he detailed his school experiences. An excerpt from the letter is as follows:

On this happy morning I come before you to present my sincere wishes. Happy, happy New Year to you! I feel how your loving kindness has guarded every day of my life, and how little I do to prove my love and gratitude. But you are so kind, you overlook all my faults, and when I promise to do better, you forgive me at once. As I know that nothing would make you so happy as to see me an obedient, dutiful daughter, I will try my utmost to please you and my teachers by applying myself to every task that is given me so that I may be a pleasure and a comfort to you. May God bless you; may he give you health, happiness, and may you enjoy many happy days together is the wish of your loving daughter. (p. 21)

At first glance, it would seem this letter is a very accomplished compositional piece, judging by the complexity of the sentences and the author’s word choices. However, Burrows reports that it was common practice during this time for the teacher to write a composition for the children to copy, in this case, one for the girls in the class and one for the boys, and then the students would copy it directly. The assessment of these writings would align with the focus of writing instruction of that day and time, with attention being paid to the construction of the letters on the page and the overall penmanship (Burrows, 1977). Mencken stated that this was the case with the above referenced letter, and Sophie later corroborated Mencken’s account of writing instruction, stating that that was “exactly the way we did it” (Burrows, 1977, p. 21). In fact Sophie and Mencken could recall no occasion for independent writing of original work during their elementary school career.

In 1894, two decades after Sophie wrote her letter, a committee of ten people, some of the most prominent researchers in the field of education, including the then president of Harvard University, Charles W. Eliot, convened to discuss the education system and devise a plan of action for all teachers (National Education Association, 1894). This was the first time a committee of this nature discussed the best ways to teach English. They wrote a report of their
recommendations, which included specific guidelines on how to teach writing. Although the focus of the report was geared towards the secondary school setting, a section was dedicated to the best ways to teach writing before the high school years as well. It was titled *The Report of the Committee of Ten* (National Education Association, 1894). The report shed some light on the phenomenon of having students copy their teacher’s work, stating:

> If the pupil is to secure control of the language as an instrument for the expression of his thought, it is necessary (1) that, during the period of life when imitation is the chief motive principle in education, he should be kept so far as possible away from the influence of bad models and under the influence of good models, and (2) that every thought which he expresses, whether orally or on paper, should be regarded as a proper subject for criticism as to language. (p. 87)

The committee then outlined what they felt should be the progression of writing instruction, stating that students in their first through third years of school should be encouraged to tell stories orally, but should not be allowed to construct them in writing due to the aforementioned points. By the beginning of the third school year, children should be encouraged to write their own compositions; however it is important to note that the committee defined students writing their own compositions as writing from memory other people’s work. For example, instead of copying their teacher’s work, they would write, from memory, a story or poem that had been read to them. The Committee of Ten (1894) then stated that later in the third year of school and through the sixth year of school, students should begin “…written exercise in the most elementary forms of compositions” (p. 87), with composing now being defined as the construction of independently written sentences, to which the committee stated the type and degree of difficulty could be assigned by the teacher. The committee recommended that the sentence construction be gradually increased to eventually include narrative writing instruction; however, the length and topic should always be assigned by the teacher. In grades seven and eight the students would be allowed, for the first time in their school career, to write a
composition of their choosing, including length and topic. The committee stated this type of composing should come from the student’s “personal experiences and observations” (National Education Association, 1894, p. 88).

It is important to note that the committee likened compositional instruction to mathematics instruction, with the idea that there is a progression of operations to be taught and followed. Just like addition is taught before subtraction, then multiplication, and lastly division; the committee believed that teaching students how to write compositions should be taken up in the same manner. They went so far as to say that a teacher should never allow a student to write a paragraph if the student did not first have a strong grasp on proper sentence formation. It is also interesting to note that the committee specifically stated that formal and explicit grammar instruction should never begin before a child turned thirteen, and that spelling should be taught incidentally, not from a spelling text book. The committee summed up their feelings regarding composition instruction with the following statement: “Compositions and all other written exercises should receive careful and appropriate criticism, and the staff of instructors should be large enough to protect every teacher from an excess of this peculiarly exacting and fatiguing work” (National Education Association, 1894, p. 88).

The next noteworthy national report regarding the field of writing instruction was commissioned in 1911, and is commonly called the Hosic Report, named for the chairman of the committee who compiled the report, James Fleming Hosic. The Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools (1917), was commissioned by the National Education Association in conjunction with the National Center for Teachers of English (NCTE) during the first year of their formation. The results from this report vastly differed from the Committee of Ten’s beliefs regarding writing instruction (Burrows, 1977).
It was the common held belief up to this time that children would not be able to write well until they could read well. Therefore the explicit teaching of writing skills and opportunities for students to write was not afforded until students reached the intermediate grades. However, the information provided by the group of high school English teachers when compiling the report, stated these practices were not conducive to producing quality written work from students (Chomsky, 1971; Hosic, 1917). The representatives from the NCTE believed that students should be given the opportunity to compose original work as early as first grade, a vastly different idea than the Committee’s notion that original composition should not begin until grades seven or eight (Hosic, 1917).

The main purpose of this report was to, as the name suggests, reorganize secondary English Education, not only to better prepare those students who were headed to college, but also to de-formalize English instruction. The sentiment of the report stated that English, writing instruction included, should be more authentic and less formal. Students should be writing about personal experiences from an early age, and teachers should be making English lessons more relatable to the students’ lives. It seems that the current educational system laid out by the Committee of Ten was also not producing college-bound students with good compositional skills, as noted by the students’ college entrance exam essays (Hosic, 1917). Therefore a restructuring in regards to how and when to teach compositional skills was revisited.

The vastly different recommendations on writing instruction from The Hosic Report came only twenty-three years after the Committee of Ten. Perhaps the ideas so greatly differed because the Hosic Report included teacher’s beliefs on the best ways to teach writing instruction, with most of these beliefs founded on anecdotal histories collected by the teachers themselves. As stated earlier, the NCTE formed in 1911, and after being given a platform from which to
speak in the *Reorganization of English in Secondary Schools*, used their platform to promote their philosophy of writing instruction in other publications (Burrows, 1977), as evidenced by their contributions to *An Experience Curriculum* in 1935.

In 1935, *An Experience Curriculum*, a document representing views of teachers who were members of the NCTE, was published (Hatfield, 1935). In this document, teachers concurred with the earlier Hosic Report on issues such as beginning compositional instruction in first grade, and were even more forward thinking with their suggested emphasis on oral composition and creative writing. This marked the first time creative writing would be given merit as compared to more formal compositional writing. A component of the proposed suggestions that served to be important historically, is their recommendation that writing instruction be incorporated across the curriculum. The teachers also encouraged the explicit teaching of letter writing, business, formal, and casual. The letter-writing component of writing instruction came to serve as community service of sorts, as the United States soon entered World War II, and students wrote letters to soldiers overseas (Hatfield, 1935).

English instruction is a broad discipline and this fact has contributed to the controversy over how and when the components of instruction should be taught. In fact, after *An Experience Curriculum* (1935), the NCTE published several books, a series in fact, dedicated solely to the English curriculum. This endeavor continued from the 1950s into the late 1960s (Burrows, 1977).

In 1959, four organizations met to discuss the issues with teaching English after World War II (Burrows, 1977). They were the NCTE, the Modern Language Association, the American Studies Association, and the College English Association. The meeting was called the Basic Issues Conference. The participants in the conference discussed the issues with having
college enrollment at its peak, with a student body at many different levels of writing and from a variety of backgrounds. They published a report titled *Basic Issues in the Teaching of English* (1959). The report addressed such topics as continuity among the grade levels, and the importance of differentiation in teaching, as well as the call for both creative and objective communication aspects of writing instruction in both elementary and secondary schools (NCTE, 1959).

In the 1960s, the first federally funded program for English came to fruition and was called Project English (Burrows, 1977). Project English explored the development of curriculum, and in relation to writing instruction, stated that children should be exposed to quality literature in primary grades in order for the students to have quality role models of writing to emulate. As a result, a variety of quality literature found their way to elementary schools across the nation. Another new federally funded concept taking place at about this same time was professional development training for teachers in the area of writing. Some workshop sessions focused on helping the teachers become better writers themselves, while others focused on planning and instruction when teaching writing.

In 1966, a group of English educators from around the world convened at Dartmouth University, and come to agree on topics that complemented what was currently happening in America in terms of writer workshops and the importance of children being exposed to quality literature while being taught the mechanics of writing (Dixon, 1967). The idea of oral composition was emphasized, and how closely aligned writing was to speaking, and that to do either well, children were going to need many opportunities to speak and be allowed to write for many purposes. “English, as a subject, is learning to order experience through language, and that language is learned through the experience of using it” (Dixon, 1967, p.2).
Up until this point in writing instruction in America’s schools, the main focus on students’ work was on the end product, the finished work (Schreiner, 1997; Voss, 1983). A study done in 1971, by researcher Janet Emig, changed that. Emig conducted a case study analysis of eight twelfth graders where she explored how the students composed when writing (Emig, 1971). Everything about this study was groundbreaking, including the methodology used (Voss, 1983). The case study approach had not been used when examining writing instruction, nor had the focus ever been on the process of writing instead of the end product. Emig had the students write autobiographies of their writing experiences, which explained the context of the students’ past writing. She then had each of them orally compose three different stories and then write them on paper. What she discovered was that the thought processes of these students as they were composing, both orally and in writing, did not mirror the traditional steps of teaching composition. Traditionally, the stages of writing had been taught linearly, with the stages being defined by brainstorming or pre-writing, first-draft writing, editing, revising, and then finally publishing. The idea was that there was an operation to follow, with a solid beginning, middle, and end, when working on a compositional piece. However, the data garnered from this study showed the students using a recursive model. This insight into a nonlinear process of composing brought about a paradigm shift in the thinking in regards to how writing was taught.

In 1973, Donald Graves, a doctoral candidate from the University of Buffalo who later became a premier researcher in the field of process writing (Lipa & Harlin, 1990), did his dissertation study on writing instruction, mirroring Emig’s methodology; however, his focus was on students in elementary school (Graves, 1973). He followed the case study approach, and observed what children do as they write. What he discovered in his observations of seven-year old children was very similar to Emig’s (1971) discoveries. The students were not approaching
writing as a construct that had a clear beginning, middle, and end, but rather they were also treating writing as more of a recursive model, often repeating the stages of writing many times and in many different orders before they would declare their work finished. The findings from these studies marked the branching off of writing research into the area of the process approach to teaching writing (Voss, 1983).

Current Practices in Writing Instruction

“The complexity of the writing process and the interrelationships of its components have been underestimated by researchers, teachers, and other educators, because writing is an organic process that frustrates approaches to explain its operation” (Graves, 1994, p. 23). In the last twenty-five years, the research in the field of writing instruction leans heavily towards the benefits of using a process approach to teaching writing (Graves, 1994; Watson & Guidry, 2002; Graham & Hebert, 2010). This contrasts greatly with the more traditional method of teaching writing, which includes a sequence of steps that should be followed with a specific order, and often has the teacher teaching mechanical skills in isolation (Kitao & Saeki, 1992).

A traditional approach to writing involves the aforementioned emphasis on the end product and involves a teacher-centered approach of instruction, with the teacher often assigning a writing topic instead of allowing the students to choose (Kitao & Saeki, 1992). In this style of writing instruction, writing is not interactive or collaborative. It is important to note; however, that not many classrooms adopt a clear process versus traditional approach, but rather employ a continuum between the two (Atwell, 1987; Kitao & Saeki, 1992). However, a plethora of research exists in support of the process-oriented approach to teaching writing (Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2001; Graham & Hebert, 2010; Neuman, 2000; Tompkins, 2011).
The process approach leans towards a student-centered method of teaching writing where the children, more often than not, choose their writing topics and are allowed to work in collaborative groups when writing (Tompkins, 2011). The students brainstorm a topic together gleaning from each other’s ideas and prior knowledge. Interactive writing occurs in a number of ways, a popular one being the language experience approach. In this approach the students write a story of their choosing in their own words, not paying mind to spelling or grammar usage. This is a very pragmatic approach to writing instruction, where the non-standard language of the writer is not only valued, but encouraged. Research suggests that exercises such as this helps writers develop their voice, with voice being defined as an ever-important trait in writing. All five stages of writing are experienced in this type of writing instruction, but the students lead the direction of the stages, with a great deal of time dedicated to reflection and revision. The main concentration with this type of writing exercise is on the message that is being communicated.

The findings yielded from such studies as Emig’s (1971) and Graves (1973), suggests that before teachers can “know how to teach writing, we must first understand how we write” (Zamel, 1982). By doing just that, by shifting the focus from the product to the process, the composing process itself gets turned on its head. According to Vivian Zamel (1982), a professor of English, who has written numerous articles on the issues of teaching compositional skills, and in particular teaching them to English language learners:

The composing process seems to be an extremely complex undertaking, the nature of which militates against prescriptive approaches to the teaching of writing; it involves much more than studying a particular grammar, analyzing and imitating rhetorical models, or outlining what it is one plans to say. The process involves not only the act of writing itself, but prewriting and rewriting, all of which are interdependent. (p. 196)

An important aspect of the process approach to teaching writing involves the allowance of the students to reflect on their work. It is this reflexive process that helps distinguish it from
the traditional method of writing (Tompkins, 2011). Allowing students to situate themselves into
the context of what they are writing, and then giving them the opportunity to rethink, revise, edit,
and then rewrite in a fluid manner, not concrete step by concrete step. Another component of
process writing also includes the importance of peer edits and revision. By allowing the students
to constructively criticize each other’s work, and using such methods as author’s chair, a
constructivists approach to teaching writing which allows the students to work in small groups
and offer ideas for revision to one student’s work, “the organic processes” (Graves, 1994, p. 23)
of the writing process can be nurtured.

In a study comparing less experienced writers with more experienced writers in order to
compare the actions the writers performed as they composed, it was noted that experienced
writers spent just as much time, if not more, in reflection of their work (Somers, 1980). Also,
when the experienced writers revised they were likely to make major structural changes to their
work. They changed their opinions and altered the message they were communicating. In doing
so, they reported they learned more about their writing topic as compared to the reports of the
less experienced writers.

The less experienced writers were observed making revisions; however, the majority of
their revisions dealt with the mechanics of their work. They seemed to be revising for usage and
grammar, but the overall message of their writing topic never altered, with the meaning of their
piece never changing. The knowledge gleaned is that experienced writers incorporated revision
to include a much deeper process than the less-experienced writers’ revision of grammar usage.
This would seem to indicate that over time writers could change the definition of what revision
means to them to incorporate a definition that would allow them to make deep, structural
changes to their work. This study also supported the notion that the process of writing should
include a back and forth between the stages of writing and not follow a linear model. The overall importance of studies like these however, was that they illustrated the fact that the then method of teaching writing was greatly contrasting with the way children were naturally approaching writing (Schreiner, 1997).

According to Gail Tompkins (2011), who has written numerous books on literacy for beginning readers and writers, one of the characteristics of an effective teacher is a teacher who understands how children learn. By understanding how children approach the writing process, it better helps a teacher understand how to teach it (Graves, 1973). It also highlights the needs to support children in their efforts when those efforts result in higher quality written work.

According to the findings of the studies exploring process writing, children need opportunities to choose what they want to write about and they need ample time to think about the topic in brainstorming and prewriting type activities (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1994; Schreiner, 1997; Tompkins, 2011).

According to Emig (1971):

> The length of the prewriting period available affects the choice of subject matter. If, according to the writer’s perception, the period is curtailed by his own schedule or by others, he usually does not elect to work on a topic or problem he regards as cognitively or psychically complex. (p. 50)

This suggests that by delivering a type of instruction that does not allow choice or the time necessary to fully develop thoughts, that this could hinder the process of writing and thusly affect the quality and depth of the students’ work.

The NCTE (2004), released their statement on their beliefs about the teaching of writing, stating that writing is a process, and should be taught as such: “Knowledge about writing is only complete with understanding the complex of actions in which writers engage as they produce texts” (NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing, 2004). The organization made several
points as to how they felt teachers could be better at teaching writing as a process, stating that it is necessary for teachers to understand the following features of writing instruction:

- The relationship between features of finished writing and the actions writers perform.
- What writers of different genres say about their craft.
- The process of writing from the inside, that is, what they themselves as writers experience in a host of different writing situations.
- Multiple strategies for approaching a wide range of typical problems writers face during composing, including strategies for audience and task analysis, invention, revision, and editing.
- Multiple models of the writing process, the varied ways individuals approach similar tasks, and the ways that writing situations and genres inform processes.
- Published texts, immediately available, that demonstrate a wide range of writing strategies and elements of craft.
- The relationship among the writing process, curriculum, learning, and pedagogy.
- How to design time for students to do their best work on an assignment.
- How writers use tools, including word-processing and design software and computer-based resources. (NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing, 2004, p. 2, para. 4)

In 2010, Steve Graham and Michael Hebert, professors from Vanderbilt University and prominent researchers in the field of writing instruction, were commissioned by the Alliance for Excellent Education to write a report on the importance of writing instruction in America’s schools and how proficiency in writing was linked to proficiency in reading. The report was
In the report, Graham and Hebert devised three recommendations for teaching writing according to the current research-validated practices.

The first recommended step was to “have students write about the text they read” (Graham & Hebert, 2010, p. 13). This step in writing instruction helped students make connections to what they were reading. Research suggests that when children connect to text personally, globally, as well as making text to text connections when reading, their comprehension of said text will improve (Tompkins, 2011). Having students write about what they were reading would not only help to improve their writing skills, but also aid in their comprehension of the text.

The researchers listed several approaches when having students write about what they are reading, with one being to use such methods as guided-journal writing (Graham & Hebert, 2010). This type of approach includes having the students write reactions to the characters they were reading about in a very informal way. This aids in the all-important personal connection to the text being read, and allows the students the time to make inferences regarding the texts they were reading. Graham & Hebert also suggested that students write summaries of the text they were reading. The benefits of this were two-fold, with one reason being that it increases writing fluency, and the other reason is that it aids in retelling, an important measure of comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Tompkins, 2011). It was also recommended that students be explicitly taught how to take notes, as this type of instruction would help students prioritize and organize their thoughts, an important aspect of the writing process.

The second recommended step was to “teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text” (Graham & Hebert, 2010, p. 17). It was their recommendation that a
continuum be employed in the two main approaches to teaching writing, traditional and process approach, and that just as much attention be given to the process of writing as the final product. It was also recommended that spelling skills be taught explicitly. The third and final recommendation offered by the duo was to “increase how much students write” (Graham & Hebert, 2010, p. 20). Daily writing for multiple purposes was suggested.

In June of 2010, Louisiana adopted the Common Core State Standards, a state led initiative coordinated by the Council of Chief State Officers (CCSO) and the National Governors Association (NGA) (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010; Common Core State Standards, 2010). The standards are “based on previous input from higher education leaders and employers as well as the most effective models in the country and across the world” (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010, para. 2). The new standards take into account the most recent research-validated classroom practices, and the readiness level students need to have in a post-secondary institution (NGA & CCSO, 2010).

In regards to writing instruction in elementary and secondary settings, the Common Core State Standards (2010) offered their position:

To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students need to learn to use writing as a way of offering and supporting opinions, demonstrating understanding of the subjects they are studying, and conveying real and imagined experiences and events. They learn to appreciate that a key purpose of writing is to communicate clearly to an external audience, and they begin to adapt the form and content of their writing to accomplish a particular task and purpose. (p. 18)

The position statement went on to say that in order to meet the necessary writing goals, “students must devote significant time and effort to writing, producing numerous pieces over short and extended time frames throughout the year” (NGA & CCSO, 2010, p. 18). All of the above were meant to apply to students in primary grades as well, with the standards outlining the types of writing instruction to be implemented at each grade level. In first grades through fourth,
the standards say students should write opinion pieces, informative/explanatory texts, narratives with plots ranging from the simple to the complex, and detailed stories that involve the writing process approach to teaching writing, which should include extensive time for the revision and editing stages of writing. Of course, the earlier grades would be given more adult support when attempting these writing tasks. The new standards also state that students should spend time in shared writing activities, citing the importance of collaboration both from peers and teachers in the writing process.

In 2011, the Louisiana Department of Education, in response to the newly adopted Common Core State Standards, published a document titled *Louisiana’s Comprehensive Literacy Plan* (2011), which states how Louisiana will address the new standards in English language arts. This literacy plan heavily cites the previously mentioned work of Graham & Hebert’s (2010) *Writing to Read*, employing their three main recommendations for writing instruction in the classroom. In the section dedicated to writing, the new literacy plan summed up the tone of the current research related to writing by stating:

Students’ skills in writing improve through explicit skill and process instruction and by increasing the frequency of writing. To improve writing, students need time to experiment, practice new skills, share, and revise. Students learn to write by working through the process of idea conception, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The process, however, is not a linear progression, but a recursive back and forth among the stages. (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011)

This brings the research related to the best practices in writing instruction to the present day, with the history of writing in the United States seeing many changes, from traditional methods to the process-oriented approach.

**Teachers’ Educational Beliefs**

Arthur Combs, a prominent psychologist and educator, once said: “Perhaps the most important single cause of a person’s success or failure educationally has to do with the question
of what he believes about himself” (Combs, 1999, p.36). According to Christopher Clark, professor of education at Michigan State University who specializes in research pertaining to teacher thinking and its applications in teacher practices, teachers make several decisions throughout their instructional day and those decisions cannot often be traced back to any particular educational theory learned in a teacher preparation program, but more often than not decisions are based on personal theories developed by the teacher over time (Clark, 1988). Research suggests these theories are formed by teachers’ educational beliefs, and that a teacher’s beliefs guide the instructional strategies used in the classroom (Paraje, 1992; Braithwaite, 1999).

These beliefs can be based on a number of things, from pedagogical preferences, to teacher preparation courses, to personal experiences. With respect to personal experiences, teachers have reported they use both their prior knowledge and their in-class experiences to decide “what works for me” (Braithwaite, 1999, p. 3). Clark seconds this idea by saying that teachers “tend to be eclectic aggregations of cause-effect propositions from many sources, rules of thumb, generalizations drawn from personal experiences, beliefs, values, biases, and prejudices” (Clark, 1988, p. 5). It has also been suggested that those areas of the curriculum that are controversial in their methods of effectively teaching them, such as writing instruction, teachers’ educational beliefs “can theoretically and practically influence the outcomes students gain from their pedagogical encounters” (Braithwaite, 1999, p. 3).

It is necessary, when describing a construct as subjective as one’s beliefs, to attempt to define the term. Though there is ample research pertaining to teachers’ educational beliefs and their impact on classroom practices (Paraje, 1992; Braithwaite, 1999; Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2001), there is no one, agreed-upon definition of the term. After reviewing the literature, the definition that incorporates the most key elements from the prominent researchers in the field,
with respect to teacher beliefs, provides the following definition. Beliefs can be seen “as embodied conscious and unconscious ideas and thoughts about oneself, the world, and one’s position in it, developed through membership in various social groups; these ideas are considered by the individual to be true” (Cross, 2009, p. 326).

Beliefs not only play an important role in guiding instructional decisions, but also have a great chance in disallowing change among classroom practices (Paraje, 1992). According to Frank Paraje (1992), teachers form their beliefs and then reinforce those said beliefs with selected portions from their memory, which may or may not accurately detail the experience. He calls this the “perseverance phenomena” (Paraje, 1992, p. 317). It seems that teachers decide what they believe to be true, and then only recall anecdotal data and memories which support that belief. According to Nisbett and Ross (1980), who wrote a book titled, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment*, this phenomenon is extremely powerful and illustrates the importance in helping teachers be reflective and examine their beliefs in regards to teaching a specific area of instruction. Nisbett and Ross (1980) concluded that beliefs will often continue to exist even when there is no rational evidence to support them. Paraje sums up this sentiment by saying, “This is not to say that beliefs do not change under any circumstance but that they generally do not change even when it is logical or necessary for them to do so” (Paraje, 1992, p. 317). This highlights the importance and power of teacher beliefs. It is also important to note how deeply rooted beliefs are to the society around us, and that if our beliefs are connected to our idea of self, then those beliefs will be influenced by race, family, and our community (Paraje, 1992). It is those connections that Paraje (1992) states “create the values that guide one’s life, develop and maintain other attitudes, interpret information, and determine behavior” (p. 319).
In regards to the field of teaching writing, and the impact of teacher’s educational beliefs on the best ways to do just that, Steve Graham, co-author of *Writing to Read*, Karen Harris and Barbara Fink (2001), explored the idea of “teacher efficacy in writing” (p. 177), with efficacy being defined as the ability to generate a preferred end result. The majority of previous studies pertaining to teacher efficacy dealt with teaching in general, and did not address specific content areas. Graham, Harris, and Fink (2001), reported that in those studies “teachers’ feelings of efficacy varied depending on the subject, the type of instructional activity, and the composition of the class” (p. 179). Therefore they believed it would be interesting to explore efficacy specifically as it related to writing instruction. One of the things they discovered through the use of a teacher efficacy scale that they modified for the purposes of their study, was that the variation of teachers’ efficacy scores were connected to their beliefs about teaching writing. In regards to teacher beliefs it was not the aim of the researchers to determine how or if the beliefs guided instruction, but rather to determine if there was any predictive information linking teacher beliefs and efficacy. They used the Writing Orientations Scale, which measures “the value teachers place on explicit instruction, correctness in writing, and natural or incidental learning approaches” (Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2001, p. 180). The results of the study linked teachers with high efficacy with those who had high expectations of student work and were more willing to allow student collaboration when writing. Those teachers who scored low on the efficacy scale reported they had lower expectations regarding not only their students’ ability to write, but their ability to teach it. These teachers reported negative feelings associated with writing. A similar notion was reported in a study of secondary teachers, which showed that teachers who viewed themselves as poor writers were likely to assign writing less as a curricula topic, and felt less confident when assessing their students’ writing, than those who had positive feelings.
associated with writing (Daisey, P. 2009). In this case, teacher beliefs were not only guiding their instructional decisions, but also informing how often the topic was taught and measured.

Graham, Harris, and Fink (2001), often used the term confidence interchangeably with efficacy, stating “Effective instruction in writing undoubtedly requires more than the possession of the latest knowledge and skills, but is also dependent on teachers’ confidence that they can affect student learning” (p. 178). Their use of the word confidence is interesting; as their results showed that a teacher’s confidence, or efficacy level, in regards to teaching writing directly affected their level of expectation of their students’ ability to write, and also affected the types of writing strategies they employed, be it more collaborative activities or more teacher-controlled and directed. It seems that the teachers’ beliefs, at least somewhat, were connected to how they viewed themselves as writers.

When Paraje (1992) was asked to state his feelings regarding educational beliefs in terms of research capabilities, he stated: “I have argued that the investigation of teachers’ beliefs is a necessary and valuable avenue of educational inquiry” (p. 326). However, it has not been one that has been fully explored as it pertains to writing instruction.

Summary

Writing instruction, the importance of it and the methods to teach it, have been a topic of discussion since the beginning of formalized education in our country (Burrows, 1977). The trends and issues related to the field of writing have changed from the more traditional to the process-oriented approach, with even the definition of what it means to compose in writing, changing over time. In the late 19th century, for those students in the early grades, to compose meant to copy someone else’s work. In today’s classroom, when a student in the primary grades
composes a story the work is meant to be original (Tompkins, 2011). No matter the changes in the field of writing, the one thing that has remained constant is the importance of a student’s ability to write proficiently, and the implications of that ability or lack thereof on the likelihood of his or her success in a post-secondary institution or the nation’s job force (Graham & Hebert, 2010). It is the importance of creating proficient writers that necessitates the need to explore the factors that contribute to the way it is taught. Due to the resistant nature of beliefs in general, and the power of teachers’ educational beliefs specifically, it becomes necessary to explore and examine them and their impact on instructional decisions in the classroom (Paraje, 1992). This is especially true as they pertain to the area of writing instruction, due to the personal nature of the writing process and the role of self within that process.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS AND MATERIALS

Design and Methodology

“I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of materials” (Creswell, 2007). John Creswell, professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in his book, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, offers this description of qualitative research: “Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37).

The focus in qualitative research is on exploring the process and the emergence of themes within that process, with the researcher acting as the “key instrument” (Creswell, 2001, p. 38). He or she may collect data with a particular type of protocol, but it is up to the researcher to analyze the data, make inferences, generalize themes, and make connections. This ethnographic case study followed those aforementioned attributes of qualitative research, with the researcher acting as the “key instrument” (Creswell, 2007, p. 38) of analysis. The researcher in question is qualified to act as the instrument of analysis as evidenced by teacher certification of English and Elementary Education grades 1-5, as well as being a reading specialist and educational diagnostician.

Ethnography has been defined as “the research technique of direct observation of human activity in an ongoing naturalistic setting” (Verma & Mallick, 1999, p. 88). According to James Spradley (1980), renowned ethnographer and author of the *Participant Observer*, “the central aim of ethnography is to understand another way of life from the native view” (p. 3). The
understanding in ethnography often comes from extensive naturalistic observation, open-ended interview questions, as well as the collection of artifacts and documents related to the phenomena. For the purposes of this study, the natives were the primary grade classroom teachers.

Case study can be defined as “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Ultimately this study was an ethnography investigating the culture of primary grade teachers in regards to writing instruction, encompassing how they view themselves as writers, to their self-reported beliefs about teaching writing, to their classroom practices involving writing instruction. The data collected included writing autobiographies detailing the teachers’ past experiences with writing, interviews, and classroom observations. The sequence of data collection used in the study followed this order: (1) writing autobiographies, (2) interviews, and (3) classroom observations. The data was analyzed, and then cross-analyzed, and will be presented in six case studies, with each teacher serving as a case.

Framework

This ethnographic case study followed the model set forth by James Spradley. In his book, Participant Observer, he details the Developmental Research Sequence Method, an ethnographic method of analysis, which outlines the twelve steps that was followed throughout the course of this study (Spradley, 1980). The steps are described below.

Social Situation

Spradley defines a social situation as any setting which includes “three primary elements: a place, actors, and activities” (Spradley, 1980, p. 39). This study was conducted in two separate
Title 1 elementary schools in neighboring school districts, with the focus being on six primary grade teachers, a first, second, and third grade teacher from each school. The researcher chose these two schools due to their similarities among demographic data and school performance scores. Primary grade classroom teachers were the focus of the study due to the emphasis on the importance of quality writing instruction in those grades (Graham & Hebert, 2010). The six classrooms observed served as the setting, with the teachers serving as the actors. The study was designed to investigate teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing, comparing their personal histories as writers and self-reported beliefs on writing and teaching writing, with that of their teacher practices. The teachers were chosen based on principal recommendations of those teachers who met the researcher’s qualifications. Those qualifications being teachers of first, second, and third grade, and who were certified and highly qualified teachers of English language arts.

Spradley’s third component of a social situation encompasses the activities involved with the above-mentioned place and actors. This study lasted six weeks, and activities therein ranged from observation of teachers during writing instruction, with each teacher being observed twice for the duration of the daily writing instruction, to open-ended interviews, as well as discussions on how the teachers viewed themselves as writers as evidenced by the information provided in their writer autobiographies.

Participant Observation

“All human beings act as ordinary participants in many social situations” (Spradley, 1980). It was the role of the researcher in this study to act as participant observer, not someone merely being involved in a scene, as an ordinary participant might be, but as someone who is
meticulously collecting data and analyzing a scene as it happens (Spradley, 1980). Spradley describes the difference between ordinary participant and participant observer, as well as a continuum of participation that includes five levels. They range from the nonparticipant to the complete participant, with passive, moderate, and active participant falling in the middle of the continuum.

Keeping the purpose of this study in mind, the researcher transitioned between a passive to moderate participant observer, the purposes of which were two-fold. One, it was the goal of the researcher when observing the teachers’ classroom practices to be as unobtrusive as possible. In this instance, the role of passive participant was taken. According to Spradley: “The ethnographer engaged in passive participation is present at the scene of action but does not participate or interact with other people to any great extent” (Spradley, 1980, p. 59). He goes on to say, “About all you need to do is find an ‘observation post’ from which to observe and record what goes on. If the passive participant occupies any role in the social situation, it will be that of bystander, spectator, or loiterer” (Spradley, 1980, p. 59). When observing, it was the goal of the researcher to blend into the landscape of the classroom and be given as little attention as possible. This was done in order to maintain the integrity of the writing instruction as planned by the teacher.

It is important to note that this passive participant role shifted to a more moderate participant observer when interviewing the teachers and/or discussing with them their writer autobiographies. The nature of the interviews, as well as the discussions, required the researcher to become more engaged with the teachers, as direct questions was asked in order to ascertain and clarify the teachers’ beliefs and feelings in regards to writing instruction.

Ethnographic Record
“An ethnographic record consists of field notes, tape recorders, pictures, artifacts, and anything else that documents the social situation under study” (Spradley, 1980, p. 63). For the purposes of this study, the interviews and classroom observations were audio recorded digitally as to uphold Spradley’s “verbatim principle” (Spradley, 1980, p. 67). Spradley suggests audio recording as much as possible, so there is no question as to the language of the subject, as he warns against the researcher’s “tendency to translate” (Spradley, 1980, p. 67). The ethnographic record consisted of field notes made during observations, using as much descriptive language as possible, as to fully describe the context in which actions were observed. When the researcher was on site a condensed version of events was recorded. Upon further reflection, and with the transcribed observations, an expanded account was written. This was recorded in a fieldwork journal. As Spradley states, “Doing ethnography differs from many other kinds of research in that you, the ethnographer, become a major research instrument” (Spradley, 1980, p. 72). As such, the fieldwork journal also served as the location for reflection, interpretation, and acknowledgement of any bias of the researcher. Notes were also taken during each interview session, and later reflected upon. Teachers’ comments on student work as well as their writer autobiographies were also examined in this way.

Descriptive Observation

“The basic unit of all ethnographic inquiry is the question-observation” (Spradley, 1980, p. 73) and this was also true of this study. Spradley describes two types of descriptive observations, the grand tour and the mini tour. The former consists of describing the major features of the social situation, and the latter offers a more in-depth look at the dimensions of what is being observed. Spradley recommends using nine elements to consider when doing descriptive observations:
1. Space: the physical place or places
2. Actor: the people involved
3. Activities: a set of related acts people do
4. Object: the physical things that are present
5. Act: single actions that people do
6. Event: a set of related activities that people carry out
7. Time: the sequencing that takes place over time
8. Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish

These dimensions served to guide the researcher when doing both grand and mini-tour observations of the social situation, and also guided the researcher when asking questions. The grand tour pointed out the key features of the social situation, with the mini-tour focusing on specific details within said social situation. Spradley’s nine dimensions provided the scope and sequence of the observations.

Ethnographic Analysis

Spradley (1980) states “Analysis is a search for patterns” (p. 85). He goes on to say that “Analysis of any kind involves a way of thinking. It refers to the systematic examination of something to determine its parts, the relationship among parts, and their relationship to the whole” (Spradley, 1980, p. 85). During this study, the goal of the researcher was to investigate all parts of writing instruction, including the relationship between beliefs and teacher practices, and how that relationship impacts the field of teaching writing as a whole. Cultural domains were identified among the data, with the data consisting of teacher autobiographies regarding their writing histories, field notes, transcriptions of audio recordings from classroom
observations and interviews, and teacher comments on student work. The data was explored in order to examine any patterns. A domain analysis was formed, as well as a comparison among the relationships of the separate domains, including a comparison within domains. Semantic relationships were explored in the hopes of connecting general themes between how the teachers viewed themselves as writers to their self-reported beliefs on teaching writing to their classroom practices when teaching writing. The findings among the relationships across and within the domains were then compared to research-validated writing practices.

Focused Observations

“A focus refers to a single cultural domain or a few related domains and the relationships of such domains to the rest of the cultural scene” (Spradley, 1980, p. 101). For the purposes of this study, the descriptive observations and focused observations occurred simultaneously. Spradley’s nine dimensions of a social situation guided the information gathered during the descriptive observations, and the digital audio recordings served as a tool to aid in the more in depth look at the cultural domains, providing a focus to which the histories, beliefs, and practices were evidenced in the teachers’ instructional practices. This served as the focused observations, as these recordings were later analyzed with the focus of analysis being on the semantic relationships found between and within the identified cultural domains.

Taxonomic Analysis

Spradley states that a “taxonomy is a set of categories organized on the basis of a single semantic relationship. The major difference between the two is that a taxonomy shows more of the relationships among the things inside the cultural domain” (Spradley, 1980, p. 112). For the
purposes of this study a taxonomic analysis was conducted in order to make known the relationships among and within the domains found within the collected data.

Selected Observations

Spradley says, “It is useful to think of the three kinds of observations as a funnel” (p. 128). He describes descriptive observations as the wide, outer rim of the funnel, with the focus observations moving down into the narrower portion of the funnel. Selected observations represent the other end of the funnel, near the small opening, with their purpose being to discover any differences and/or similarities found among the categories or cultural domains once those domains are identified. This particular step in Spradley’s developmental research sequence involves the interview process, both formal and informal.

During this study formal interviews took place among all six teachers participating in the study. This consisted of the teachers meeting with the researcher one at a time at an agreed upon time and place. The questions asked of the teachers followed Spradley’s recommendations for types of questions and included descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. A similar study regarding teacher’s beliefs and practices included a list of interview questions that served as a springboard for this study’s questions, and were modified and adapted to fit the needs of this particular study (Lipa & Harlin, 1990). See Appendix A for the list of interview questions. The purpose of the interview questions was to aid in extrapolating any differences between how the teachers viewed themselves as writers to their self-reported beliefs about writing instruction to the instructional decisions they made during writing instruction. Informal interviews also took place. These interviews occurred spontaneously during the course of the study when the researcher felt that a question would help clarify the collected data.
The transcripts from the formal interviews were also analyzed according to Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch’s (2006) listening guide approach, in order to ascertain the contrapuntal voice of each teacher. Gilligan et. al (2006) suggests reading each interview transcript at least four times, each time reading for a different purpose.

The first reading of each interview transcript entailed searching for the narrative or plot. What story is the speaker telling? The second reading of the interviews involved locating all the “I” phrases used during the interview. The purposes of which were to focus on how the speaker saw herself in regards to the discussion topic. According to Andrea Doucet, professor at Carleton University, who recommends using the listening guide approach to explore the narrated subject, “‘I’ gives access to this emerging narrated self” (Doucet, 2008, p. 406). For this reason I phrases were also examined in the teachers’ writing autobiographies. In order to aid in identifying the participating teachers’ sense of self I poems were written. This entailed pulling all of the “I” phrases out of the teachers’ comments and placing them in the format of a poem. This was done in order to glean the overall voice and tone of the participant regarding their histories, beliefs, and practices regarding writing. The third reading of the interviews entailed searching for relational terms. How does the speaker view herself in relation to others? The fourth and final reading of the interview transcript focused on the dominant ideologies found in the transcript with the purpose on connecting common themes found in the interview.

Componential Analysis

According to Spradley (1980), “Componential analysis is the systematic search for the attributes (components of meaning) associated with cultural categories” (p. 131). Once cultural categories, or domains, were identified among the collected data, the componential analysis step
in Spradley’s method was used to plot any connections found among the data. Similarities and differences found both within and between domains will be reported. See Figures 3.1 and 3.2 illustrating the partial and complete analysis, including the taxonomic analysis.

Figure 3.1  Figure 3.2

Cultural Themes

“The concept of theme has its roots in the general idea that cultures are more than bits and pieces of custom. Rather, every culture is a complex pattern” (Spradley, 1980, p. 141). The main goal of this ethnographic case study was to illustrate any patterns found among the different collected points of data. (The themes discovered may be tacit or explicit). How these themes connected, or the relationship between themes was also investigated. Spradley states that themes should emerge once the researcher has immersed herself within the culture of the social situation. For the purposes of this study, immersion was defined as observations, interviews, and extensive analysis of transcribed observations, interviews, and writing autobiographies.

Cultural Inventory

The last step of the Developmental Research Sequence is the cultural inventory. This entailed organizing all the data gathered during the course of the study in an attempt to see the entire picture before writing the ethnography. Just as doing inventory in a grocery store allows
the grocer to know how many of everything he has, it also allows him to see what he may not have, and the same goes for the researcher. If a hole existed in the data collected, doing an inventory would aid in illustrating this so that the researcher may fill in any gaps. An inventory was also necessary in providing the necessary visual for the ethnographic coding which took place. The researcher accomplished this task by using color-coded post-it notes to write identified categories. Once the categories were identified and displayed, the researcher was able to better analyze the emerging themes within and among the cultural domains.

Participant Sampling

According to John Creswell, “The idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). For this investigation, a purposeful sampling took place, including both setting and participants. The researcher chose the schools based on their similarities according to reported standardized district data and school performance scores. The teachers were chosen based on principal recommendations of those teachers who met the researcher’s qualifications. Those qualifications being teachers of first, second, and third grade, and who were certified and highly qualified teachers of English language arts.

Biases

Due to the nature of the types of inquiry associated with qualitative research and the methods of data collection, it was vital that the researcher not allow any personal beliefs to bias the data. As stated earlier, in ethnography the researcher is the “key instrument” (Creswell, 2007, p. 38). Due to the fact that the researcher is the medium through which all data passes, it is
imperative that the researcher record events as they actually occur and not alter or omit information so that a particular story is told. To aid with this endeavor, the researcher shared all collected data and results with the participants to verify that the participants’ original tone, intent, and messages were accurately conveyed. A further measure included soliciting an external auditor who inspected the raw data and the results in order to ascertain that the presentation of data and results in the study were not skewed in any way.

The purpose of the study was not to bring into light any negative implications towards the educational beliefs held by the teachers, or their choice of classroom practices in regards to writing instruction. On the contrary, the goal of this study was simply to illustrate any possible connections between how the teachers viewed themselves as writers, to how they believed regarding writing in general, to how they teach writing. A further analysis concerned whether or not any conflict existed between their classroom practices and research-validated practices.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the proposed study was garnered through the standards of validation set forth by Yvonne Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985), in their book *Naturalistic Inquiry*. According to Lincoln and Guba, there are four components of trustworthiness to be followed when doing qualitative research and they are as follows: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. By following the four components of trustworthiness, the researcher helped ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and verifiability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The truth value was determined by the data collection activities, which included prolonged engagement in the field through descriptive, focused, and selected observations,
formal and informal interviews of each participating subject, as well as through the collection of
teacher autobiographies and samples of student work. The triangulation of the data ensured the
accuracy of the study as the information was collected from numerous sources, persons, and
methods. This speaks to the credibility of the study.

The applicability of the study was determined by the purposeful sampling of the
participating subjects and setting of the study, and through thick, rich description of the social
situation in order to provide enough detail so that an accurate visual image was created. The
sampling of setting and subjects, as well as the detailed descriptions, speaks to the transferability
of the study.

The processes performed during data collection determined the consistency of the study. Some of the processes entailed the researcher making field notes, conducting a taxonomic
analysis charting general and connected themes, as well as showing evidence of found
differences. During the ethnographic coding a poster was created which housed the color-coded
characteristics that emerged within the data. A field work journal was kept, as well as a
reflective journal. All of the above aided in the dependability of the study.

The neutrality of the study was determined by the connections to literature related to the
topic of the study, as well as evidenced by the data collected, and the researcher’s reflective
journal. This speaks to the verifiability of the proposed study. It was the hope of the researcher
that by enacting all four components of Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) standards of validation,
trustworthiness of the study would be established.

Summary

The importance of this study was to present the reader with collected data and research in
order to highlight any possible impact a teacher’s sense of self as a writer may have on their
educational beliefs regarding writing instruction, how those beliefs informed their instructional decisions, and how closely related those practices were to research-validated practices. This ethnographic case study of six primary grade teachers in two elementary schools connected generalized themes in an attempt to offer a broad explanation of the aforementioned problem.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The study was conducted at two urban elementary schools in neighboring school districts in Louisiana. Throughout this study they are referred to as Chesapeake Elementary and Roosevelt Elementary. Chesapeake Elementary is a Title 1 school with approximately 520 students, with over 95% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The mission of Chesapeake Elementary is to commit to excellence in teaching and learning for all students. According to the 2011 LEAP test results for fourth grade, the percentage of students who scored in the advanced range in English Language Arts was 4%; those who scored in the mastery was 20%, basic was 47%, approaching basic was 23%, which left 6% to score unsatisfactory (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). The 2011 school performance score was 96.6, resulting in a letter grade of C-.

Roosevelt Elementary is a Title 1 school with approximately 500 students, with over 95% qualifying for free and reduced lunch. The mission of Roosevelt Elementary is to provide all students with a challenging learning environment. According to the 2011 LEAP test results for fourth grade, the percentage of students who scored in the advanced range in English Language Arts was 1%; those who scored in the mastery was 5%, basic was 49%, approaching basic was 36%, which left 9% to score unsatisfactory (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011). The 2011 school performance score was 77.2, resulting in a letter grade of D.

The study was conducted for six consecutive weeks, three weeks at each school. The data was collected through interviews, observations, and writing autobiographies. Throughout the study, interviews were conducted with each of the six participating teachers, a first, second,
and third grade teacher at each site. The complete list of questions and interview transcripts are presented in Appendix A. In addition, observations were made during the writing instruction, with each participating teacher being observed twice for the length of their daily writing instruction. Spradley’s nine dimensions of a social situation, space, actor, activities, object, act, event, time, goal, and feeling, provided the protocol for the descriptive observations (Spradley, 1980). Writing autobiographies were also collected. Teachers were supplied with the following prompts: (1) How do you view yourself as a writer? (2) How would you rate your writing ability and explain. (3) Reflect on your experiences with writing, both positive and negative, in elementary, middle, high, and post-secondary school. (4) How are your positive and negative experiences connected to your teachers at the time? Field notes, journals, and a digital audio recorder were also used to obtain data during the study.

The framework of this ethnographic case study followed the model set forth by James Spradley in his Developmental Research Sequence Method (Spradley, 1980). The study took place in two urban elementary schools in neighboring school districts. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling, based on the principal recommendations of those teachers who met the researcher’s qualifications. Those qualifications being teachers of first, second, and third grade, and who were certified and highly qualified teachers of English language arts. The following is the collection of data from writing autobiographies, interviews, and observations.

Autobiography of Chesapeake Elementary First Grade Teacher

A writer’s autobiography was collected from a first grade teacher at Chesapeake Elementary who will be referred to throughout this study as Grace Munson. Ms. Munson earned her Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education in 2009, and has been teaching at Chesapeake
Elementary for the last three years. She has held the position of fist grade teacher all three years. She is currently pursuing her master’s degree in Educational Leadership. Ms. Munson is certified to teach elementary education, grades 1-5 and has achieved highly qualified status.

Results

According to Ms. Munson’s writing autobiography, she specified she viewed herself as an “overall decent writer” (G. Munson, writing autobiography, 2012), but then claimed, “I think I do a pretty good job of putting my thoughts down” (G. Munson, writing autobiography, 2012). Her overall feelings toward her experiences with writing were positive, citing that she enjoyed the editing process most of all. In college, her friends and classmates would often bring their work to Ms. Munson so that she could edit and critique their work, citing her ease with writing as the reason. “It has always come easy to me to put words onto paper” (G. Munson, writing autobiography, 2012).

In elementary school, Munson stated she loved to write, crediting the influence, not with her teachers, but of her father, a writer, with this love. “My father is a brilliant writer and has written for many newspapers and magazines. I always admired the way Dad could create a mental image with his words” (G. Munson, writer autobiography, 2012). She further detailed her father’s influence as having the greatest impact on her self worth as a writer. “As a child, Dad always encouraged reading and writing over anything else” (G. Munson, writer autobiography, 2012), crediting her ability to write due to her father’s positive impact in this area.

Due to the amount of writing Ms. Munson is required to do in her Master’s program, she claimed that the older she gets, the easier the process of writing has become. However, she believed it to be a complex process to teach her students. Even so, she reported that she felt comfortable doing it, and strived to learn more in respect to teaching writing. “I will continue to
work on ways to be a better teacher of writing and to have the impact on my students as my dad had on me” (G. Munson, writing autobiography, 2012).

In Ms. Munson’s writing autobiography it was necessary to examine her “I” phrases which were related to the research questions regarding history, beliefs, and practices. This was done in order to aid in identifying Munson’s sense of self with respect to writing. According to Andrea Doucet, professor at Carleton University, who recommended using the listening guide approach when exploring the narrated subject, “‘I’ gives access to this emerging narrated self” (Doucet, 2008, p. 406). This entailed pulling the relevant “I” phrases out of the autobiography and placing them in the format of a poem. This allowed the researcher to glean Ms. Munson’s overall tone regarding her history as a writer. Ms. Munson’s I poem follows:

I view myself as an overall decent writer.
I especially enjoy editing the work of others
When I was in college, before I became a teacher, friends would bring me their papers to edit
I remember people telling me I had my work cut out for me, but
I would just edit away!
I am currently working on my Master’s degree (there is a lot of writing) of essays and reports
I view myself as an overall decent writer.
I especially enjoy editing the work of others
When I was in college, before I became a teacher, friends would bring me their papers to edit
I remember people telling me I had my work cut out for me, but
I would just edit away!
I am currently working on my Master’s degree (there is a lot of writing) of essays and reports
I think I do a pretty good job of putting my thoughts down
I am constantly changing things
I often skip around

As a child, I loved to write.
I was a huge fan.
I would sit and type away: making up stories, constructing poems
I always admired the way Dad could create
I think my father had the greatest impact on me as a child.

As I have grown older, I have found writing in general much easier to do.
I truly believe teaching writing is one of the most difficult concepts to teach.
I feel comfortable doing it.
I will continue to work on ways to be a better teacher of writing.
Interview with Chesapeake Elementary First Grade Teacher

Self-expression was the term Munson used to describe the definition of writing, stating “I think it gives my students the opportunity to express themselves. Sometimes it’s easier for them to write down what they’re feeling rather than speak it” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012). Ms. Munson reported that she believes a good writer employs the writing process when writing and spoke of the process as non-linear, stating that a good writer “goes back and revises, edits, and reworks their work to tweak it just right” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012). She then went on to say that the recursive nature of writing is also the hardest part for her in her own writing, stating that the construction of a piece of writing, from the birth of an idea to a complete piece, can be daunting. The easiest part of writing for her was finding the right words. “It’s easy for me to put my thoughts in words, but as far as putting it together…it’s hard, it’s difficult” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012). She stated that revising is the most crucial part of the writing process, remarking that she revises as she writes as well as going through multiple revisions once a piece of writing has reached the final draft stage. When asked how she knew when a piece of her writing was finished she stated, “I know that it’s finished when I can read it and it makes sense, and it flows and has the right structure…when I can read it and not find any errors” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012).

When speaking in regards to teaching writing to her students, she articulated the difference between compositional writing and creative writing, stating the difference lied in how the piece was structured, claiming that creative writing afforded more flexibility in construction and structure, but that compositional writing had a template to follow. She cited the four-square writing method, a method of writing which uses a graphic organizer to aid in the students’
progress through the different stages of writing as evidence of her students’ compositional writing (Gould, E. & Gould, J., 1999).

When describing the differences between a more traditional approach to writing and the notion of teaching writing as a process, and where she felt the emphasis lied in her writing instruction, she claimed, “…the end is equally important as the process…” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012). She stated that teaching writing as a process includes the times they worked on a piece of writing as a class, focusing on what the students were doing at each stage of the writing process. She went on to say that in her writing instruction she felt that she addresses both the traditional methods of teaching writing as well as the process-approach to teaching writing. However, she claimed that while she does emphasize the proper mechanics, usage, and grammar of her students’ writing, her main focus in writing instruction is on the forming of ideas and making sure the students are communicating their intended message when they write.

After discussing the emphasis she placed on writing instruction, Ms. Munson remarked the first thing she does when teaching writing is to focus on the students’ handwriting, and then she moves on to teaching them how to write phrases, and finally teaching them to write simple sentences. Munson claimed that her students revised their writing once they were finished with a piece, stating “…they go back, and I make them make sure they have what they are supposed to” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012). She stated that she asks them to expand on their ideas, write better details, as well as check for capitalization, spelling, and punctuation errors.

Ms. Munson reported that her students spend approximately one hour per day on writing instruction and spend it doing journal writing and with large group writing instruction. Most of
their writing includes narratives and some poetry. When the students are writing independently, Ms. Munson reported she remains mobile, going from student to student monitoring them as they write. She stated she asks her students questions relating to their ideas and also checks for mechanics, usage, and proper grammar.

Observation with Chesapeake Elementary First Grade Teacher

Observation 1 Data

Upon entering Ms. Munson’s room, the researcher noted the space was a print-rich environment, observing the amount of words displayed in various word walls, as well as labeled items and the reading center, which was stacked with a multitude of books. The objects in the room consisted of desks lined up next to each other and wrapped around the perimeter of the classroom, resembling the letter U. In the center of the classroom was a teacher station, which included an assortment of manipulatives. The Smartboard and a timer, the only objects used by the teacher, were visible from every desk. Additional objects used by the students included markers, pencils, dry erase boards, napkins, and lined paper.

The event observed was the students’ daily writing instruction. The goal of Ms. Munson’s lesson was to teach the proper usage of the verbs am, is, and are, and when the letter “I” should be capitalized, including what order the words me and I should go when writing and speaking. Three activities were conducted during the lesson, with all three linking to the goal of the lesson. During all three activities no spatial changes took place, as all students remained seated at their desks.

For the first activity Ms. Munson wrote a sentence on the Smartboard: “I and she am six years old” (G. Munson, classroom observation, 2012), and instructed the students to correct the sentence on their individual white boards using their markers. Ms. Munson stated there were
five things wrong with the sentence. As the students copied the sentence down, Ms. Munson walked around the room, monitoring student work. “I see one person who’s got it right so far” (G. Munson, classroom observation, 2012). Munson then orally reviewed the mistakes with the students during a large group activity, where she corrected the sentence on the Smartboard. As the teacher went over the mistakes in the sentence, the students checked their own work. Munson then instructed the students to use their desks as an object to write on, and told the students to number their desktop from one to six. She pointed to a paragraph on the Smartboard that contained numerous sentences that needed correcting, all dealing with the use of am, is, and are, and when the letter “I” should be capitalized. The teacher led the students through the first three sentences orally as a large group activity, calling on students to correct the mistakes found in the sentences. The students then wrote the corrected sentences on their desktops. Once this was completed, Munson instructed the students to independently correct the last three sentences in the paragraph and gave them a minute and a half to complete this activity, and then set her timer. Once the timer went off, Ms. Munson then orally reviewed all mistakes found in the remaining sentences as the students corrected their sentences at their desks.

During the last activity Ms. Munson asked the students to write a story using the aforementioned verbs, am, is, and are. “I want you to write me a story using am, is, and are. I want your story to be about…If you were animal, what would you be” (G. Munson, classroom observation, 2012)? As the students wrote their stories, Ms. Munson monitored the students’ work by walking around the classroom. Her comments to the students were related to the expansion of their ideas and the details to support those ideas. She also made sure the students stayed on topic as they wrote.
The overall feelings associated with this lesson, as evidenced by the teacher comments and the students’ attitudes were positive. In regards to the observed emphasis on writing instruction, Ms. Munson displayed more of a process approach to teaching writing than traditional methods. During the initial phases of the writing lesson, Munson taught mechanical skills in isolation, which at first glance could be seen as a traditional approach; however, she then allowed the students to compose original works while embedding the mechanical skills that were addressed earlier in the lesson. As the students composed, Munson’s comments regarding their work stayed focus on what the students were doing as they wrote. She made sure they stayed on topic and aided in expanding their ideas and details. This lesson lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

Observation 2 Data

The space observed during the second observation was the same as the first, being Ms. Munson’s first grade classroom. No changes were made to the classroom between the first and second observations, in regards to space and objects in the classroom. For this lesson, the objects used by the teacher were the Smartboard, and the students used pencils and lined paper while seated at their desks.

The event observed was the students’ daily writing instruction. The goal of Ms. Munson’s lesson was to teach her students how to write a friendly letter. The writing lesson consisted of three activities, two of which directly linked to the lesson’s goal.

The first activity included Ms. Munson reviewing a topic she had been covering in social studies. “Ok, we have been talking about Louisiana. Why have we been talking about Louisiana? The Louisiana Purchase was in 1803 and in 1812 Louisiana became a state…so we’ve been talking about things long ago and things today” (G. Munson, classroom observation,
2012). Ms. Munson then orally reviewed with her students, comparing how things are presently in Louisiana with how they were 200 hundred years ago.

The next activity consisted of the teacher reviewing the parts of a friendly letter orally with the students. She then instructed them to begin their third and final activity, which was to write a friendly letter to someone living in Louisiana 200 hundred years ago. “We are going to write a letter to someone who lived in Louisiana 200 hundred years ago…we are going to talk to them about things we do now that they didn’t do 200 years ago” (G. Munson, classroom observation, 2012). Ms. Munson then passed out lined paper and instructed the students to use their pencils with the assignment.

Once the materials were passed out to the students, Ms. Munson again orally reviewed the parts of a friendly letter as a large group activity. Munson then instructed the students to begin their letter. As the students wrote, Ms. Munson went from desk to desk monitoring student progress, making sure everyone wrote the greeting of the letter correctly. Once everyone completed this task she instructed them to talk to their neighbor in regards to how they believe would be the best way to begin their letter. “I hear lots of good ideas. I hear you telling them about school and talking about food and transportation. That’s good” (G. Munson, classroom observation, 2012). After giving more technical instruction, like how many finger spaces should separate the sections of the letter, Ms. Munson instructed the students to begin writing. As the students wrote the letters Ms. Munson continued to move around the room monitoring for progress. Her comments to the students consisted of reminding students to begin their sentences with capital letters and end with the appropriate ending punctuation, as well as on expanding their ideas and including details in their writing. She conveyed to her students that she wished them to include the things they discussed with their neighbors in their letter. During all three
activities no spatial changes took place, as all students remained seated at their desks. The letter writing activity lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

The overall feelings associated with this lesson, as evidenced by the teacher comments and the students’ attitudes were mostly positive. Some students seemed reluctant to begin the writing process when composing their letters and Ms. Munson had to redirect them. In regards to the observed emphasis on writing instruction, Ms. Munson was more in line with the process approach to teaching writing, in that the students were allowed to compose their own letters, with the bulk of skill instruction embedded in the lesson writing activity. As the students composed, Munson’s comments regarding their work stayed focus on what the students were doing as they wrote, as well as making sure they used proper beginning capitalization and ending punctuation. She also made sure they stayed on topic and orally aided in expanding their ideas and details.

Autobiography of Chesapeake Elementary Second Grade Teacher

A writing autobiography was collected from a second grade teacher at Chesapeake Elementary who will be referred to throughout this study as Lori Thompson. Ms. Thompson earned a Masters of Arts in Teaching in 2004, and has been teaching a total of nine years, the last six at Chesapeake Elementary. All nine years have been served as a second grade teacher. Ms. Thompson is certified in elementary education grades 1-5, and has achieved highly qualified status.

Results

According to Ms. Thompson’s writing autobiography, she specified she viewed herself as a “competent writer” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012), rating her writing ability as average; however, she stated “I sometimes have difficulty transferring my ideas to paper” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012). Thompson’s overall feelings associated with writing
in regards to her history as a writer and her beliefs with respect to teaching writing were negative. Her writing history prior to college included writing reports and term papers in high school. During college Ms. Thompson reported that she took a creative writing course that she described as a challenge, stating, “The most challenging part was the impromptu writings. I had such a difficult time getting started and getting my ideas to paper” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012). She then went on to write “I still find writing a challenge as an educator. My personal strengths and weaknesses tend to reflect in my teaching of writing” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012).

Ms. Thompson included in her autobiography (2012) that she considers her strengths in writing to be organizations and the traditional conventions of writing:

Organization and conventions are my strengths, and I seem to spend most of instruction on these traits. Since I have difficulty in instructing my students in the traits of ideas and voice, most of their writing has centered on the final product and not the process of writing.

When Ms. Thompson described her feelings toward teaching writing and her students’ ability to write, she stated “My expectations are low, and I hate to say that about myself, but I think it all goes back to the fact that I don’t feel comfortable teaching it” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012).

In Ms. Thomson’s writing autobiography it was necessary to examine her “I” phrases in order to aid the researcher in identifying Thompson’s sense of self with respect to writing. This entailed pulling out the “I” phrases that were related to three explored domains: histories, beliefs, and practices, and placing them in the format of a poem. This allowed the researcher to glean Ms. Thompson’s overall tone in respects to these areas. Ms. Thompson’s I poem follows:

I am a competent writer
I would rate my ability as average
I sometimes have difficulty
In college I took a creative writing class
I had such a difficult time
I still find writing a challenge
I seem to spend most of the instruction on organization and conventions of writing
I have difficulty instructing my students in the traits of ideas and voice
I feel writing is an intricate part of teaching students to read
I don’t feel comfortable teaching it

Interview with Chesapeake Elementary Second Grade Teacher

Ms. Thompson defined writing as “an extension of the literacy process” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012), adding that the purpose of writing was a way for her students to “draw their expressions” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). She stated that a good writer is able to translate their thoughts and personal experiences into stories, noting that some of her weaker readers had trouble with this concept. They had problems “getting their ideas over” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). Ms. Thompson reiterated this sentiment by saying that the hardest part of writing in her own writing was always getting started. “I remember that from college and having to do impromptu writings…it’s just getting started, but once I get started it seems to flow” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012).

Thompson stated that the easiest part of writing for her was organizing the piece of writing. She remarked that she revises her written work as she goes along and again once she finishes the piece. Ms. Thompson stated that she knows when a piece of her writing is finished when she has the end product she is looking for, stating “I think with me it’s more of a product. In college I was taught more of an introduction, details, and then a summary. So when I feel like I’ve addressed all of those issues then my product is finished” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012).
Thompson reported the emphasis with her writing instruction has been on the final product, citing a more traditional approach to the way she teaches writing. She went on to say that she did not see any problem with this approach to teaching writing until she attended a professional development workshop, in which she learned about the Six Trait Writing technique, which focuses on the importance of teaching writing as a process as well as the following traits of writing: organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation (Culham, 2005). “I really saw the mistakes I was making with my students. It wasn’t the process, it was more the final product and I was really stifling their creativity” (L. Thomson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). She stated that as her students worked on a piece; she would only make comments on the mechanics and grammar mistakes her students were making, “which is the same thing I do as I write” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). After the training, Thompson reported that she attempted to teach with a process-approach to writing, but “I found myself getting away from six traits and getting more again into the traditional role of teaching it” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). Thompson stated that she was initially excited to teach the six traits of writing and to move away from the traditional method of teaching writing; however, “…the excitement kind of left, because I was so uncomfortable with it” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012).

Thompson articulated the difference between compositional writing and creative writing, likening compositional writing to writing reports and writing creatively as writing without a theme or structure requirement. Thompson referred to compositional writing as having required components, such as an introduction, a minimum number of sentences, and details. Thompson stated the hardest part about teaching writing is to teach writing as a process, remarking that she does not have problems teaching her students how to organize their writing, or teaching them
mechanics, usage, and grammar, which in her words is, “the traditional role of teaching writing” (L. Thomson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). However, when helping her students with other traits of writing, including character and voice, Ms. Thompson stated “I just had a hard time just really teaching it” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). When asked what the easiest part about teaching writing is Ms. Thompson whispered, “Nothing” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012), then said she feels more comfortable teaching organization and grammar than any other part of teaching writing. She reported that her students revise their written work as they go along; however she commented that her students’ revisions were limited to fixing spelling errors and were stronger in grammar and organization. “It’s probably because of the way I’ve taught it. You know, being stronger in the grammatical part and the organization” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). She stated that her students participated in peer revision; however, the students are only looking for grammatical errors and no other trait of writing.

Thompson reported that the first thing she believes should be taught in regards to writing instruction is handwriting, and then stated the students should write about what they are reading, commenting that students should make connections to what they are reading through their own experiences. According to Thompson, her students spend twenty to thirty minutes per day for writing instruction, spending most of that time with descriptive writing, some time spent with letters, with very little time spent writing poetry or informational pieces.
Observation 1 Data

Ms. Thompson’s classroom is an extremely print-rich environment, including an assortment of word walls, mostly consisting of phonographs and vocabulary with configuration. The objects in the room consisted of desks arranged in groups of four to make six groups of small tables. One wall in the room consisted of computers, with the opposite wall holding books on shelves. The Smartboard and document camera, the only objects used by the teacher, was visible from every desk. Additional objects used by the students included pencils, lined paper, and folders.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson being the teacher teaching the students how to write a friendly letter. The lesson consisted of two activities, both of which linked to the goal of the writing lesson. “Pick someone famous from Louisiana’s past. Write a simple letter to them about one subject or thing…maybe it is a question you want answered or to tell them something that might have helped them” (L. Thompson, classroom observation, 2012). Thompson then orally brainstormed with the class regarding possible ideas. She then placed a copy of a letter under the document camera, which was then displayed on the Smartboard. Thompson referred to this letter when discussing what the students should write in their own letters. As the students began to write, Ms. Thompson moved from student to student making sure everyone stayed on task. All of the comments she made regarding the students’ work dealt with the components of the letter, the proper heading, spacing, etc., and beginning capitalization and ending punctuation. No comments were made regarding the students’ ideas, sentence fluency, or voice. This activity lasted for ten minutes.
Ms. Thompson then informed the students to stop writing and to put their papers in their folders. She claimed she would read the letters at a later time.

The overall feelings associated with this lesson, as evidenced by the teacher comments and the students’ attitudes were mostly positive. The students asked very few questions and used the example displayed on the Smartboard as a guide. Some of the students even copied the letter directly from the Smartboard, making very little, and in some cases, no changes to the provided example. In regards to the observed emphasis on writing instruction, Ms. Thompson used more traditional methods when teaching writing, as evidenced by the focus on the instruction and the comments made by the teacher. The focus of instruction was on the students using beginning capitalization and ending punctuation. As noted earlier, no other traits of writing were taught and/or discussed. The lesson lasted approximately fifteen minutes.

Observation 2 Data

The second observation took place in the same setting and space as the first observation, Ms. Thompson’s second grade classroom. The objects in the room remained arranged the same as they were during the previous observation. Additional objects used by the teacher and students were a document camera, pencils, and lined paper.

The event observed was a lesson in daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson being the students writing a paragraph on an assigned topic. As the students were doing a unit of Louisiana history, Thompson reviewed with the students regarding things they loved about Louisiana, reminding them about their most recent conversation about beignets. “Do y’all remember what we talked about earlier today? What was the pastry we talked about that is unique to Louisiana” (L. Thompson, classroom observation, 2012)? The students stated that they spoke about beignets and then began orally describing the traits of a beignet, commenting on the
looks and taste of the pastry. Thompson then passed out lined paper with a space for illustrations at the top of the page, and instructed the students to write about beignets, using those traits they had just discussed. As Ms. Thompson finished distributing the paper, she reminded them to begin their sentences with capital letters and to use the correct ending punctuation. They were told to write at least three sentences, and once they were done they would be allowed to illustrate their work. She told the students to make sure their illustrations matched their written work.

As the students worked on their pieces, Thompson moved from student to student and made comments about the aforementioned conventions of writing, be it beginning capitalization and ending punctuation. She also made comments regarding the students’ misspellings. No other trait of writing was discussed.

The overall feelings of the lesson were not positive, in that the students repeatedly asked questions regarding how to spell certain words, and did not concern themselves with any other trait of writing, such as word choice, ideas, or voice. The students did not seem to be enjoying the activity, as they were frustrated and worried over misspelling certain words in their sentences. Thompson’s emphasis on writing instruction with respect to the method she employed was the traditional method of teaching writing. The students were not allowed to discuss their work or share their ideas. Also, at no point were the students offered time for reflection or revision. The lesson lasted approximately fifteen minutes.

Autobiography of Chesapeake Elementary Third Grade Teacher

A writing autobiography was collected from a third grade teacher at Chesapeake Elementary who will be referred to throughout this study as Gennifer Elliot. Ms. Elliot earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education in 2009. She has been employed at Chesapeake Elementary for the last two years as a third grade teacher. Elliot is certified in the
area of elementary education, grades 1-5, and has achieved highly qualified status.

Results

Ms. Elliot reported in her autobiography that although writing had been difficult for her during her early years as a student, “I view myself as a pretty good writer. I love to write about things I am interested in. As a child I was always writing” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012). Elliot credited her past difficulties with writing, not with her ability as a writer, but to what she believed was a stifling atmosphere provided by previous teachers and inadequate instruction. As stated earlier, Elliot reported that she loved to write about topics in which she found interesting. However, according to Ms. Elliot’s autobiography, the majority of her elementary teachers did not allow freedom of writing topic and she reported that she was never allowed to veer off of the teachers’ assigned writing prompt or topic. Due to this, Elliot reported that “During my elementary years I hated writing in the classroom” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012) and cited the fact that she was never allowed to choose her own writing topic as the reason for these feelings. To further prove this sentiment regarding negative feelings and freedom of choice when writing, Elliot reported that she had one elementary school teacher who did not stifle her creativity, her second grade teacher. She reported that this teacher “…loved writing and made it a positive experience for us in the classroom” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012). Elliot reported that her second grade teacher allowed her to write in journals on topics that she found interesting. She went on to say this teacher would read the journals every evening and upon returning to school the next day the students would find the journals on their desks, with positive comments left by the teacher. Elliot stated, “I really liked this” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012) and stated she felt this was a way to communicate with the teacher. “We were allowed to write about whatever we wanted her to know that day”
(G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012). This teacher’s positive attitude toward writing affected Ms. Elliot and she remarked that she continued writing in journals, stating that she wrote in journals as a child and used writing as “a way to express myself. This really improved my writing ability” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012).

Elliot reported that some parts of the writing process still provide a challenge, citing punctuation and grammatical issues specifically. This played into what she considered the hardest part of writing for herself, which was editing and correcting. “I always hated when my teachers would say, look at your papers for your mistakes. I wanted to tell them if I knew how to do it, I wouldn’t have made the mistake” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012). However frustrating that was for her, she then lamented that she often finds herself doing the same thing to her students. “On several occasions I have caught myself doing the same thing as a teacher. I have to stop and take a step back…and make sure the students understand the mistakes they made” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012).

In reference to teaching writing to her students, Elliot commented that “It was a struggle when I first starting teaching writing. I had to go back and teach myself the steps of writing” (G. Elliot, writing autobiography, 2012). She stated that she now feels comfortable teaching writing to her students.

In Ms. Elliot’s writing autobiography it was necessary to examine her “I” phrases in order to aid the researcher in identifying the teacher’s sense of self with respect to writing. This entailed pulling out the relevant “I” phrases out of the autobiography and placing them in the format of a poem. Ms. Elliot’s I poem follows:

I was never really taught how to write
When I first started teaching writing
I had to go back and teach myself
I view myself as a pretty good writer
I love to write about things I am interested in
I was always writing
I would say my writing is pretty good
I always hated when my teachers would say look at your papers for your mistakes
I wanted to tell them
If I knew how to do it I wouldn’t have made the mistake
I have caught myself doing the same things as a teacher
I notice myself doing this
I go back and make sure the students understand

I hated writing in the classroom in elementary school
I will never forget
I wrote about having to come back home (from summer vacation) and how that made me mad
(My teacher said) I was not on topic…I thought I was on topic

I do not ever remember writing in high school
All I wrote was research papers
I never remember being allowed to just write on a topic that I found interesting

I do remember one teacher that loved writing
I really liked this
In college, I don’t really remember doing that much writing
I think it was supposed to be taught
I feel comfortable teaching it

Interview with Chesapeake Elementary Third Grade Teacher

Ms. Elliot stated the purpose of writing is the expression of “feelings and ideas about a topic” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012), and reported she believes a good writer begins with brainstorming and organization and will include their feelings and opinions when writing. Elliot commented that the hardest part about writing for her was choosing the correct wording so the message she intended to communicate was in fact communicated. She stated the easiest part is “…the actual writing, because I could write all day long and fill up pages and pages” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012). Elliot remarked that she revises as she goes along when working on a piece of writing, and claimed that she knows when a piece of her writing is finished when “I get tired of revising” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012),
stating that a piece is finished once she feels like there are no other changes that can be made.

Elliot claimed that her emphasis in writing instruction, “differs from year to year” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012), depending on the ability level of her students. With respect to the traditional method of teaching versus the process-approach, and her emphasis on either, Elliot stated that she uses the Six Trait writing method when teaching writing to her students. This method of teaching writing is more in line with methods of teaching writing as a process as it focuses on what students do as they write, as well as all the components of writing instruction. Elliot remarked that when she is teaching the traits of writing she focuses solely on the trait being taught. For example, “Depending on the trait, if we’re focusing on organization then that’s all they’re looking at. They’re not looking at grammar; they’re not looking at spelling; they’re strictly looking at how their writing is organized” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012).

She stated she believed the differences between compositional and creative writing lied in the freedom to choose topic and structure, with creative writing affording students to choose both. She stated she believed compositional writing had necessary components that must be included, “Whereas creative writing you kind of give them free reign” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012).

Elliot remarked that the hardest part about teaching writing is getting her students to revise and edit their work, stating that they seem to rush through the process of writing, claiming “They want to go so quick. They do their four square; they do their rough draft, and then they’re ready to do their final draft” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012). She stated the easiest part of teaching writing is teaching with a graphic organizer such as the four-square method, something she uses in addition to the Six Trait writing method. “The easiest part
is…four square, because they can write their sentences and they know the order they go in. We always do main idea, detail one, detail two, detail three, closing sentence. It never changes…” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012).

Elliot stated she believes the first thing you should do when teaching writing is “making sure they can write a well-constructed sentence” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012), and that students should also be taught beginning capitalization and ending punctuation. Elliot commented that when teaching her students to write she employed the revision process through the use of peers, dictionaries, and thesauruses. She remarked that her students aid each other with the mechanics of their writing, as well as other traits of writing such as ideas, organization, and voice.

Elliot reported that her students spend approximately forty-five minutes daily on writing instruction, and this time is spent on a particular trait of writing, reinforcing her earlier sentiment that she focuses on one trait at a time. The genres her students work on include mostly personal narratives and letters. She cited they do one poetry assignment in the third grade, and that when her students are working on their writing, she can be found “walking around, monitoring, looking and seeing how they’re going” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012). She stated that when her students have completed their written piece, they bring their work to her for individual conferences “and we look through it together to see if there’s any other mistakes before they go into the final draft” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012).

Observation with Chesapeake Elementary Third Grade Teacher

Observation 1 Data

Upon entering Ms. Elliot’s room, the researcher noted the walls of the classroom were left blank, completely devoid of print. The objects in the room consisted of desks arranged in
groups of four to six, facing one another. One wall was lined with three computers, with a Smartboard at the front of the classroom. The objects used by the teacher consisted of a picture book, the Smartboard, a document camera, and a timer. Additional objects used by the students included sentence strips, Smartboard, writer’s notebooks, and pencils.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson being to teach organization in writing. Four activities occurred during the lesson, all of which linked to the goal of the lesson. The first activity included Ms. Elliot reading the picture book *The Paper Boy* by Dav Pilkey. Once she finished reading the story, she called on students to ask them questions regarding the sequence of the story. “Okay, so what did the paper boy have to do first” (G. Elliot, classroom observation, 2012)? Elliot continued the questions until the entire plot of the story was discussed in the order the events occurred in the story. She summed up this activity by asking, “Do you see how the order that the book is in makes sense” (G. Elliot, classroom observation, 2012)?

The students then transitioned into the second activity, whereupon Ms. Elliot supplied each arranged group of desks with sentence strips with events from the story written on them. The students were required to arrange the strips in the order they occurred in the story, in order to reinforce the organization of the narrative. As the students began working on this task, Ms. Elliot walked from group to group, monitoring student progress.

The third activity included Ms. Elliot transitioning back to the front of the classroom, where she arranged her copy of the sentence strips under the document camera, which she then displayed in the correct order. The students were then given the opportunity to check their group’s answers with the teacher’s sentence strips.
The fourth and final activity required the students to compose their own paragraph. “We reviewed organization and now we are going to move into doing our own organized paragraph” (G. Elliot, classroom observation, 2012). Elliot informed the students that they should begin their writing assignment using the four square method. The students were instructed to use the following writing prompt: “I want you to tell me a story about what you would do if you were delivering papers” (G. Elliot, classroom observation, 2012). The students remained at their desks, but instead of working as a group they completed this activity independently using their writer’s notebooks. As the students wrote, Ms. Elliot asked the students what should be included in each square of their four square. The students responded that the different squares should first include the topic idea and then followed by details that support the main idea or topic sentence, with the last sentence containing the feeling sentence. Once the students finished their four square activity they were instructed to then compose their paragraph, being sure to focus on the writing trait organization. The students were given fifteen minutes to complete this assignment. As the students worked, Ms. Elliot moved around the room, reading the students’ work. In addition to making comments of verbal praise, “Keep going. You’re doing well” (G. Elliott, classroom observation, 2012), she also commented on the students’ use of capitalization and grammar. At the end of the writing lesson, Elliot reported she would read the students’ works in their writer’s notebooks and that they would continue working on their story at a later time. The lesson lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

The overall feelings associated with the lesson were positive as evidenced by the teacher’s comments and the students’ attitudes and receptiveness when writing. In regards to the emphasis on writing instruction, the researcher observed that the teacher used methods akin to teaching writing as a process, as no skills were taught in isolation and the students were given the
opportunity to reflect and speak to one another in order to share ideas, as well as focus on the trait of writing within an authentic writing assignment, such as creating their own stories.

Observation 2 Data

The second observation of writing instruction took place in the same setting and space as the first observation, Ms. Elliot’s third grade classroom. The desks remained arranged in the same pattern as before, with children working in groups of four to six. The objects used by the students included their writers’ notebooks, pencils, Smartboard, and dictionaries. Objects used by the teacher were the Smartboard and timer.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson having the students write a story from a writing prompt given by the teacher. Four activities occurred during the lesson, all of which linked to the goal of the lesson. The first activity included the teacher introducing the writing prompt orally with the students as a large group. “In our writing this week, we are writing about Louisiana. What I want you to write about is what is very important to you about Louisiana” (G. Elliot, classroom observation, 2012). The students were instructed to begin brainstorming in their notebooks and were given two minutes to list their favorite things about Louisiana. Ms. Elliot reminded them to list things that were only true of Louisiana, reminding the students not to write in complete sentences during this phase of the writing process. Once the two minutes expired, Elliot instructed the students to orally share their ideas with the class as a large group. The students then orally discussed their ideas. The teacher then instructed the students to begin the four square portion of their writing assignment. “So pick one thing off of your list…one thing off your list and that’s what I want you to write about” (G. Elliot, classroom observation, 2012). The teacher then instructed the students to draw their four squares on a blank piece of paper in their writer’s notebooks. Once the four squares were
finished the students were instructed to begin their rough drafts. As the students began writing 
Ms. Elliot moved from student to student, reading their work and answering questions. Elliot’s 
comments were in regards to the students writing in complete sentences and using capital letters 
at the beginning of their sentences. As the students finished their rough drafts, Ms. Elliot 
instructed them to begin editing their work and told them to use dictionaries to aid the process. 
The teacher then instructed them to stop what they were doing so they could get ready for lunch. 
Elliot informed the students that they would finish their writing as an early finisher activity 
throughout the rest of the day.

The overall feelings associated with the second observation were positive as evidenced 
by teacher comments. In regards to the emphasis on writing methods, traditional versus process, 
Elliot again taught with a process approach to teaching writing. This was evidenced by her use 
of allowing the students opportunity to share and reflect on their work, as well as edit and revise. 
Additionally, no skill was taught in isolation but rather embedded among the task of writing the 
narrative on Louisiana. This lesson lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

Autobiography of Roosevelt Elementary First Grade Teacher

A writing autobiography was collected from a first grade teacher at Roosevelt Elementary 
who will be referred to throughout this study as Brenda Towns. Ms. Towns earned a Bachelor of 
Science degree in Elementary Education in 2009. She has been employed at Roosevelt 
Elementary for the last two years as a first grade teacher. Ms. Towns is certified in the areas of 
elementary education, grades 1-5 and has achieved highly qualified status.
Results

According to Ms. Towns’ writing autobiography, she does not identify herself as a writer, but states she can write when necessary. “If asked to write, it is not difficult. I just don’t really enjoy the process unless it holds meaning for me” (B. Towns, writing autobiography, 2012). She believes her ability as a writer falls in the average range; however, numerous people have told her that she is a gifted writer.

Ms. Towns loved to write in elementary school, because “I received high praise for my creativity and attention to detail. I was even placed in the gifted program at my school in Texas because of my writing ability” (B. Towns, writing autobiography, 2012). She commented that her writing path remained the same throughout middle and high school, stating “I never had difficulty writing” (B. Towns, writing autobiography, 2012). Ms. Towns stated that in college she was writing frequently, but that she did not enjoy it. She stated that her biggest accomplishment in regards to writing, since college, has been her attempt at achieving National Board Certification. “That was like writing a dissertation in volume. I felt confident, spent many hours writing and am very proud of the end result” (B. Towns, writing autobiography, 2012).

Ms. Towns commented that in her elementary school days, her teachers’ praise of her work had a positive impact on her self confidence as a whole, not just as a writer. She also credited her teachers’ ability to offer explicit instruction with her success in her writing endeavors.

My writing experiences were linked to the praise of teachers in the beginning. That fed my confidence (which I lacked significantly in most other areas of life) and created a girl who could write with ease and success. My teachers gave clear, concise guidelines for what and how to write and I was able to follow those. So, I believe both the instruction and thoughtful correction of the teachers along my path had influence on my writing.
In Ms. Towns’ writing autobiography it was necessary to examine her “I” phrases in order to aid the researcher in identifying the teacher’s sense of self with respect to writing. This entailed pulling out the relevant “I” phrases out of the autobiography and placing them in the format of a poem. Ms. Towns’ I poem follows:

I do not consider myself a writer  
I can write when necessary  
I just don’t really enjoy the process  
I write notes of thanks and encouragement to loved ones  
I believe I have an average writing ability  
I’ve been told many times that I have a gift for writing  
I’ve also been told if you don’t use a gift, you lose it  
I went from just above to average ability  
I’m a perfectionist  
When I’m writing for evaluation or professional purposes  
I strive for excellence

(In elementary school) I loved to write  
I received high praise  
I was even placed in the gifted program because of my writing ability  
I remember getting into trouble once when given an assignment to write about my family  
I enhanced the truth  
I never had difficulty writing  
I always excelled  
I rarely enjoyed it, but I was able to succeed

I felt confident  
(My writing experiences were linked to the praise of my teachers. That fed my confidence, which…)  
I lacked significantly  
I was able to follow guideline (set by teachers)  
I believe both the instruction and thoughtful correction of the teachers along my path had influence on my writing

Interview with Roosevelt Elementary First Grade Teacher

Ms. Towns stated she believes the purpose of writing is to communicate a message, either as “an art form, or to just to send a message of any kind” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She believes a good writer thinks about what they are going to write before the writing process begins and has a good idea of where they want the piece to go, stating that one
should “Begin with the end in mind” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She stated that the hardest part of writing for her was getting started and then staying on track. She stated the easiest part of writing was knowing how she wanted the piece to end. She also stated that she revises her work as she goes along, and commented that she knows when a piece of her writing is finished when the message has been communicated and the piece has proper mechanics and grammar.

Towns claimed that her emphasis in writing instruction, in regards to the traditional writing approach versus writing as a process, lies more with the process approach to teaching writing, stating that she is looking for “The different parts of what they are trying to write, not just the big picture…I’m looking for their ideas” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 20, 2012). Ms. Towns stated the hardest part about teaching writing is “finding the time in the day to do it, and the will for the students to do it” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She believes finding age-appropriate topics that are interesting to her students difficult to do.

Ms. Towns stated the easiest part of teaching writing is teaching the mechanics, usage, and grammar, citing her comfort level with those aspects of writing as the reason she finds this easy to teach. “The grammar and the mechanics are something I’m really good at, or I think I am. I feel comfortable with it, so that’s easy to teach” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 20, 2012). Towns stated the first thing one should do when teaching writing is to teach the parts of a sentence, then stated that students should also begin with journaling. She stated the journal topics should consist of topics the students want to talk about, and that students should be allowed to illustrate their journal entry. When asked if and how her students revise their work, she stated that her students revise as a large group with her commenting things like, “’Ok, Do you have capital letters? Do you have your periods?” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 20,
2012). She stated her students spend approximately one hour per day on writing instruction. They spend this time journaling, writing lists, letters, and stories through the four square writing method. She stated that when her students are writing she walks around the room, assessing and monitoring, as well as providing feedback.

Observation Roosevelt Elementary First Grade Teacher

Observation 1 Data

Upon entering Ms. Towns’ room, the researcher noted the classroom was a print-rich environment with posters and word walls decorating the classroom walls. The back room in the wall was lined with four computers for student use. Additional objects in the room consisted of desks arranged in four rectangles with desks facing one another. A Smartboard was attached to one wall, opposite the computers. Below the Smartboard, on the floor of the classroom, was a round carpet that took up the front half of the classroom’s floor space. Additional objects used by the teacher and students included journals, crayons, pencils, Popsicle sticks, and a timer.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson for the students to write a story from a writing prompt given by the teacher. The lesson consisted of four activities, all which were linked to the lesson’s goal. “We are going to write about Field Day…the kinds of relays we did” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012). The teacher then instructed the students to silently brainstorm. “Show me thirty seconds of thinking time. Show me how you think. Just look at me…think. I can tell if you aren’t thinking. I can see the wheels moving in your brain” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012).

Once this quiet thinking time concluded, Towns began reviewing her expectations for the class, reminding the students they should have a hook sentence when writing. She went on to say, “What if you just say, ‘I ran and it was hot.’ Is that hooking you” (B. Towns, classroom
observation, 2012)? Once the students responded, Ms. Towns added, “What if you said ‘I ran like the wind and felt the sun on my face.’ Does that make you want to read” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012)? The students responded affirmatively, and Towns reiterated that they should include a hook sentence in their own writing. She then reminded them that they should begin all of their sentences with a capital letter and the appropriate ending punctuation. The teacher then instructed the students to compose four sentences related to the writing prompt. As the students began writing, Ms. Towns moved from student to student, encouraging them to add more details in their writing. “Don’t just write ‘It was hot.’ Write more than that” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012). For the students who finished the assignment early, they were instructed to illustrate their story.

The fourth and final activity required the students to move from their desks to the carpet at the front of the classroom. Each sat in a specific spot on the carpet and held their journals in their laps. As the students were seated, Ms. Towns moved around the carpet, looking at the students’ work. She commented, “I love how I am looking at people’s words and I see periods where they should be. I see exclamation marks” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012). As she continued reading other students’ work she made comments regarding their ideas, word choice, and staying on topic.

I like how you tackled that big word…Remember if you are going to start talking about a race, don’t start talking about a book or an animal, unless it’s in the race. Make sure you keep the subject the same. Make sure you keep your idea the same.

The teacher then gave the students time to share their sentences about field day. The teacher pulled popsicles sticks with the students’ names written on them from a can in order to determine who would share their sentences. The students were allowed to share one sentence with the class. The students listened attentively to the person who was reading his or her
sentence as evidenced by their body language. The students sat quietly on the carpet with their journals in their laps. Once a student read his or her sentence, the other students offered encouraging comments to the person who just read. Ms. Towns continued this activity until every student read at least one of their sentences. Once the sentence-sharing activity concluded the students were instructed to return to their seats and the writing lesson ended.

The overall feelings associated with this lesson were extremely positive as evidenced by the teacher’s supporting comments and the students’ receptiveness with the writing activity. The students were excited to write about field day as evidenced by their facial expressions and eagerness to share their ideas with their neighbors. In regards to the methods used in the writing lesson, Ms. Towns taught writing as a process. The topic she chose was something the students were interested in writing, and they were allowed ample opportunity to silently brainstorm and then share their ideas with their classmates, both of which are characteristics of teaching writing as a process. Towns did not teach any skill in isolation; however, the skills were embedded within the writing assignment. She encouraged many different traits of writing as evidenced by her comments regarding their ideas, word choices, details, and sentence fluency. The lesson lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

Observation 2 Data

The second observation of writing instruction took place in the same setting and space as the first observation, Ms. Towns’ first grade classroom. The back room in the wall was lined with four computers for student use. Additional objects in the room consisted of desks arranged in four rectangles with desks facing one another. A Smartboard was attached to one wall, opposite the computers. Below the Smartboard, on the floor of the classroom, was a round
carpet that took up the front half of the classroom’s floor space. Additional objects used by the teacher and students included journals, crayons, pencils, and a timer.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson for the students to write a paragraph with a similar plot to a story the teacher read earlier in the day. The lesson consisted of five activities, all of which were linked to the lesson’s goal. The first activity consisted of Towns reviewing that morning’s story time, which included the readings of Laura Numeroff’s works *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*, *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*, and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. The teacher then reviewed the plot points of each book, discussing the formulaic attributes of each one. “We said that they start out if you give a something a something…they will want something else” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012). Towns then instructed the students to write their own story with similar elements, using the lined paper she passed out to them. The students were instructed to write at least four sentences.

Before the students were allowed to begin writing, Ms. Towns orally reviewed her expectations for the students’ writing, reminding them they need to begin each sentence with a capital letter and the appropriate ending punctuation. She also reminded them to use appropriate spacing and left to right progression when writing. Ms. Towns instructed the students to use the space at the top of their paper to illustrate their story.

The second activity consisted of the students writing their story. As they did this, Ms. Towns moved from student to student, making comments regarding their work, reminding them to write in their best handwriting. She also pointed out when they were missing proper capitalization and punctuation. She commented on their word choices and sentence fluency, and also redirected those students who had gotten off track from the topic of the story. She reminded them to keep with the theme of the earlier mentioned stories. As the students began finishing
their writing they were instructed to illustrate their story, but advised to make sure their picture related to the story. For those students who finished both their story and picture, Towns instructed them to help those students not yet finished. Once the entire class had finished the writing assignment, they were instructed to share their stories with a peer. Towns assigned partners and the students exchanged papers, with some of them moving to different spots in the classroom. They then began reading. The students were instructed to offer verbal feedback on their partner’s work. “Tell your friends what you think of their ideas. Tell them they did a good job” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012). She then instructed them to check each other’s work for complete sentences and proper mechanics and grammar. The students seemed to enjoy this activity as evidenced by their body language and facial expressions. As the students shared their work and offered areas for revision, Ms. Towns walked around the room listening to the students’ comments. Once everyone had shared their work, Ms. Towns instructed them to return their partner’s papers and return to their desks.

The final activity consisted of Ms. Towns closing her lesson. “When I was walking around and watching you read each other’s papers, I really liked that you were reading and not just talking about silly things. I want you to pat yourself on your back” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012). She then reviewed with them what they were told to look for when reading each other’s work, restating that they were to look for proper capitalization and punctuation. They were also told to help their partner if their work did not include complete thoughts. Towns then told the class she was going to read the papers a second time to make sure the aforementioned qualities were addressed. The overall feeling of the lesson was positive with Towns summing up the lesson by saying, “Thank you for doing your best writing” (B. Towns, classroom observation, 2012).
In regard to the methods used when teaching writing, Towns used many strategies associated with the process approach to teaching writing. This was evidenced by the fact that she connected what the students were writing with what they were reading. She also allowed ample opportunity for her students to brainstorm and share their ideas. When constructing their written pieces, the students were encouraged to embed a variety of writing traits into their work, with Towns specifically addressing organization, ideas, voice, sentence fluency, and conventions. The students were allowed to peer edit and they were given time to reflect on their work, all traits of the process approach to teaching writing. The lesson lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

Autobiography of Roosevelt Elementary Second Grade Teacher

An autobiography was collected from a second grade teacher at Roosevelt Elementary who will be referred to throughout this study as Suzanne Smith. Ms. Smith earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education in 2010. She has been employed at Roosevelt Elementary for the last two years and has served as second-grade teacher both years. Ms. Smith is certified in the areas of elementary education, grades 1-5 and has achieved highly qualified status.

Results

In her writing autobiography, Ms. Smith stated she does not feel confident as a writer, rating her writing ability as “a little less than average” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012).

Today, as a writer, I still have insecurities. Most of the time I feel the need to have someone else proofread important papers before I turn them in. These are some of the same insecurities I had as a student in high school. Although my confidence has grown greatly since I have been teaching writing, I often wonder why these insecurities exist. As a teacher, I had to question if I had, in fact, been taught how to write properly as a student.
Ms. Smith stated her strengths in writing are spelling and vocabulary, but that she has difficulty in other aspects of writing, citing the reason for this as poor instruction from her teachers. “…I feel that my teachers did not properly prepare me to be a good writer” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012). Smith stated that in elementary school she was in gifted education classes for reading and math; however, writing instruction was not emphasized. Smith remarked that she was made to write about certain topics, but that her writing pieces were not graded and her teachers never gave her any feedback. Ms. Smith believes the reason for this is because “Standardized tests at that time did not include writing” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012).

Smith stated that her middle school experiences, in regards to writing, were somewhat better. She stated this was where she learned what she knows pertaining to mechanics and grammar. She commented that during this phase of her school career she was more interested in writing. However, she stated, “…high school totally let me down as a writer” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012). Smith remarked that she was not made to write much in high school, and believes this is the reason for her insecurities as a writer in college. “Because I lacked structure in writing in high school, I was always insecure during my writing assignments in college” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012). Ms. Smith credited the poor writing instruction she received as her motivation to being a better writing teacher to her students. “These writing experiences have pushed me to become a better writing teacher. I would not like my students to feel not prepared or informed about the proper strategies in writing” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012).

In Ms. Smith’s writing autobiography it was necessary to examine her “I” phrases in order to aid the researcher in identifying the teacher’s sense of self with respect to writing. This
entailed pulling out the relevant “I” phrases out of the autobiography and placing them in the format of a poem. Ms. Smith’s I poem follows:

I still have insecurities
I feel the need to have someone else proofread important papers
The same insecurities that I had as a student
Since I have been teaching writing, I often wonder why these insecurities exist
I had to question if I had, in fact, been taught how to write

If I had to rate my writing ability on a scale from one to ten,
I would rate my ability as a four
I am a little less than average
I usually resort to techniques that I presently use to teach my students

I felt my teachers did not properly prepare me to be a good writer
I’ve been a student in gifted classes
I believe because this area was not tested, it was not taught
I don’t believe there were any rubrics or guidelines given for writing
I was in gifted, but my teachers offered me little or no challenges
I don’t remember having to write papers
I lacked structure in writing
I was also insecure during my writing assignments
I would not like my students to feel not prepared or informed…in writing

Interview with Roosevelt Elementary Second Grade Teacher

Ms. Smith stated that the purpose of writing is self-expression and believes a good writer is one who can freely use his or her imagination. She also linked her purpose for writing with what good writers do, stating that good writers are those who can freely express themselves. She commented that the hardest part of writing for her was brainstorming an idea and then staying on topic. The easiest part of writing for her was coming up with initial ideas to write about. Ms. Smith stated that she does not revise her own writing due to her perception that she is unable to find her mistakes. She did state that she lets someone else read her work and takes his or her suggestions for revision. She stated that she knows when a piece of her writing is finished once it has three main parts: the main topic, the body, and the conclusion.
Smith stated she believed the difference between compositional and creative writing lied in the writer’s ability to have freedom of form and topic when writing creatively. In regards to the traditional approach to teaching writing and writing as a process, Ms. Smith stated that her emphasis in writing instruction was more on the process of writing. She remarked that her students use the Four Square writing method, and have broken the steps of writing into separate days, with each day assigned to a different step. She stated that her students revise and edit their work as a teacher-led large group. The focus on revision was with mechanics, usage, and grammar.

Ms. Smith stated that teaching writing in general is difficult for her, citing her lack of writing instruction when she was a student. “The hardest part about teaching it is I didn’t have a really good background in it…” (S. Smith, personal interview, May 7, 2012). She stated the easiest part to teach was mechanics, usage, and grammar, and that her students spend approximately fifteen minutes on writing per day, explaining “We don’t spend a lot of time on writing actually. We have writing during our reading center so they have a writing center every single day and its twelve minutes” (S. Smith, personal interview, May 7, 2012). Ms. Smith stated that when her students are working on their writing projects she is leading a separate center, but that she gives comments on their work on Thursdays when they are working on the revising and editing parts of the writing process. Smith stated the first thing one should do when teaching writing is to teach the parts of a sentence. She stated that her students write narratives only, and do not write in different genres.
Observation with Roosevelt Elementary Second Grade Teacher

Observation 1 Data

Upon entering Ms. Smith’s room, the researcher noted the classroom was decorated in bold primary colors with several posters displaying phonics rules. Bookshelves carrying a multitude of picture books lined the back wall of the classroom. Next to the bookshelves were three computers for student use. The student desks were arranged in three rectangles with desks facing each other, two by two. A Smartboard was attached to one wall, opposite the computers. Additional objects used by the teacher and students included lined paper, pencils, pocket folders, and a timer.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson for the students to write a story from a writing prompt given by the teacher. The students were required to use the four-square writing method when composing their work. The lesson consisted of two activities, both of which were linked to the lesson’s goal. The first activity consisted of the teacher providing the writing prompt, “What is one of the reasons we will enjoy our summer vacation” (S. Smith, classroom observation, 2012)? Smith then led the students in an oral brainstorming session as a large group activity. The students responded with various reasons they would enjoy summer, and Ms. Smith encouraged them to make sure their thoughts were complete and to provide necessary details. Smith then reminded the students when completing their four square activity, that the last square should include a feeling sentence.

The second activity required the students to move from their desks, as the literacy center time began. “Right now we are going to start centers. At your writing center you are going to begin, you are going to complete your bubble map and you are going to start on your four square” (S. Smith, classroom, observations, 2012). Smith commented to the students that they
should, in addition to completing their bubble map; fill in at least two squares of their four-square graphic organizer. Once all the students transitioned to their centers, Smith set the timer for twelve minutes. The students at the writing center then began working on their bubble map, which consisted of brainstorming ideas for reasons they would enjoy their summer vacation. As the students worked, Ms. Smith sat at a nearby table, leading her own center. When the timer sounded, the groups rotated around the centers, with a new group of children now in the writing center. Smith then reset the timer for twelve minutes. This continued until all children had visited each center in the classroom, with the total time of the literacy center lasting sixty minutes. At no time did Ms. Smith make comments about the student work in the writing center, as she remained in her teacher-led center for the duration of center time.

Smith reported to the researcher that each day of writing instruction was conducted in a similar manner as the observed day; however, the students were required to address a different stage of writing each day. On Mondays the students usually worked on their bubble map, which included brainstorming. Tuesdays usually entailed the students completing their four-square graphic organizer. Wednesdays entailed the students completing their first draft, with some beginning the editing and revising stage. Thursdays entailed the students finishing up any editing and revisions, and they were also to complete their final draft. The students were required to keep each day’s writing in their assigned pocket folder. Ms. Smith would then read over each day’s work and evaluate their final product.

The overall feeling associated with the lesson was positive as evidenced by the students’ attitudes and interactions with one another in the writing center. In regards to the emphasis on writing instruction and the methods employed by the teacher, Ms. Smith used more traditional methods of teaching writing. The fact that the students were locked into a particular step of the
writing process depending on the day was evidence of this fact. Smith treated the stages of writing as linear instead of recursive, as the students were never allowed to move back and forth freely among the stages of writing. The entire literacy center time lasted sixty minutes; however, only twelve of those minutes were spent in the writing center.

Observation 2 Data

The second observation of writing instruction took place in the same setting and space as the first observation, Ms. Smith’s second grade classroom. Bookshelves carrying a multitude of picture books lined the back wall of the classroom. Next to the bookshelves were three computers for student use. The student desks were arranged in three rectangles with desks facing each other, two by two. A Smartboard was attached to one wall, opposite the computers. Additional objects used by the teacher and students included lined paper, pencils, pocket folders, and a timer.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson for the students to write a story from a writing prompt given by the teacher. The students were required to use the four-square writing method when composing their work. The lesson consisted of two activities, both of which were linked to the lesson’s goal. The first activity consisted of the teacher providing the writing prompt, “Why is it important to be a good friend” (S. Smith, classroom observations, 2012)? Smith then led the students in an oral brainstorming session as a large group activity. The students responded with various reasons why it was important to be a good friend. Smith then reminded the students when completing their four square activity, that the last square should include a feeling sentence.

The second activity required the students to move from their desks, as the literacy center time began. “Okay, we’re going to start centers. At your writing center you are going to finish
your bubble map and begin your four-square. You should get at least get two squares completed” (S. Smith, classroom observations, 2012). Once all the students transitioned to their centers, Smith set the timer for twelve minutes. The students at the writing center then finished working on their bubble map, which consisted of brainstorming ideas for reasons they would enjoy their summer vacation. As the students worked, Ms. Smith sat at a nearby table, leading her own center. When the timer sounded the groups rotated around the centers, with a new group of children now in the writing center. Smith then reset the timer for twelve minutes. This continued until all children had visited each center in the classroom. Only once did Smith make a comment regarding the students’ work in the writing center, which consisted of “Make sure you start out your sentences with capital letters” (S. Smith, classroom observations, 2012). At no other time during center time did Ms. Smith make comments about the student work in the writing center, as she remained in her teacher-led center for the duration of literacy center time, which lasted approximately sixty minutes.

The overall feelings associated with this lesson were positive as evidenced by the students’ receptiveness to the writing topic. As in Smith’s previous observation, in regards to the emphasis on writing instruction and the methods employed by the teacher, Ms. Smith used more traditional methods of teaching writing. The students remained locked into a particular step of the writing process depending on the day of the week, and were not allowed to fluctuate among the stages of writing. This is evidence of the traditional methods of teaching writing, as the stages of writing were presented as a linear progression. The entire literacy center time lasted sixty minutes; however, only twelve of those minutes were spent in the writing center. Ms. Smith reported that her students spent no other time on writing instruction during the day.
Autobiography of Roosevelt Elementary Third Grade Teacher

An autobiography was collected from a third grade teacher at Roosevelt Elementary who will be referred to throughout this study as Brandy Masterson. Ms. Masterson earned a Masters of Art in Teaching in 2008. She has been teaching for three years, and all three years have been served as third grade teacher at Roosevelt Elementary. Ms. Masterson is certified in elementary education, grades 1-5 and has achieved highly qualified status.

Results

According to Ms. Masterson’s writing autobiography, “I do not view myself as a writer, because I only write when I am required to do so” (B. Masterson, writing autobiography, 2012). Masterson commented that she enjoyed writing in elementary and high school, but did not feel prepared for college-level writing. She commented that she was required to write in college, and that her professors tended to focus on “grammar, spelling, and content” (B. Masterson, writing autobiography, 2012). Masterson stated she was not as successful with these endeavors as she was in high school. However, “After a lot of red marks, I adjusted and managed to master writing activities with at least 80% accuracy” (B. Masterson, writing autobiography, 2012).

Even though she had to work at her college-level writing, she reported she did not view her experiences in a negative light, due to the fact that those experiences with struggling as a writer motivated her to become a better writer and hopefully a better teacher of writing. “…the red marks were helpful and instrumental in shaping me to become a better writer” (B. Masterson, writing autobiography, 2012). She went on to say that her struggles with writing would allow her to “…share the experiences with my students in hopes of shaping them into better writers” (B. Masterson, writing autobiography, 2012).
In Ms. Masterson’s writing autobiography it was necessary to examine her “I” phrases in order to aid the researcher in identifying the teacher’s sense of self with respect to writing. This entailed pulling out the relevant “I” phrases out of the autobiography and placing them in the format of a poem. Ms. Masterson’s I poem follows:

I do not view myself as a writer
I only write when I’m required to do so
I mastered writing skills with at least 80% accuracy
I have not always been a decent writer
I gained a lot of writing experience in graduate school
I have found the writing process that we use at our elementary school beneficial to myself
I have learned that brainstorming really helps produce better results
I do feel that I can successfully complete a writing assignment
I enjoyed writing in elementary and high school
I adjusted and managed (in college)
I do not consider any experiences to be negative
I can share the experiences with my students in hopes of shaping them into better writers

Interview with Roosevelt Elementary Third Grade Teacher

Ms. Masterson reported the purpose of writing is to “…express your thoughts or your opinions on a specific subject or topic” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She stated she believes a good writer will spend a good amount of time in the brainstorming process and plan what they are going to write before beginning to write a first draft. The hardest part of writing in her own writing is breaking down her topic in a way to compose the piece and include the necessary components of the different paragraphs. The easiest part of writing for her is including the necessary details once she knows what she wants to write about. Masterson stated she revises her work as she goes along, as well as during the final draft stage of the writing process.

Ms. Masterson commented that she knows when a piece of her writing is finished when “the topic has been addressed” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She also
stated that a piece of her writing was finished once it had gone through a peer revision. In regards to the traditional approach to teaching writing versus teaching writing as a process, she stated the emphasis in her writing instruction varies. Masterson claimed that her emphasis in type of instruction depends on her students’ ability, claiming that students who need more instruction as they write receive instruction on the process of writing. For those students who write well, she focuses on the end product. She stated that creative writing afforded freedom of topic and did not have to follow a set of guidelines. She went on to say that creative writing allows students to use their imaginations more than compositional writing, a type of writing with a specific form.

Ms. Masterson commented that the hardest part about teaching writing is “having my students be creative and think outside the box” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012); however, she seemed to believe that teaching writing in general was difficult. She said the majority of her students wrote in simple sentences and wrote the bare minimum when writing with the Four Square method of writing. “They feel they have to follow the steps thoroughly to the tee” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She also stated that she had difficulty teaching her students to stay on topic when they wrote, and not to be repetitive in their writings. She reported the easiest part of teaching writing is having her students follow the steps of the writing process. “They know the steps to follow” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012).

Masterson reported that the first thing one should do when teaching writing is to teach the steps of the writing process. “I would let them know that we have a step…we have steps that we have to go by” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012). She also stated she would teach the students how to write a main idea, and “make sure they were able to read the writing
prompt and understand what they’re writing about” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012).

Masterson reported that her students use the revision process when composing their rough drafts. She allows them to use dictionaries and thesauruses to aid them in better word choice. They also revise for mechanics, usage, and grammar. She stated her students help revise each other’s work, but “…some of them can’t handle it. Some of them are more critical and some of them can’t take the criticism, but we have tried that, and I get them to read each other’s works” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012).

Masterson stated her students spend approximately twenty to thirty minutes per day on writing instruction. They spend this time in writing centers, where they write about assigned topics using the Four Square method of writing. Each day they spend on a different stage of writing, which results in them completing one writing project per week. Masterson commented that the students spend each Monday with brainstorming their ideas, and always begin their rough drafts by the Wednesday of each week. “…Friday their final draft is due to me” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 20, 2012). Ms. Masterson stated they write mostly fiction, but have written some letters. When her students are in the writing center Ms. Masterson stated she is directing another teacher-led center; however, she positions the writing center near her station so that she can monitor the students’ writing progress.

Observation with Roosevelt Elementary Third Grade Teacher

Observation 1 Data

Upon entering Ms. Masterson’s room, the researcher noted the walls of the classroom held three posters related to literacy. The student desks were facing each other two by two and
arranged in groups of six desks, making three rectangular tables. Four computers lined the back wall of the classroom across from the wall that held the Smartboard. Bookshelves were lined along the east side of the room and carried a multitude of different book of different genres.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson being the students listening and participating in a large group writing activity. The lesson consisted of five activities, all of which were linked to the goal of the lesson. The first activity consisted of an oral review of the steps involved in the writing process. “…tell me the first step in the writing process. What’s the very first thing, after we read our topic, what to do we do” (B. Masterson, classroom, observation, 2012)? The oral review then transitioned into the teacher reviewing the steps of the Four-Square strategy. She then used the white board to write down the writing topic, which she informed them would be about the beach.

Masterson drew an example of the Four-Square writing graphic on the whiteboard and wrote the word beach in the center of the four squares. She then began working through the steps of the writing strategy with the students as a large group activity, filling in the blanks of the four-square drawn on the whiteboard. During the duration of the activity Masterson commented that the students needed to include details and be sure to stay on topic when writing. She also reminded them that they should be descriptive when writing in order to make the experience more interesting for the reader. “When people read your writing they want to feel, make them feel like they are there or they actually can imagine the things” (B. Masterson, classroom observation, 2012). During this time the students remained seated at their desks and answered Masterson’s prompts orally. The oral activity also included reviewing types of genres the students could write, focusing on fiction and nonfiction. As the students went through the brainstorming and four-square process orally, Masterson continued writing their ideas on the
whiteboard. Masterson then asked the students to tell her what would come next in the writing process, after their four square was complete. The students replied they would then write their rough draft and final draft. Masterson spoke about the importance of revision and stated, “Because you may have a mistake or say I want to add one more thing in this second paragraph. You can add things or delete things” (B. Masterson, classroom, observation, 2012).

The final activity consisted of Ms. Masterson reading an example of one of her student’s work to the class. She used the student’s work as an example as to what she would like her students to do when they write. Once she finished reading the student example, she stated, “You see how she was vivid? She made you imagine” (B. Masterson, classroom observation, 2012). Masterson then read another student’s work and told the class, “Do you see how hers was descriptive? She told me their names, she told me what she saw, she told me what they were wearing, and she told me they were playing” (B. Masterson, classroom observation, 2012). She then told the students to remember these traits and the steps in their own writing. This concluded the writing lesson.

The overall feelings associated with the writing lesson were positive as evidenced by the teacher’s comments and the students’ attitudes when responding to questions asked by the teacher. In regards to the types of writing instruction employed by the teacher, the methods were in line with the traditional methods of teaching writing. This was evidenced by the lecture-type delivery of instruction, which included teaching the stages of writing in isolation, as the students were not afforded the opportunity to write and/or put into practice any of the tips Ms. Masterson spoke regarding writing. The lesson lasted approximately thirty minutes.
Observation 2 Data

The second observation of writing instruction took place in the same space and setting of the first observation, Ms. Masterson’s third grade classroom. The objects used in the classroom were the same as the first observed lesson, with the student desks remaining facing each other two by two and arranged in groups of six desks, making three rectangular tables. Additional objects included the four computers that lined the back wall of the classroom across from the wall that held the Smartboard. Other objects used by the teacher and students were lined paper, pencils, and dictionaries.

The event observed was the daily writing instruction, with the goal of the lesson being that the students were to work on a piece of writing from a writing prompt provided by the teacher. The lesson consisted of four activities, all of which linked to the goal of the lesson. The first activity included Masterson reviewing orally with the class regarding the steps of the writing process, which included her asking various students’ questions regarding the stages of writing and the students answering. This was done as a large group activity. For the second activity Masterson told the students their writing prompt, “What if aliens landed at our school” (B. Masterson, classroom, observation, 2012), and allowed them to orally brainstorm ideas. As the students answered, Masterson made comments and then transitioned to the third activity, which involved the use of a timer. Masterson set the timer for fifteen minutes and instructed the students to move to their literacy centers, with one of those centers being the writing center. The writing center was made up of a cluster of student desks near Ms. Masterson who was leading her own center. The students were given fifteen minutes to complete their brainstorming activity; however, this time they were to write their ideas down on a bubble map, a graphic organizer used to aid in the organization of ideas when writing. The initial group of students in
the writing center consisted of five students. As the student worked on their bubble maps, Ms. Masterson reminded them to stay on topic. At the end of the fifteen minutes the timer sounded, signifying the end of that activity. All of the students then rotated to a new center, resulting in five new students in the writing center. The instruction for this group of students was the same as the previous group. The timer was then reset, and the center time continued. This activity continued until all students had visited each center, including the writing center. Ms. Masterson informed the students that the next day they would use their bubble maps to aid in their four-square writing activity. The students were to put the bubble maps in their folders, and would use those to aid in the next stage of writing, which would be done the next day. The students participated in writing centers daily, with each day representing a different stage of writing.

The overall feeling associated with the lesson was positive as evidenced by the teacher comments. In regards to the type of writing methods employed by the teacher, the majority of the lesson was delivered in the traditional methods of teaching writing. Even though the students were allowed to orally brain storm and share ideas, a trait of the process approach to teaching writing, that was where the collaboration with their writing ended. For the duration of the writing lesson, the students were made to independently fill in their bubble maps and were given fifteen minutes to do so. The fact that the stages of writing were locked into a particular day illustrated that the process of writing was being treated linearly, and writing was being taught concrete step by concrete step, as the students were not allowed to move back and forth between the stages of writing. The lesson lasted approximately fifteen minutes.
CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This ethnographic case study examined the possible connections found among teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing, comparing their personal histories as writers and self-reported beliefs on writing and teaching writing, with that of their teacher practices. A further analysis examined how closely aligned their teacher practices were to research-validated practices. The review of literature identified three main areas to be examined, the first being the historical view of writing instruction, the second being the current and research-validated practices in writing instruction, and the third being teachers’ beliefs and their impact on decision making in the classroom.

This study answered these questions concerning writing instruction:

1. How do teachers’ personal histories with writing inform their beliefs on writing in general, as well as their beliefs on teaching writing?

2. How do teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing inform their instructional decisions?

3. What impact do teachers’ personal histories with writing and their educational beliefs about writing have on how closely aligned their teacher practices are to research-validated practices?

During the ethnographic analysis three main cultural domains were explored among the participants: (1) histories as writers, (2) beliefs about writing, and (3) practices when teaching writing. A domain analysis was formed, which included a comparison among the relationships of the separate domains, as well as a comparison within domains. Semantic relationships were then examined, serving as the taxonomic analysis, in order to connect general themes between how the teachers viewed themselves as writers to their self-reported beliefs on writing and
teaching writing, to their classroom practices when teaching writing. The findings among the relationships across and within the domains were then compared to research-validated writing practices.

Question 1: How do teachers’ personal histories with writing inform their beliefs regarding writing in general, as well as their beliefs regarding teaching writing?

Data Analysis of Histories and Beliefs

Based on the data gathered from autobiographies and interviews regarding the teachers’ histories as writers, it was revealed that two of the six teachers felt that the beginning process of writing was the most difficult part when constructing their own writing pieces. They claimed that in their past writing they had difficulty getting from the initial idea phase to brainstorming, and then transitioning from brainstorming to a first draft. These same two teachers also believed this aspect of writing as the hardest part of teaching writing in general. In fact all six teachers, even though their answers were diverse in nature depending on their history, believed the hardest part of the writing process for themselves was also the hardest part to teach their students. This was also true with respect to the teachers’ views of the easiest parts of the writing process. For example, Lori Thompson wrote in her autobiography that in her history as a writer, the easiest part for her was the organization of ideas. This same trait informed her beliefs about writing in general, as she reported that the organization of the written piece as the easiest part to teach her students.

In addition, all six participants noted their strengths in their own writing to be qualities among which they found easy to teach. In her interview, Brenda Towns stated that the easiest part of teaching writing to her students was skill instruction, which included grammar and mechanics. “The grammar and the mechanics are something I’m really good at…I feel
comfortable with it, so that’s easy to teach” (B. Towns, personal interview, April 18, 2012). Lori Thompson further reiterated this notion by stating that her strengths in writing were, in addition to grammar and mechanics, to be in the writing trait organization, the trait of writing which she felt most comfortable teaching. She summed up her feelings in her autobiography by writing, “I had such a difficult time getting started and getting my ideas to paper…My personal strengths and weaknesses tend to reflect in my teaching of writing” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012).

When asked about the teachers’ histories in regards to revising their written works, five of the six teachers reported they revised as they wrote, and that the revision stage of the writing process remained fluid, in that they revisited this stage during the other stages of the writing process. Furthermore, this practice with revision informed all six teachers’ decisions regarding when they believed a piece of their writing to be finished. Grace Munson reported, “I know when a piece of my work is finished when…I can read it and not find errors, or not find revisions” (G. Munson, personal interview, April 12, 2012). This belief was true of all six teachers, thus linking the revision stage of the writing process to the final product. This included Suzanne Smith, the sole participant who reported that she did not revise as she wrote, but rather had a peer read and revise once she had finished the work.

When identifying the teachers’ sense of self as writers, based on their histories with writing, there was a link found between the teachers’ views of their ability to write and their experiences with writing, be it either positive or negative. This link also connected to the teachers’ beliefs regarding their ability to teach writing. This was found to be true for all six participants in the study. For example, three of the six teachers cited positive experiences regarding their writing careers in school and the feedback they received from teachers and/or
parents. These teachers rated their abilities from average to good, and reported positive histories with writing in general. They also reported they felt confident in their ability to teach writing. Grace Munson stated, “It has always come easy for me to put words onto paper” (G. Munson, writing autobiography, 2012). She then wrote in her autobiography about her father, who was always supportive in her writing efforts and made her feel as if she could write well.

Brenda Towns reported, “My writing experiences were linked to the praise of teachers in the beginning. That fed my confidence (which I lacked significantly in most other areas of life) and created a girl who could write with ease and success” (B. Towns, writing autobiography, 2012). Both of these teachers reported that even though they felt teaching writing to be a complex process, they felt comfortable doing it.

The other three teachers, who did not report positive experiences with respect to their writing and their teachers’ and/or parents’ feedback, rated their abilities from average, or competent, and in the case of one of the teachers, reported herself as below average in her ability. Even though two of these participants felt average in their abilities, they reported struggling as writers and related negative feelings associated with writing in general, and also reported that they did not feel very confident when teaching writing. Suzanne Smith reported that she felt insecure as a writer, citing her negative experiences and what she believes as her teachers’ ineffectiveness in teaching writing as the explanation. “As a teacher, I had to question if I had, in fact, been taught how to write properly as a student…I feel that my teachers did not properly prepare me to be a good writer” (S. Smith, writing autobiography, 2012).

In Lori Thompson’s writing autobiography, she reported no positive experiences in her writing career as a student, and did not feel as if she were a good writer. She stated, “I still find writing a challenge as an educator” (L. Thompson, writing autobiography, 2012). During
her interview she commented that her expectations for her students in regards to writing were low. “…I hate to say that about myself, but I think it all goes back to the fact that I don’t feel comfortable teaching it” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). This particular finding links the teachers’ histories with writing in regards to positive or negative experiences, and their general beliefs about their own writing ability, as well as their beliefs regarding their ability to teach writing.

Of the three participants who did not view themselves as good writers, there was a connection found between their histories as writers with respect to what they felt was the hardest part of the writing process for themselves and the attributes they believed a good writer must possess. For example, Suzanne Smith noted that a good writer is able to stay on topic and express him or herself with the intended message. She then stated that the hardest part of the writing process for her was making sure the appropriate message was communicated and staying on topic. Thompson’s comments further illustrated this connection by stating that a good writer “creates from their own thoughts and experiences and doesn’t have trouble getting their ideas down” (L. Thompson, personal interview, April 19, 2012). She then stated that one of the hardest parts of the writing process for her, in addition to getting started, was idea formation.

Summary

According to the componential analysis within and among the domains of histories as writers and beliefs about writing and teaching writing, four general themes and connections among those themes were identified. The first theme that emerged within the data concerned the participants’ beliefs regarding their strengths and weaknesses in writing. A connection was found between the participants’ beliefs regarding their strengths and weaknesses in writing and
the component of writing they found easy and/or hard to teach, in that the participants’ personal histories with writing informed their beliefs regarding what they felt was the hardest aspect of the writing process in general, as well as the most difficult aspect to teach.

The second general theme that emerged within the data concerned the participants’ writing practices in regards to revision. The data revealed that the participants’ revision practices informed their belief regarding when a piece of their written work was complete. The third general theme that emerged within the data concerned the participants’ sense of self as writers, with a found connection between the participants’ sense of self, their beliefs regarding their ability to write, and their beliefs regarding their ability to teach writing. Those teachers who did not report positive experiences and had negative feelings towards writing in general, believed themselves to be only competent, and in one case, below average in her ability to write. These teachers reported that they did not feel comfortable teaching writing.

Of the three teachers who did not relate positive histories with writing, a fourth general theme emerged. A connection was found between what these participants’ believed were attributes of a good writer, and what they believed to be the hardest part of the writing process for themselves, in that all three of the participants’ descriptions of the attributes of a good writer were attributes the participants felt lacking in their own writing.

**Question 2: How do teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to writing in general, as well as in teaching writing, inform their instructional practices?**

**Data Analysis of Beliefs and Teacher Practices**

When analyzing the domain of the teachers’ beliefs about writing in general, five of the six teachers stated they described the purpose of writing as a form of self-expression. Brenda Towns, the only teacher with a different definition, stated the purpose of writing was to
communicate a message, which could be construed as a broader construct of self-expression. Therefore a general consensus was formed among the teachers regarding their beliefs on the purpose of writing. This was true of their own writing, as well as their reported beliefs regarding their students’ purpose for writing. In this respect, the teachers’ beliefs regarding the purpose of writing informed their instructional practices.

A further analysis of the participants’ beliefs regarding writing’s purpose revealed a connection between their purpose for writing and when they believed a piece of writing to be finished. This connection was also revealed during the participants’ writing instruction. Four of the six teachers related their purpose to the final product of the writing process. For example, as stated earlier, Brenda Towns stated the purpose for writing was to communicate a message. She went on to say that she knew when a piece of her writing was finished once the intended message had been communicated, offering a clear connection between these two constructs. This theme was then further connected as evidenced in her daily writing instruction with her students, as she stated that it was important to her that her students were able to write about what they wanted to talk about, highlighting the significance of her students’ ability to communicate their intended message. Brenda Masterson echoed these sentiments, as she defined her purpose for writing as a form of self-expression and fully addressing the topic at hand. She stated that a piece of her writing was complete once she felt that she had fully expressed her thoughts and opinions on a subject and that was also true for her students’ writing as evidenced during her writing instruction.

In addition, four of the six teachers linked their definitions regarding the purpose of writing to their beliefs concerning the attributes of a good writer. Suzanne Smith defined the purpose of writing as “a way to express yourself in words” (S. Smith, personal interview, May 7,
She then listed the attributes of a good writer as someone who “uses his or her imagination to express himself or herself” (S. Smith, personal interview, May 7, 2012). Furthermore Gennifer Elliot defined the purpose of writing as “the expression of a student’s feelings and ideas about a topic” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012), and then she stated that a good writer “begins by organizing and jotting down what comes to mind, including how they feel and view the topic” (G. Elliot, personal interview, April 27, 2012). The two other participants gave varying opinions regarding the attributes of a good writer; however, neither of them was connected to the idea of self-expression. Therefore, for four of the teachers, their beliefs regarding the purpose of writing and the attributes of a good writer were traits they looked for in their students’ written works.

This was further evident in the types of writing activities conducted and the amount of time spent on those activities during daily writing instruction. To illustrate this point, Ms. Elliot, who believes a good writer spends time with brainstorming and organizing their thoughts and feelings, allowed ample time in her daily writing instruction for her students to spend on this stage of the writing process and the traits therein, such as organization. In fact, three of the six teachers linked their beliefs with respect to the attributes of a good writer to the types of activities conducted during their daily writing lessons.

Brandy Masterson stated in her interview that a good writer “plans and thinks through the idea before they write. They do lots of brainstorming” (B. Masterson, personal interview, April 18, 2012). The other two participants gave similar responses referring to brainstorming and planning in regards to what they believed were attributes of a good writer. Thusly, a link was found between these same participants’ beliefs regarding the characteristics of a good writer and the emphasis on those particular attributes during their writing instruction, in that they conducted
multiple activities in which were related to the brainstorming and planning phases of the writing process.

In the previous analysis of histories and beliefs, it was noted that all six teachers reported that the easiest part of the writing process for themselves was also the easiest part to teach their students. A further connection was made concerning the analysis of teacher practices, in that five of the six participants, when observed during writing instruction, spent the majority of their instructional time focusing on the aspect of writing which they felt easiest to teach, being the easiest part of the writing process for themselves. For example, Suzanne Smith reported she felt the easiest part of teaching writing to be finding ideas to write about, and then developing those ideas with details. As reported in her interview, this was also the easiest part of the writing process when Smith composed her own work. Furthermore, during the observations of her writing instruction, Ms. Smith spent the majority of her instructional time orally aiding and leading her students through the initial brainstorming of ideas and the development of details to support those ideas. This was similarly noted in Ms. Thompson’s writing instruction, as she reported that the easiest part of the writing process was organization, mechanics, and grammar. She thusly spent the majority of her writing lesson on these attributes of writing, with all of her teacher comments regarding the students’ work related to either grammar or mechanics. She never addressed any other trait of writing such as character or voice, both aspects in which Thompson stated she did not feel comfortable teaching.

As reported in their interviews, all six teachers were in agreement regarding the definitions of compositional and creative writing, defining compositional writing as being more structured regarding form and topic, and creative writing allowing more choice for the student regarding form and topic. The same was true regarding the definition of traditional writing and
writing as a process, with the participants in agreement that traditional writing focuses on the end product of writing, and teaching writing as a process focuses on what the students do as they write. According to the classroom observations and where the emphasis in the teachers’ instruction lied, be it more compositional, creative, traditional, or process-oriented, three of the six teachers used methods more in line with compositional writing taught in a traditional manner. The researcher noted these three participants were the same three teachers who reported struggling with writing and their comfort level when teaching writing. Lori Thompson, Suzanne Smith, and Brenda Masterson employed more traditional methods when teaching writing. This was evidenced by the strategies they used, as well as the activities they chose to conduct and the break down of those activities. For example, both Smith and Masterson approached the stages of writing as a linear process. This was evidenced in their daily writing instruction, as the stages of writing were divided up among the days of the week. The students in both classes were required to complete all pre-writing activities on Mondays; on Tuesdays the students began piecing together their first drafts; on Wednesdays first drafts were to be completed. Thursdays were reserved for revision and editing, and the students were required to turn in a final draft on Fridays. This interpretation of the stages of writing is line with the traditional methods of teaching writing, in that the steps of writing are concrete with a specific order of operations to be followed (Kitao & Saeki, 1992). Thompson also used traditional methods of writing in that her students were instructed to compose their writing, only paying attention to the conventions of writing such as beginning capitalization and ending punctuation. Ms. Thompson did not address any other trait of writing in her instruction. The students also were not allowed time to reflect and revise, characteristics of the process approach to teaching writing (Graham & Hebert, 2010).
Therefore of these three participants, their histories and beliefs regarding writing informed the methods in which they taught writing to their students.

The three participants who reported histories that included positive experiences with writing and felt confident in their abilities as writers and teaching writing, employed methods more in line with teaching writing as a process. This was found to be true as evidenced by their classroom observations. Grace Munson, Brenda Towns, and Gennifer Elliot all employed the process approach to teaching writing. The three teachers spent time focusing on what the students were doing as they wrote, and attended to several traits of writing, be it organization, voice, sentence fluency, as well as the conventions of writing. The students were given the opportunity to share not only their ideas, but also the time to read each other’s work in order to offer feedback and support. All three teachers showed evidence of allowing their students to spend time reflecting on their work as well as in the revision process. The students were also given the opportunity to write about what they were reading about, another trait of the process approach to teaching writing (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

Summary

According to the componential analysis within and among the domains of beliefs about writing and practices when teaching writing, six general themes and connections among those themes were identified. The first theme that emerged within the data concerned the teachers’ beliefs regarding the purpose of writing. A general consensus was formed in that the participants believed the purpose of writing to be self-expression and/or communicating a message. This same consensus was found among the teachers’ beliefs regarding their students’ purpose of writing, in that they were one in the same. A second theme emerged concerning four of the six teachers with respect to their purpose for writing. A connection was found between their
purpose of writing, when they considered a piece of their writing to be finished, and when they believed their students’ writing was complete. In other words, there was evidence to suggest that their beliefs regarding the purpose of writing informed their ideas as to when their written work was complete, and thusly informed when they believed their students’ work to be finished.

A third theme that surfaced concerned four of the six teachers’ purpose for writing and their reported beliefs in regards to the attributes of a good writer. A connection was found between what the teachers believed the purpose for writing and the characteristics of a good writer was. This also informed their instructional practices in that they spent more time on those traits of writing that they felt a good writer should posses.

A fourth theme that emerged from the data concerned all six participants and what they believed was the easiest part of the writing process. A connection was found between what component of writing the teachers felt was easiest to teach and the component of writing they spent the most time teaching. For example, if the conventions of writing were found to be easy, then the majority of instructional time was spent on teaching those conventions.

A fifth theme in the data comparing beliefs and practices concerned three of the six teachers who believed their writing ability to range from, at best competent to at worst, below average. These teachers’ employed instructional practices more in line with the traditional methods of teaching writing. Conversely, the sixth and final theme to emerge among the data concerned the three teachers who related positive experiences with writing and felt confident as writers and in teaching writing. They used a process approach to teaching writing, the most current research-validated method of teaching writing. Therefore, a connection was found to exist among how the teachers viewed themselves as writers to the type of writing methods they used when teaching writing.
Question 3: What impact do teachers’ personal histories with writing and their educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing have on how closely aligned their teacher practices are to research-validated practices?

Data Analysis of Teacher Practices and Research-Validated Practices

When analyzing the domain of the teachers’ practices when teaching writing, it was noted that the three teachers who reported struggling with writing in their experiences, stated they were not comfortable teaching writing. They also spent less time teaching it as compared to those teachers who reported positive experiences and who felt comfortable teaching writing. For all six teachers, a correlation existed among the teachers’ comfort level with teaching writing and the amount of time they spent on daily writing instruction. For example, Munson, Elliot, and Towns, the three teachers who felt comfortable teaching writing, spent approximately one hour per day on writing instruction. Those teachers who were not comfortable teaching writing, Thompson, Smith, and Masterson, spent approximately 15-30 minutes per day on writing instruction. According to the current research, students should be spending approximately one hour per day on daily writing instruction (Graham & Hebert, 2010). The time spent teaching writing could be broken up over the course of the day and not taught in a one hour chunk; however, the bottom line, according to researchers in the field, is that teachers need to “increase how much students write” (Graham & Hebert, 2010, p. 20).

In addition, the teachers who spent more time on daily writing instruction had students who produced more written works per week than those students in the other three classrooms. According to the new Common Core State Standards (2010), and its position regarding this fact, “students must devote significant time and effort to writing, producing numerous pieces over short and extended time frames throughout the year” (NGA & CCSO, 2010, p. 18).
In addition to spending more time on daily writing instruction, those teachers who felt confident in their writing abilities and comfortable teaching writing, practiced writing methods that more closely resembled those practices recommended in the current research as the best ways to teach writing to children. These three teachers were observed teaching writing using a more process-approach to teaching writing, and attended to writing traits other than the conventions of writing, but incorporated other traits as well. This included teaching organization, voice, sentence fluency, and ideas. Students in these three classrooms were given ample time to reflect and revise their work, also a trait of the process approach to teaching writing. According to the new standards in the Common Core State Standards (2010), students in the first through fourth grades should write opinion pieces, informative/explanatory text, narratives with plots ranging from the simple to the complex, and detailed stories that involve the writing process approach to teaching writing, which should include extensive time for the revision and editing stages of writing. These three teachers also employed interactive writing in their written instruction in that their students were afforded opportunities to collaborate with one another when writing, another method of teaching writing according to the current research (Tompkins, 2011).

The three teachers, who struggled in their experiences as writers and did not feel comfortable teaching writing, taught writing in a strictly traditional manner, using methods that were not in line with the current research-validated practices, as evidenced by their classroom instruction. For example, Smith and Masterson both approached the stages of writing as linear instead of recursive, in that their students moved through the stages of writing according to the day of the week. On Mondays they brainstormed, Tuesdays they began their first draft, etc., with no fluid movement allowed between and among the stages of writing. According to Louisiana's
Comprehensive Literacy Plan (2011), which addresses how Louisiana will incorporate the new core standards:

Students’ skills in writing improve through explicit skill and process instruction and by increasing the frequency of writing. To improve writing, students need time to experiment, practice new skills, share, and revise. Students learn to write by working through the process of idea connection, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The process, however, is not a linear progression, but a recursive back and forth among the stages. (p.24)

The current research also proposes that students be allowed to write in a multitude of genres and for different purposes, including having the students write in journals (Graham & Hebert, 2010). The three aforementioned teachers did not allow their students to write in many different genres, focusing almost solely on narrative fiction writing. Their students also were not allowed to write in journals. Of those teachers who felt confident in their abilities, their students were afforded more opportunities to write in different genres, and all three teachers required their students to keep daily journals.

Summary

According to the componential analysis within the teachers’ practices when teaching writing and the comparison of those practices with current research-validated practices, one general theme emerged within the data; however, several connections among the theme was identified. The overriding theme that emerged within the data concerned the fact that the teachers who felt confident in their ability as writers and teaching writing, were more in line with current research-validated practices than those teachers who did not feel confident in their writing abilities and teaching writing.

The first connection found among this theme dealt with the amount of time the teachers spent on daily writing instruction. Those teachers, who reported positive feelings with writing and felt comfortable teaching it, spent more time teaching writing as compared to those teachers.
who reported negative feelings with writing and did not feel comfortable teaching it. Additionally, those teachers who spent more time on daily writing instruction had students who produced more written works than the students in the other classes. These facts were in line with what current research suggests teachers of writing should be doing with respect to the time spent teaching writing and the amount of work the students produce (NGA & CCSO, 2010).

Another connection among this theme dealt with the type of writing instruction the teachers employed and their feelings regarding their abilities. Those teachers who felt confident as writers and teaching writing used methods more in line with the process approach to teaching writing, the method of teaching writing which current research supports (Graham & Hebert, 2010; Tompkins, 2011). Several examples of this were noted, in that these teachers had their students write in different genres for different purposes, and used interactive methods of teaching writing. They afforded their students ample time to reflect and revise, as well as opportunities to collaborate with one another.

The teachers who reported they did not feel comfortable teaching writing used methods more in line with the traditional method of teaching writing. This was evidenced by their classroom practices, in that their students were not required to write in many different genres, nor given the opportunity to reflect on their work or collaborate with their peers. The stages of writing were presented as a linear progression instead of recursive, the most current research-validated way of presenting the process of writing (Louisiana Department of Education, 2011).

Discussion and Overall Summary of Results

This ethnographic case study examined the possible connections found among teachers’ educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing, comparing their personal histories as writers and self-reported beliefs on writing and teaching writing, with that of their teacher practices. A
further analysis examined how closely aligned their teacher practices were to research-validated practices. When analyzing the domains of histories, beliefs, and practices, connections were found within and among the aforementioned cultural domains.

According to this study, there was evidence to suggest that teachers’ histories with respect to writing informed their beliefs regarding several components of writing, such as the teachers’ beliefs regarding the hardest/easiest part of teaching writing, their beliefs with respect to revision and when their work was complete, as well as their sense of self as writers. Additionally, there was evidence to support that their general beliefs regarding their ability to write and teach writing influenced their comfort level when teaching writing to students.

Furthermore, this study showed a connection between the teachers’ beliefs with respect to writing and teaching writing and their teacher practices. Several connections were noted such as the teachers’ beliefs regarding the purpose of writing and when they believed their students’ writing to be complete, their purposes for writing and their beliefs regarding the attributes of a good writer, as well as the amount of time the teachers spent teaching those same attributes. It was also noted that those beliefs regarding the easiest/hardest parts of teaching also reflected in the teachers’ practices, in that they spent more time on what they deemed easier to teach and less time on the harder parts of the writing process.

When comparing the teachers’ practices to current research-validated practices, it was noted that those teachers who viewed themselves to be competent to below average in their ability to write and teach writing, employed methods that did not align with what research suggests is the best ways to teach writing, and they spent less time on daily writing instruction. Conversely, those teachers who did feel confident in their ability to write and teach writing were observed using writing methods that employed the strategies recommended in the current
research with respects to teaching writing, and they spent more time teaching daily writing instruction.

The findings of this study speak to the importance of self-reflection and the power of teacher beliefs. Those teachers who reported they did not feel comfortable teaching writing also reported struggling with writing in their experiences. Their histories with writing cannot be remediated; however, measures can be taken to improve the teachers’ sense of self with respect to writing. In other words, their confidence levels can be improved upon in regards to their writing ability and their comfort levels with teaching writing. Research suggest the more we practice writing the better writer we become (Graham & Hebert, 2010). This is also true of teachers. Instead of attending professional development workshops on methods of teaching writing, why not have the teachers learn how to become better writers themselves? Continued professional development that focuses on the teachers as writers could have a profound impact on their sense of self as writers. This impact could inform the teachers’ confidence with writing as well as their comfort levels when teaching writing. If like the three teachers in the study who did feel confident with writing and teaching writing, this could be the catalyst for the teachers to increase the amount of time spent on daily writing instruction, as well as increase the likelihood that the teachers would address a wider variety of writing components, thus increasing their likelihood of employing methods that more closely align with current research-validated practices.

Implications for Future Research and Limitations

It is sensible to assume that continued study of the factors that influence classroom practices, history-based beliefs specifically, could offer educators more insight into the motivations of teacher decisions regarding classroom practices. Additional studies may suggest
other factors that inform the decisions teachers make in the classroom and could impact how
writing is taught to students. Furthermore, this study could be expanded to include the
assessment of student work. An area of future research could be in comparing the results of the
end products among the students from the two sets of aforementioned teachers, in order to
determine if the teachers’ practices impacted the students’ overall performance in writing.

Limitations of this study involved three main areas. The first being the small sample size
as the parameters of the study was limited to a small purposeful sampling of six case studies.
Secondly, the teachers participating in the study were primary grade teachers at two urban
elementary schools. A broader scope in regards to this study could include the upper elementary
grades, middle school, and high school teachers. Thirdly, the students at both schools served a
population of students from a low socioeconomic background, with the schools earning a school
performance letter grade of C- and D respectively. Again, a broader scope for this study could
have included schools with higher school performance scores with more affluent students.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you define writing?

2. What do you think a good writer does when writing?

3. When you are writing, what is the hardest part for you?

4. When you are writing, what is the easiest part for you?

5. Do you revise your writing?

6. How do you know when a piece of your writing is finished?

7. What is the difference between compositional and creative writing?

8. What is the difference between traditional writing methods and writing as a process, and where do you feel your emphasis in writing instruction lies?

9. What do you believe is the hardest part about teaching writing?

10. What do you believe is the easiest part about teaching writing?

11. What do you believe is the first thing you should do when teaching someone how to write? Why?

12. How do your students’ revise their writing?

13. How much time do your students spend writing during the day?

14. How do they spend their writing time?

15. What do you do during regularly scheduled writing time?

16. How are your students writing in different genres?
Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

Applicant: Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at https://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml

A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
(A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
(B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
(C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
(D) This proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
(E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training Link: (http://phprr.nmrtraining.com/users/login.php)
(F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (http://www.lsu.edu/irb/security%20co%20data.pdf)

1) Principal Investigator: Shailanda Stanley
   Dept: Educational Theory Policy and Administration
   Phn: (318)348-4674
   E-mail: stanley@lsu.edu
   Rank: Doctoral Student

2) Co-Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each
   None

3) Project Title: An Investigation into Teachers' Educational Beliefs in Regards to Teaching Writing: Comparing Experiences and Self-Reported Beliefs to Teacher Practices

4) Proposal? (yes or no) No
   If Yes, LSU Proposal Number
   Also, if YES, either
   ○ This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
   OR
   ○ More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students): Primary Grade Teachers
   *Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children 18 and under, the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, others). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature: Shailanda Stanley Date: 1/27/12

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changed, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU Institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study, if I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted ☑ Not Exempted Category/Paragraph

Reviewer: Kristin A. Gande Signature: Date: 03-01-2012
Participant Consent Form

Title of Study:
An Investigation into Teachers' Educational Beliefs in Regards to Teaching Writing: Comparing Experiences and Self-Reported Beliefs to Teacher Practices

Performance Site: Two Urban Title 1 Elementary Schools

Investigator: Shalanda Stanley is the sole and primary investigator. She can be contacted for questions regarding the study at (318)348-4074 or at sstanley@lum.edu.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to investigate teachers' educational beliefs in regards to teaching writing, comparing their personal histories as writers and self-reported beliefs on the best ways to teach writing, with that of their teacher practices.

Subject Inclusion: For this investigation, a purposeful sampling will take place, including both setting and participants. The researcher has chosen the schools based on their similarities according to reported standardized district data, and chose teachers based on the principal's recommendations at the aforementioned schools.

Number of subjects: 6

Study Procedures: The study will be conducted in three phases. In the first phase, subjects will write an autobiography in regards to their personal histories as writers. The second phase will include an interview with the researcher, and the third phase will include observations of the subject during writing instruction.

Benefits: The study may yield valuable information regarding the impact teachers' educational beliefs have on classroom practices.

Risks: There are no foreseeable risks in the involvement of this study.

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigator. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Matthews, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692, lr@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Subject Signature: ________________________ Date: ________________
VITA

Shalanda Stanley, a native of Monroe, Louisiana, earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from The Florida State University in 1998. After teaching for ten years in the Louisiana public school system, Ms. Stanley went on to earn her Master of Education degree from the University of Louisiana at Monroe in 2008. In the fall of 2009, she began her pursuit of the Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction at Louisiana State University, under the supervision of Dr. Earl Cheek.