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# Teacher Preparation and Practices of Writing Instruction

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# Teacher Preparation and Practices of Writing Instruction

**Abstract**

This study examined how teachers were prepared to teach writing as well as what methods they use when instructing in writing. It is important for teachers to be knowledgeable of writing because it is a skill that students will continue to need after school. Data was collected from teachers through a questionnaire, field notes, and a writing sample. After analysis of the data, it was found that teachers lack the formal preparation to teach writing and modeling, providing adaptations and re-teaching of certain skills are present when instructing in writing. As writing continues to be an important skill, teachers need to be knowledgeable with up to date research in order to provide effective instruction.

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### Abstract

This study examined how teachers were prepared to teach writing as well as what methods they use when instructing in writing. It is important for teachers to be knowledgeable of writing because it is a skill that students will continue to need after school. Data was collected from teachers through a questionnaire, field notes, and a writing sample. After analysis of the data, it was found that teachers lack the formal preparation to teach writing and modeling, providing adaptations and re-teaching of certain skills are present when instructing in writing. As writing continues to be an important skill, teachers need to be knowledgeable with up to date research in order to provide effective instruction.

### **Teacher Preparation and Practices of Writing Instruction**

Writing has become an important form of communication that connects people to society. With new technology being invented all the time, students have more opportunities to engage in writing in different ways and often every day. For example, sending e-mails, text messaging, posting on walls on Facebook, tweeting, and blogging are just some of the ways that individuals engage themselves in writing. When students graduate from high school, they are expected to have the writing skills that are needed to be successful in college and the workplace (Roth & Guinee, 2011). Therefore, the instruction that students receive in school needs to prepare students for the various writing tasks they may be asked to do in college or the workplace. Although there are different ways to engage in writing throughout the day, writing instruction is often limited during the school day or not done at all (Fry & Griffin, 2010). In fact, reading instruction is often dominated over writing instruction because of initiatives such as Reading First, a component of the No Child Left Behind Act (Moats, Foorman & Taylor, 2006). A lack of writing instruction in schools can indicate to the students that writing is seen as unimportant and thus students may struggle in college or the work field when they encounter writing again.

Not only is there a lack of writing instruction in the classrooms, but there is a lack of learning how to teach writing in teacher education programs because of the higher emphasis that is put on reading instruction (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011). With the greater emphasis put on reading during teacher education programs, teachers often lack the confidence in teaching writing to their students. According to Grisham and Wolsey (2011), “for many elementary and secondary teachers, it is the area of literacy/language arts that they feel themselves least prepared to teach well” (p. 348). Teaching writing is a complex process for most teachers and often a difficult and demanding task for students to master (Morgan, 2010). Professional developments

are often enforced to keep teachers informed with up to date research and methods that will benefit them in the classroom, but most professional developments do not focus on writing. Writing instruction needs to be enforced in teacher education programs so that new teachers can go into the classroom and strongly support and teach their students in writing. Then professional developments can be followed up in writing instruction so that the teachers who did not receive much support in their teacher education programs can still be informed of the best practices in writing.

The intent of this study is to examine if the research is true about the lack of preparation teachers have had in learning to teach writing and to determine what steps should to be taken in order to help with the lack of preparation in writing instruction. Furthermore, the study will reveal teachers' attitudes and beliefs about writing that will help answer some of the following questions that come up in research pertaining to writing. Questions that are often asked about writing instruction mostly relate to how are teachers prepared to teach writing? Other questions are how confident are teachers when instructing their students in writing and what kinds of experiences did these teachers have to help determine their methods for instruction of writing?

College education courses are often considered the number one way teachers receive preparation to teach a variety of methods. However, Smagorinsky, Wilson and Moore (2011) state that when it comes to writing, teacher education programs are lacking the preparation that teachers need to teach writing effectively to their students. In order to help understand how teachers were prepared to teach writing and what methods they use to instruct in writing, data was collected through a teacher questionnaire, field notes and a writing prompt. The findings from this study supported the literature review in regards to the lack of preparation that is

provided in teacher education programs. The findings also demonstrated that teachers use similar methods when instructing their students in writing.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Writing is just one component of literacy and it is important to understand what literacy is and how children begin to acquire literacy and language before examining how students can receive effective instruction in writing. According to Larson and Marsh (2005), literacy is a “multimodal social practice with specific affordances in different contexts” (p. 21). Therefore, literacy is a social practice that involves an individual to actively participate in various environments in order to learn about different ways that language can be used. The sociocultural theory is strongly supported in this study because the way individuals acquire literacy and writing skills impacts the knowledge they will have of these skills when they begin school. The sociocultural theory states that “literacies are bound up with social, institutional and cultural relationships, and can only be understood when they are situated within their social, cultural, and historic contexts” (Lankshear & Knobel, 1996, p. 8). Therefore, the writing activities that children are exposed to at home and throughout their community can only be learned and understood if the school writing activities are similar to those that students are familiar with. The discourse of a society is where an individual begins to hear and practice the language of a community. Gee (2001) uses the term Discourse with a capital D to refer to the way an individual uses discourse in their social group. Primary and secondary are two types of discourse that Gee talks about. He argues that primary discourse is the language that develops within the family and secondary discourse is the language that is learned and acquired through the community and other places such as “schools, workplaces, stores, government offices, businesses, or churches” (Gee, 2001, p. 22). Larson and Marsh (2005), further argue that literacy

events are embedded in Discourses. The more interactions that an individual will have in their various environments the more literacy skills they will obtain. Children will first need to know how oral language is formed and used before they begin experimenting with the written part of language. Written language will also be present throughout many different environments such as at home, school, and the community.

The sociocultural theory helps explain how individuals acquire literacy skills. Acquisition of literacy skills and behaviors begin to develop at birth. The term ‘emergent literacy’ developed after learning of the literacy skills that young children possess before entering school (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Both oral and written language plays an important role in acquiring such literacy skills. Knowing how children acquire writing skills at an emergent stage in their life is important for primary school teachers to understand because it will help instruct their students in writing and provide support to those students who struggle with writing. Furthermore, the awareness of oral and written language helps children acquire literacy skills because they begin to learn the systems of language. Knowledge of these systems of language increases their communication competency and awareness of certain writing features. The systems of language consist of phonetics (sounds of language), semantics (meaning from words), syntactic (rules of language), morphemic (word structure), and pragmatics (purpose of language) (Otto, 2008). Kucer (2009) also considers text type, genre, text structure, orthographic (spelling), and graphemic (formation of letters) systems of language that children encounter. All of the systems of language are important for writing instruction. Therefore, teaching and reinforcing the systems of language are essential for students to communicate through their writing. As children encounter these systems of language, whether it is in their home or community, they begin to practice them on their own and begin to acquire literacy skills that will



help them read, write and communicate. A child's home environment life has a major influence on how children will acquire literacy skills and be able to use them in school (Heath, 1982).

Since the home environment impacts the development of these systems, parents and other adults in the home must have knowledge of the systems of language too in order for children to understand language better. Furthermore, writing contains all the systems of language in order to communicate effectively. Grammar, spelling, form, and organization are all important components to have when writing and are often taught during writing instruction.

The sociocultural theory views learning and knowledge of literacy skills is obtained through group interactions rather than through the individual alone (Larson & Marsh, 2005). Young children will only attempt oral and written language if they are present in a literacy enriched environment. Again the systems of language need to be introduced to individuals so that they can form sentences and begin to write down their thoughts and ideas. Without knowledge of the systems of language students would not be able to communicate through writing. It is the interactions that children have in their environment with print that help them learn the various ways that language is written and the purpose that it serves. According to Larson and Marsh (2005), learning only occurs through the "participation in social, cultural, and historical contexts that are mediated by interaction" (p. 105). Therefore, the more experiences and interactions that children have with their environment, the more information they will have to share in their writing. Children will most likely attempt the written part when they see their parents engaging in writing activities. For example, a child's first example of written language may look like scribbles on a page. Children may attempt to write a "to do" list or grocery list when they see an adult writing a "to do" list or grocery list. If children do not have the same encounter with writing as they do with reading in their home environment, then it can also

impact them with their learning of writing when they go to school. Having a strong background knowledge about writing is important for teachers to have too so that they can help students who come to school with little to no knowledge about writing. Providing support and adaptations is often a difficult task for teachers to do, especially if they do not have the background education in teaching writing. Written language has many different forms and is seen in different contexts so therefore it needs to be authentic and have meaning. The writing activities that students engage in should not be done in order to just fit writing into the school day but rather seen as valuable and important to the students. When teachers are selecting writing activities and topics for students to complete they must think about each student's experiences with the activity so that the students can complete the activity and relate to the topic. Larson and Marsh (2007) suggest that teachers need to clearly understand their practices and the practices of the community which includes the students and family members of their classroom to help ensure authentic practices are being implemented in the classroom.

A second theory that is supported in this study which is also similar to the sociocultural theory is the New Literacy Studies (NLS). In fact, NLS helped theorists discover the influence that social interaction has on literacy learning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Larson and Marsh (2005) argue that, "NLS helps us understand that literacy learning does not simply occur in formal or informal settings, or in or out of school, but also occurs in-between in everyday interaction as tools for building and maintaining social relations" (p. 18). Therefore the definition and idea of literacy has changed and developed because of the NLS. Prior to the 1970s, literacy instruction was only thought to be for those who were illiterate (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Today literacy is no longer considered just for people who are illiterate and in fact has become a central focus in school settings. The NLS also highlighted that literacy is

more than just reading, writing, speaking and listening (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Literacy can be seen everywhere and now even most technology can be considered a part of literacy. In fact Baron (2001) considers “writing itself is always first and foremost a technology” (para. 5). With new technology advances, students have more opportunities to engage in various writing activities while at the same time building their literacy skills. Although more and more teachers are using technology to instruct their students they still need to be prepared and updated as new information and forms of communication are being invented because, students may be exposed to them in their many environments. Students would rather type their paper than use what is now often referred as the “old fashion” method of pencil and paper. The sociocultural theory and New Literacies Studies provide support that writing has changed throughout the years and can be easily present in everyday interactions.

### **Research Question**

Although reading is important for learning and engaging in the environment, writing is also as equally important. Some students may not understand this importance because of the way that writing instruction is provided to them. There are various ways that writing can be implemented. This instruction in most cases is up to the teacher. Teachers learn about writing methods either from professional developments, the classes they took through their teacher education program, from other colleagues or research they have done on their own. In most cases teachers do not receive the adequate support in writing as they do in other subjects and it is often put off as a last minute activity. Given that literacy is a social practice and that writing is an important skill for students to have even after they graduate high school, this action research project asks, how are teachers prepared to teach writing, and what methods do they use during writing instruction?

### **Literature Review**

The amount of research that can be found on writing and teachers' experiences with writing is rather extensive, however, Gilbert and Graham (2010) and Cutler and Graham (2008) argue that there is not enough research on what writing instruction looks like in the classrooms. Furthermore, Grisham and Wolsey (2011) and Davenport (2006) argue that there is little research on how teachers effectively learn to incorporate writing in K-12 instruction. There have been several studies to find out how knowledgeable and comfortable teachers are when it comes to the teaching of writing as well as the methods and strategies that were used to conduct the studies (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Fry & Griffin, 2010; Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Al-Bataineh et al., 2010; Pardo, 2006). In the following literature review, there were numerous arguments discovered about writing and the teachers' confidence in teaching writing instruction. First, the literature review will examine how teachers obtained their knowledge of writing and how it impacted them while teaching. Secondly, the review will focus on what the research says about writing in schools and how it is not always the main focus of instruction. This finding also demonstrates what little time is left for students to engage in writing as well as for teachers to give instruction. Finally, the last part of the literature review will focus on what the literature says about the practice and implementation of writing in the classroom. An examination of different methods and practices will be discussed as well as the type writing activities students participate in. In this part of the review, attention will be focused on how differentiation is used to help instruct struggling writers and identify whether or not teachers are scaffolding instruction for struggling writers.

### **Teacher Experience, Knowledge, and Preparation**

As standardized assessments require more writing components, writing has become an

important topic for many researchers. There are various ways that teachers can implement writing instruction in the classroom. In order to understand what methods of writing instruction teachers use in their classrooms, it is important to first examine where and how teachers obtained their knowledge of writing. Teachers, just like students, had experiences with writing as they grew up in their home and then also in their K-12 schooling experience. As teachers moved on into their college career and choose a profession in teaching, they took courses in a teacher education program. It may be assumed that in teacher candidates' coursework, one of the courses involved the learning of how to teach writing, however, research indicates this is not always the case (Al-Bataineh et al., 2010; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011).

As mentioned earlier students are under pressure to write well because of standardized assessments and other major assessments such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Roth & Guinee, 2011). The pressure from administrators and parents is then often put on the teachers (Brindley & Schneider, 2002; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). The amount of research on teachers' experiences and histories that they have with writing is often the first area of concern in regards to teaching writing in their classrooms. In a study done by Al-Bataineh, Holmes, Jerich and Williams (2010), teachers were questioned about their self-efficacy when it came to the instruction of writing. Self-efficacy is defined as the "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Al-Bataineh Holmes, Jerich & Williams, 2010, p. 440). Teachers' self-efficacy in Al-Bataineh et al.'s study was only impacted by the experiences that they had. For example, teachers shared their personal writing histories that shaped their beliefs about writing. Reflecting on their past experiences with writing was either identified as positive or negative. These experiences were both prior to becoming a teacher and then the actual experiences from the school and classroom

that the participants taught at. Furthermore, Gilbert and Graham (2010) argue that teachers' self-efficacy for teaching writing predicts their writing practices that they will implement in the classroom. Gilbert and Graham claim that when teachers had negative experiences with writing in their past, they tend to have low confidence in teaching writing to students. Also, in a study conducted by Grisham and Wolsey (2011) teacher candidates' self-efficacy in teaching writing increased after having positive experiences with teaching writing in their student teaching placements. In a similar study by Pella (2011) teachers were able to discuss their view of writing pedagogy through a professional learning community and were looking to change their perceptions of self-efficacy in writing instruction. A participant indicated that through the knowledge she obtained in the professional learning community she felt more confident in setting goals for the future. Al-Bataineh et al.'s study also led to teachers discussing how they obtained knowledge about writing by providing examples in three different ways. First, examples were provided about ones experiences with writing from their home environment. Second several references were made about teachers' K-12 schooling experiences and finally their experiences that they had in their teacher education programs were also shared. These themes were also present throughout several other studies that were conducted.

Similar studies to Al- Bataineh et al. (2010) also questioned, surveyed, or interviewed teachers about their literacy histories. According to Norman and Spencer (2005), the literacy histories that pre-service teachers experience influence their pedagogical decisions that they will make in the classroom as well as how they will learn writing in their teacher education programs. In a study by Mathers, Benson and Newton (2007), participants responded that the influences of parents and siblings were responsible for their success in writing. Family members were often credited for helping participants learn how to write in other studies as well. For example, family

members that put an emphasis on writing helped contribute to teacher's attitudes and knowledge towards writing. Although the research in this area of home experiences was scarce, the comments participants shared from the various studies were positive.

Home experiences were not the only factors that contributed to the knowledge or lack of knowledge in teaching writing. The experiences that teachers had when in their K-12 schooling played another important role in determining their thoughts about writing. According to Pardo (2006), one reason that teachers have discomfort and lack confidence in teaching writing is because they felt that they were not given the proper instruction in K-12 school. In a study done by Street and Stang (2009), participants responded to a question concerning major influences that impacted their self-confidence as writers. Teachers and school experiences were viewed as the most important factor in determining teachers' views on writing (Street & Stang, 2009). In Al-Bataineh et al.'s (2010) study it was discovered that there were some experiences that impacted their teacher self-efficacy negatively and then some that were impacted in positive ways. Positive personal writing experiences, mentor or model teachers, collaboration with other teachers, and teacher attitude were the major positive themes that arose through the teacher interviews about writing. The negative themes that were discussed were insignificant or negative personal writing experiences, insufficient training for teaching writing, and absent or inconsistent guidelines for writing (Al-Bataineh et al., 2010).

The participants in the various studies had mixed reactions about the instruction they received in school. For example, Norman and Spencer (2005) and Morgan (2010) found that more participants viewed themselves positively when it came to writing because of their experiences in school. The participants in the study reported having positive teachers in elementary school who were "encouraging, supportive and caring" (Norman & Spencer, 2005 p.

31). However, some participants reported having negative experiences with writing when they entered middle and high school because their teachers were characterized as “insensitive, critical, uncaring, and ineffective” (p. 31). Although there were a few positive experiences in school, studies mostly revealed the negative parts that were experienced with writing instruction during school. Often participants expressed more negative feelings toward writing when they entered high school. The reasons for participants having low self confidence in Street and Stang’s (2009) study was because the participants reported that their experiences in school resulted in “criticism,” “harshness,” and “resentment” (p. 84).

Lastly, much of the research that was examined found that teacher education programs have received negative attention in helping to expand teacher knowledge in the area of writing and to help improve their self confidence in teaching writing. Participants in various studies reported that their teacher education program provided minimal to no preparation to teach writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Fry & Griffin, 2010; Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Al-Bataineh et al., 2010; Norman & Spencer, 2005). In fact, The National Commission on Writing (2003) reported that some state departments of education do not require teacher candidates to take courses in writing in order to earn their certification (Fry & Griffin, 2010; Pardo, 2006). Smargorinsky, Wilson and Moore (2011) argue that because students do not receive the information needed to effectively teach writing, they often rely on the methods that were taught to them when they were in school. However, most of the emphasis in teacher education courses is often focused on reading instruction. Norman and Spencer (2005) further claim that teacher candidates will receive more instruction in reading theory and practice compared to writing instruction. However, the few teachers reported in the studies that did receive instruction on how to teach writing felt more comfortable as writers and thus more confident in teaching writing to



their students (Morgan, 2010).

Although it is indicated that writing is often not taught in college coursework, several studies took action by having pre-service teachers participate in writing activities. For example, pre-service teachers participated in field placements such as student teaching with writing instruction being their central focus. Fry and Griffin (2010), Grisham and Wolsey (2011), and Davenport (2006) implemented studies in which teacher candidates were paired up with other students in local schools so that the teacher candidates could learn how to instruct writing. Not only did the teacher candidates get a chance to learn about writing instruction and give feedback, but the students that received help from the pre-service teachers also enjoyed the fact that they were able to help an adult learn too (Fry & Griffin, 2010). Fry and Griffin (2010) and Colby and Stapleton (2006) recommended that pre-service teachers experience training in teaching writing, have the opportunity to write and respond to writing and to teach the writing process. Also, Fry and Griffin and Colby and Stapleton strongly support pre-service teachers having the opportunity to work with both individual and groups of learners in order to apply what they are learning about writing instruction. Davenport (2006) argues that there needs to be a better “balance between on campus instruction and off campus field-based experiences” (p. 13). Smagorinsky, Wilson and Moore (2011) also believe in the importance of having teacher candidates engage in more field- experiences for teacher education programs. Thus, the professors need to have better knowledge on how to teach candidates on the practices that are often focused on in the classrooms. In addition, Brindley and Schneider (2002), argue that college professors need to find ways to engage pre-service and in-service teachers in sharing their philosophical views of teaching so that new ideas can be implemented in the classroom. The question still remains on how teacher education programs can effectively implement more courses so that teacher

candidates will feel confident in teaching writing. Not only does the lack of preparation in teacher education programs prove to be a problem but so does the lack of training that is provided in the school district (Al-Bataineh et al., 2010). Schools also need to provide support, by including more professional developments that focus on writing.

### **Scores and Time Constraints**

When looking at the data for writing performance in the United States, it is fairly low compare to other areas. Writing is the one area that students have struggled to show gains in (Colby & Stapleton, 2006). The findings from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reported that “67% of eighth grade and 76% of twelfth grade students performed at or below the basic level in writing” (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 494). Elementary students were not tested in this recent NAEP, however approximately “two-thirds of fourth graders scored below the basic level in the preceding NAEP assessment” (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 494). Often college professors report that about 50% of high school graduates are not prepared to write at the college level (Kiuvara, Hawken and Graham, 2009; Cutler & Graham, 2008). Furthermore, Colby and Stapleton (2006) and Roth and Guinee (2011) argue that with the data provided by the NAEP, it makes it harder to prepare students for the workforce considering writing is an important skill to have for most employment and even more important when considering a promotion. For example, “nearly two-thirds of salaried employees have some writing responsibility” (Colby and Stapleton, 2006, p. 354). For example, individuals that hold jobs in a business or government field are often required to write “clearly written documents, memorandum, technical reports and electrical messages” (Cutler & Graham, 2008, p. 907). In an even greater claim Kiuvara, Hawken and Graham (2009), Cutler and Graham (2008) and Coker and Lewis (2008) state that \$3.1 billion dollars is spent by businesses annually in

order to improve employees' writing skills.

The data on writing can be overwhelming and one may assume that if the scores are so low in writing, then writing should be the main area of focus in schools. However, writing instruction and time spent on writing is often limited. As students started to experience failure with reading instruction in schools, Reading First, the component of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was implemented which resulted in more instruction in reading (Moats, Foorman & Taylor, 2006). The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) resulted in classrooms implementing five pillars of reading which became an important method for scientifically-based reading instruction. Those five components include phoneme awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Moats, Foorman & Taylor, 2006). Thus, writing instruction in many classrooms was put aside. Although the National Assessment of Education Progress in reading requires a written response, written expression and spelling have not been identified as components to be measured in such initiatives (Kihara, Hawken & Graham, 2009). The absence of writing in school reform is often referred as the "neglected R" (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Furthermore, Roth and Guinee (2011) state that insufficient or poorly implemented writing instruction in the primary grades could be another reason for the poor outcome of writing instruction in middle and high school classrooms.

As the new reforms were implemented into schools, teachers felt as though there was no time for writing instruction because their main focus was on reading instruction. In a study completed by Pardo (2006), participants in a school district were forced to implement 120 minutes daily of uninterrupted literacy instruction in the morning due to a Reading First grant. However, the first 90 minutes were solely to be focused on reading instruction which concentrated on the five reading components mentioned previously (Pardo, 2006). During these

90 minutes the teachers were asked not to teach any writing. The teacher in this study reported that it was difficult for her to not teach both reading and writing together because she felt that when done together they created a fluent process. Gilbert and Graham (2010) argued that more time needs to be spent on writing because learning to write takes time and efficient instruction. In addition, Fry and Griffin (2010) found that a veteran teacher would often put writing aside because it was hard to teach. The data and scores in writing should not be surprising when studies such as Fry and Griffin are indicating that teachers think teaching writing is hard and put it aside.

Several studies discovered how much time students spent writing and then how much time was spent on writing instruction. Teachers need enough time to instruct students in writing and then the students need time to practice the skills they learned. In a survey that questioned teacher practices in writing instruction, Cutler and Graham (2008) discovered that students only spend about twenty minutes a day on writing and teachers spend fifteen minutes on instructing their students in writing. In a similar study, Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that students in the participants' classes spent about two hours per week writing and then received about one hour and fifteen minutes of instruction per week. Furthermore, Moats, Foorman and Taylor (2006) observed little time on both writing and spelling instruction. In addition, to the little instruction that was observed in the classroom about one third of the third grade teachers did not teach writing during the observations. In addition to these reported times spent on writing, Roth and Guinee (2011) were the only study that found more time spent on writing compared to the other studies in this literature review. For example, it was found that about 36 minutes a day was spent on Writer's Workshop and about 49 minutes a day was spent on total writing instruction. Although these reported times are a little higher than other studies, it was not by much compared

to the amount of time that was spent on reading activities. The lack of writing instruction can then result in a lack of self-efficacy among students to use writing strategies (Moats, Foorman & Taylor, 2006). Although teachers may have a lack of self-efficacy when teaching writing, they may be unaware of the impact that it may also have on students. Lastly, with all the talk of limited time for writing instruction, Roth and Guinee (2006) argue that just ten minutes a day of powerful teaching, such as interactive writing, can have a positive impact on children's writing development. Although there are benefits to using the interactive model, Roth and Guinee also share that this method is not intended to be the only method used to teach writing in an early literacy classroom. Roth and Guinee simply wanted to demonstrate in their study how easy it can be to effectively implement writing in a classroom throughout the school day.

When Fry and Griffin (2010) conducted a similar study to Cutler and Graham (2008), participants found it difficult to complete any writing tasks because of interruptions throughout the day. For example, the interruptions included standardized testing, parents unexpectedly showing up with birthday treats for students, unexpected snow delays and an extended recess. In addition to these interruptions, one participant in the study responded that they never realized how much time needs to be spent on writing. It was difficult for this participant to create a 45 minute lesson of uninterrupted writing instruction (Fry & Griffin, 2010). Participants in Al-Bataineh et al.'s (2010) study felt that due to scheduling in their school it made it harder to teach writing too. For example, participants stated that because of the extra classes such as music and physical education, it did not give them adequate time to teach an uninterrupted block of writing. Content also seemed to be a problem for participants because they had to cover a lot in the academic day which caused them at times to take writing out of the school day.

### **Methods of Instruction**

As previously mentioned, teachers' experiences with writing, whether it was at home, school, or in college has an impact on their method for teaching writing in their classroom (Wiebe Berry, 2006). These beliefs that teachers have on writing not only impact the way they teach but will have an impact on students' educational experiences too (Wiebe Berry, 2006). Ihmeideh, Al-Basheer, Al-Momani (2008) believe that teaching children to write is a major component in early childhood classrooms. Jones, Reutzler and Fargo (2010) also argue that there needs to be more research on the impact of writing methods with regards to early literacy skills. Helping students learn to write at a young age will have positive effects on their literacy skills in the future. Furthermore, with all the research on writing instruction, about five percent is only focused on elementary school children (Jones et al., 2010). Since writing has been crucial for learning in school, pre-school educators have debated on how to exactly go about fostering literacy skills. For example, pre-school teachers believe in teaching children about letters so that they are prepared when they enter school and other educators once choose not teach the letters because they knew children would be receiving instruction when they began school (Ihmeideh et al., 2008). Although for the most part pre-school teachers do teach letter recognition it is important to understand the terms, emergent and readiness.

The emergent philosophy is the belief that children acquire literacy skills before receiving any formal instruction in school (Ihmeideh, et al., 2008). Emergent writing for children can be identified in different stages. For example, the stages can be seen as "drawing, scribbling, letter linked forms, patterned letter strings and invented spelling" (Ihmeideh, et al., 2008, p. 409). Invented spelling is where children will create their own spelling for words that they do not know how to conventionally spell yet. For example, invented spelling can be represented

differently such as one letter can stand for an entire word, words might overlap and there may be no spacing (Imeideh, et al., 2008). Children need to have more opportunities to be exposed to literacy events in order to practice the skills that they will be exposed to throughout their schooling. Wiebe Berry (2006) claims that before writing occurs, teachers need to start with the student's skills rather than where teacher's think the students should be.

The readiness philosophy claims that after a child has reached a level of maturity they are ready for appropriate instruction (Imeideh et al., 2008). There are several readiness skills that determine if children are mature for the instruction. For example, some of the readiness skills consist of visual and auditory discrimination, letter name knowledge, the ability to identify and differentiate familiar sounds, rhyming words and the sounds of letter. Furthermore, left to right eye progression and visual motor skills like cutting on a line with scissors and coloring within the lines of a picture and large motor skills are other examples of readiness skills (Imeideh, et al., 2008).

Although educators agree on the importance of writing instruction, they do not always agree on the best method for teaching writing (Roth & Guinee, 2011). Again, the experiences that teachers have had with writing have shown to have an impact on what methods they prefer to use. According to Roth and Guinee (2011), in the primary grades, teachers need to begin instructing the necessary skills for writing. Therefore, if students receive little instruction in writing during their primary grades, it could have a negative impact on them in the future as they continue their schooling. Furthermore, Jasmine and Weiner (2007) state that primary grade students are completely capable of learning the routines and practices of the writing process. Thus, teachers need to be knowledgeable with writing so that they can help their students move through the process.

Several studies have been conducted to look at what methods of instruction teachers are using, as well as what types of writing they are assigning. Roth and Guinee (2011) examined how interactive writing instruction impacts first graders' independent writing. Interactive writing is an instructional approach used to provide models of writing that will help children make process as independent writers (Roth & Guinee, 2011). More specifically this approach is often designed solely for the younger children so that they can develop an awareness of reading and writing. In a similar study by Fry and Griffin (2010), participants participated in an interactive writing model by writing a paragraph with mistakes in it, in order for pre-service teachers to practice providing feedback to the students on how to make revisions using language from the 6+1 Traits writing rubric. The study enabled students to think about mistakes they have made before and also demonstrated their knowledge of writing skills.

Other studies examined teacher beliefs about writing instruction in which the beliefs of a general and special education teachers were compared. Dunn (2011) specifically wanted to examine the current practices of special education teachers and see whether or not the teacher was differentiating the instruction for struggling writers. According to Coker and Lewis (2008), a struggling writer can include "learning disabled students, ethnic minorities, students from low-socioeconomic-status households, and English-language learners" (p. 245). Often struggling writers need the teacher's assistance of modeling and the providing of extra examples with mini lessons that focus on the student's area of need in writing (Dunn, 2011; Lienemann, Graham, Leader-Janssen & Reid, 2006). The mini- lesson is about a five to ten minute lesson which is often taught at the beginning or the end of the writing process (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). Mini lessons usually take place in a Writer's Workshop model in order to help students learn a new step in the writing process (Dunn, 2011). The Writer's Workshop model is an interactive



approach to writing where students learn and practice drafting and revising their written work (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). According to Lienemann, Graham, Leader-Janssen and Reid (2006) explicit instruction for struggling writers is an effective approach to use. It was discovered in Lienemann et al.'s study more participants were able to write more complete stories after receiving explicit instruction.

In a study conducted by Colby and Stapleton (2006), pre-service teachers taught a Writer's Workshop for weeks as a part of an undergraduate program at their university. One big finding that the pre-service teachers shared was the importance of understanding each individual's needs when planning and adapting instruction. Dunn (2011) discovered various ways that writing instruction could be scaffold for struggling writers. First, students will often need step by step instructions. Breaking up the directions allow for the students to manage each step in the writing process (Dunn, 2011). Furthermore, some students may need a graphic organizer to help them organize their thoughts. Sometimes struggling readers may need assistive technology to help them with their writing. Dunn states that word processing helps lead struggling writers to edit without realizing that they are being asked to look over their work. Finally, struggling writers benefit from smaller group instruction or one on one conferencing. Gilbert and Graham (2010) argue that one step in helping reform writing instruction is to differentiate instruction for struggling writers. However, Cutler and Graham (2008) claimed that primary grade teachers made few to none adaptations for struggling writers, whereas Kiuvara, Hawken, and Graham (2009) found that high school teachers did make adaptations for struggling writers but did this infrequently. The most frequent adaptations that teachers would have to make are in the following areas of "grammar, capitalization, planning, revising, re-teaching skills or strategies, handwriting, spelling, sentence writing and text structure" (Gilbert & Graham,

2010, p. 500). Gibson (2007) discovered there are different levels of scaffolding required depending on the skills that needs to be acquired. For example, low to medium levels of scaffolding include modeling opportunities to practice whereas higher levels of scaffolding were required when teaching students to write. Gibson argues that effective scaffolding requires a strong interaction between, “the teacher’s knowledge of specific ways in which students need to think and act in order to work effectively and the changing competencies of individual students from one lesson to the next” (p. 9).

In a study conducted by Troia and Maddox (2004), the beliefs of special and general education teacher practices were also examined. Special education teachers reported that their students felt that writing was a much harder task than reading and although they use e-mail and instant message, they did not have to worry about using the correct conventions. These teachers then suggested several approaches to help with student motivation. Motivation in Colby and Stapleton’s (2006) study discovered that 40% of teachers felt motivation and sustaining the attention of their students was a difficult task in Writer’s Workshop. However, one suggestion that the special education teacher gave in Troia and Maddox’s study was to use relevant and real world tasks. This theme of relevant and real world writing was a topic often discussed in other studies too. For example, Roth and Guinee (2011) claim that in order to ensure effective learning, differentiated instruction must occur and the writing must be meaningful and offer opportunities to write for a variety of purposes. Furthermore, the interactive writing model also helps provide explicit instruction with authentic participation in meaningful writing activities (Roth & Guinee, 2011).

First year teachers often struggle with what to teach and will often rely on the available curriculum to help with their instruction. According to Colby and Stapleton (2006), pre-service

teachers' first experiences with teaching writing are through a scripted curriculum or through writing prompts. Furthermore, Smargorinsky, Wilson and Moore (2011) examined a first year English teacher and her struggles of teaching grammar and writing. Smargorinsky et al. discussed how the participants in their study were provided with two forms of instruction when in school. The first model of instruction was an inquiry model. In the inquiry model students were able to take part in their learning and develop a sense of agency (Smargorinsky et al., 2011). In contrast, participants reported a control approach to learning. The control approach often looked like correct answers only. Participants wanted to instill the inquiry approach with their students because they reflected on teachers who used the same model with them when they were in school.

There were various kinds of writing activities that were mentioned throughout the literature review. According to Wiebe Berry (2006), "response journals, mailboxes, morning message, Writer's Workshop, book club, traditional centers, reading response and literature response" are considered to be some integral writing opportunities that students can engage in (p. 18). In addition, Gilbert and Graham (2010) argued that students need to be assigned writing activities that are meaningful and useful, but also are extended so that students can demonstrate their skills. For example, primary grade teachers often assigned "writing assignments that involved narrative writing, letter writing, completing worksheets and responding to material read" (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 496). Similarly, high school teachers shared that the kinds of writing assignments they assigned were "short answer responses, responding to material read, completing worksheets, summarizing material read, writing journal entries, and making lists" (Gilbert & Graham, 2010, p. 496). In the study conducted by Cutler and Graham (2008), students participated in various writing activities throughout the school year that included,

“writing stories, drawing a picture and then writing something to go with it, writing letters, journal writing, completing worksheets, composing personal narratives, responding in writing to material read and writing poems” (p. 912). However, the frequencies of these writing activities were different depending on the grade level of the students.

Writing is a complex process that includes various steps in order to produce a piece that will satisfy the writer and the reader. The first action that is required in increasing student scores with writing in schools is to improve the knowledge of teachers that are not confident in teaching writing because they have had a lack of preparation in teaching writing. Although teacher confidence in writing should have developed in K-12 schooling, some teachers did not experience positive writing instruction. Therefore, teacher education programs should require colleges to have teacher candidates take a course in learning to teach writing. These courses need to help teachers become more confident in teaching writing as well as know how to scaffold and make adaptations for struggling writers. As teachers receive the right instruction in college they will then be able to impact students as they are beginning to learn about writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010).

## **Methods**

### **Context**

The study took place in a small suburb school district located in Western New York. Sunnydale School District’s (a pseudonym) enrollment of students is from the two towns of Myan and Summit (pseudonyms). The total population of these two towns is 4,149 with a median house hold income of about 41,000 dollars (Public School Review, 2012). The percentage of residents age 25 and older that hold a college degree is approximately twenty seven percent. The district which is located in Summit consists of three schools with all three

buildings connecting. The high school includes 304 students. The middle school has 207 students and the elementary school has 398 students (Public School Review, 2012). Since this study took place in the elementary school, it is important to take a closer look at the data for this school.

The elementary school district holds kindergarten through fifth grade students and there are 31 teachers. There are three teachers per grade level with approximately the same amount of students in each class. The breakup of students in each grade level consists of 71 students in kindergarten, 62 students in grade one, 63 students in grade two, 56 students in grade three, 70 students in grade four and 75 students in grade five (Public School Review, 2012). There is a large amount of the school population that qualifies for a free or reduced lunch. For example, 19% (169 students) are eligible for a free lunch and 12% (104 students) qualify for a reduced lunch (School Report Card, 2011). The ethnic makeup is predominantly White with the population being 95%. The other ethnic makeup of the elementary school consists of 1% American Indian, 1% Asian, 2% Hispanic, and 2% Black (Public School Review, 2012). Males are the majority of the school's population with 57% and then 43% of the population consisting of female students (Public School Review, 2012).

The three classrooms that the observations took place were in kindergarten, third and fourth grade. In kindergarten there is one female special education teacher that pushes in for services during ELA time. However, she is only in the classroom for writing instruction twice a week and the other times solely focuses on reading instruction. The class size in kindergarten is smaller in the afternoon because the teacher that teaches UPK in the morning takes students from each kindergarten class to teach ELA in the afternoon. There were 16 students in the kindergarten classroom which consisted of 10 girls and six boys. Two of the students were

African American and the remaining students were White.

In third grade there were 26 students with 15 girls and 11 boys. There are no students with special education services, therefore there are no special education teachers that push into this classroom. The students in the class had some diversity with two Asian students, one African American, and one American Indian. The remaining students were White.

The students in the fourth grade were all White. In the fourth grade classroom there are a total of 26 students with 12 boys and 14 girls. However, during the two ELA periods five students go to another teacher for ELA services. Fourth grade is the only grade level that breaks up their hour and half ELA block. Due to scheduling with specials and lunch fourth grade had to split their ELA time up and therefore their first block is half an hour and their second block consist of an hour. I observed the first block which consisted of half an hour.

### **Participants**

There were three teachers that participated in this study. First, Sarah (pseudonym) is a White third grade teacher who is in her tenth year of teaching in the district. She hasn't taught any other grade level or at another school district. Sarah received her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and then a Master's Degree in Literacy Education. Sarah also has certifications in Elementary and Special Education. When it comes to learning how to teach writing in teacher education programs during college Sarah recalled receiving minimal preparation. However, she has received adequate support through the school district.

Jen (pseudonym), the second participant in this study is a White kindergarten teacher who has taught kindergarten for seventeen years in the school district. Prior to teaching kindergarten she also taught fifth grade for two in half years. Jen received her Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education in English Literature and then received a Master's degree in

Special Education. Jen has reported receiving minimal preparation in learning to teach writing in her teacher education programs, but has received professional developments and workshops through the school district to further support her in providing writing instruction.

Finally, the third participant in this study is Kim (pseudonym), a White fourth grade teacher who has taught fourth grade for eleven years. She also has taught other grade levels including a fifth grade special education teacher for two years, then a fifth and sixth grade self-contained classroom, and also was a resource room teacher in high school. Kim received her Bachelor's Degree in Elementary and Special Education and then her Master's Degree in Literacy Education. Kim also reported that she received minimal formal preparation of writing instruction in her teacher education programs, but has been provided several professional development opportunities regarding writing. Kim also presented a professional development on the 6+1 writing traits to the elementary staff. Furthermore, Kim finds joy in writing and writes often on her free time. She reported that she enjoys writing letters to her parents and children weekly.

### **Researcher Stance**

As the researcher of this study, I have a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary and Special Education for grades one through six. I currently am working on completing my Master's Degree in Literacy Education with certification in grades birth through twelfth grade. For the past year, I have been subbing at Sunnydale School District where I have gotten to know the students and teachers better. Throughout the study I took on the role as the passive observer (Mills, 2011). According to Mills (2011), the passive observer role is defined as when teachers "no longer assume the responsibilities of the teacher" (p. 75) and should only focus on the data collection. Furthermore, Mills (2011) claims that when teachers take on the passive observer

role it provides an, “insightful opportunity for teachers who are unaccustomed to watching their students in a different setting, through a different lens” (p. 75). I took on the role of passive observer during my observations because it allowed me to observe students receiving instruction from their teachers. The students knew me and have received instruction from me before when I have subbed, but during the time of the observation, I got to sit back and see what instruction looked like from their teacher.

### **Method**

This action research project required three different sources of information to be collected. The first source of data that was collected was through a questionnaire. The questionnaire included a variety of questions that included the participants to respond to statements, answer questions, and check off writing assignments and adaptations that they have their students do. The questionnaire was broken up into four parts. The first part included the teachers to share background information about their teaching experience and information about their current class. The second part required teachers to respond to their experiences with writing during and after college and then their attitudes about writing in general. The third part asked teachers what kinds of assignments they assign their students throughout the year as well as how much time is spent on writing instruction throughout the school day. Finally, the last part included teachers to examine the adaptations they make for struggling writers as well as how they assess student’s writing. Teachers received the questionnaire before completing any observations. As a second form of data collection, a writing prompt was given to teachers along with the questionnaire. The writing prompt required the teachers to write about their interests and hobbies when they are not in school. The participants were told that they could simply write their response on the sheet I provided them or they could type it up and print it off.



The last form of data that was collected was field notes through an observation of each teacher instructing a writing lesson. Appointments were made with the teachers to come in and observe a lesson when I handed out the questionnaires, writing prompt and had them sign the informed consent form. Participants in this study were observed teaching their students a writing lesson. In kindergarten, students continued a writing piece from an activity that they were working on throughout the week. In third grade, students wrote a friendly letter to another classmate in the room and in fourth grade students read a text and then filled out a graphic organizer to prepare their writing. There was only one observation per teacher and the length of time spent on instructing writing and the actual time students spent on writing was different for each class. However, the overall time for each observation was between 30 to 35 minutes. I stayed and observed the writing lesson from beginning to end. The setting of each observation was also similar for each grade level. All three teachers started out with a mini lesson such as a review or modeled writing for students and then teachers allowed the students to begin writing on their own.

### **Quality and Credibility of Research**

When conducting any study it is important to take into consideration the quality and credibility of the research. According to Mills (2011), credibility refers to “the researcher’s ability to take into account the complexities that present themselves in a study and to deal with patterns that are not easily explained” (p. 104). Therefore, I needed to collect a variety of data samples to ensure the quality of the study. I used triangulation to help with the data collection. Mills (2011) states that triangulation is used, “to compare a variety of data sources and different methods with one another in order to cross-check data” (p. 104). Again the three forms of data that I collected were a questionnaire, observation with field notes and then finally a writing

sample from the teachers. All three forms of data were compared to see if the same ideas and themes carried over from each piece of data collection.

Transferability was also present during the research. Transferability is defined as, “qualitative researchers’ beliefs that everything they study is context bound and that the goal of their work is not to develop “truth” statements that can be generalized to larger groups of people” (Mills, 2011, p. 104). Through the questionnaires the information that teachers shared were reported and then compared with their writing sample as well as their observed writing lesson. During my observations, my field notes were detailed in order to practice transferability. These notes helped me compare the information that I obtained from the questionnaires as well.

Dependability which refers to the stability of the data was also present throughout the study because the responses from the questionnaire helped support the other data (Mills, 2011). For example, the data was overlapping because of how participants responded to the questionnaire, I was able to also identify the overlapping ideas through the observations and their writing sample. In the questionnaire, a section contained adaptations that teachers make for struggling writers. During my observations I saw some of the teachers making these adaptations which showed me the dependability of the data. After all the data was collected and I examined it, I shared with my critical colleague my ideas that I discovered from the data and to see if she could add any more findings to my topic that I might have overlooked.

Finally, confirmability was present in the study because as I continued to write the paper I looked back at the data that has been collected to ensure accurate findings were being shared. Mills (2011) argues that confirmability is the “neutrality or objectivity of the data that has been collected” (p. 105). Again the triangulation method was used to collect three various data forms so that the findings could be compared and checked with one another to ensure quality data. I

also kept a journal to reflect on the data that I received throughout this study to ask questions.

### **Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants**

Before beginning the research process, I asked teachers if they were willing to participate in my study after explaining the study to them. After the teachers agreed to be a participant in my study, I then collected an informed consent to protect the rights of the participants. The informed consent allowed the participants to know that a pseudonym would be provided for them as well as the school district that they work in. This step in the research process is important for participants to know that anything they share will remain confidential. Participants need to feel comfortable and have the reassurance that their identity and what they say will be protected which can result in more honest data.

### **Data Collection**

There was three different forms of data that was collected during the study. The first form of data that was collected was the information from the questionnaire. The questionnaire helped me learn more about the participants as well as their teaching beliefs. The second data that was collected was a writing sample from the teachers. The information from the writing sample illustrated how teacher's view writing because of the quality and length of their writing that they gave me. Finally, field notes were collected during the observations of the writing lessons. These field notes were detailed and identified how comfortable the teachers were when teaching writing, answering questions and helping students.

### **Data Analysis**

After all data was collected, I had to examine it several times to discover themes that reoccurred throughout all of the data. First, after each observation was completed, I made sure to type up my notes in order to make them easier to read and add more description. Next, I began

reading over the writing prompts that the teachers wrote for me. I recorded the different lengths and how two of the participants typed their responses. I wrote down the findings in my notebook where I then reflected and wrote down questions. Then I looked over the questionnaires and compared the responses with each other as well as to what I have read about in the literature review. When I read over the field notes, I first began circling things that stood out to me. The second time reading it through I began to write down words or phrases that came to my mind of the information I previously highlighted on. Finally, the third time of reading the field notes I wrote down questions that I still had. After analyzing all of the data, I discovered three themes that recurred in each piece of data that was collected.

### **Findings and Discussion**

After several examinations of the data that was collected during my study, there were three themes that emerged across all pieces. These themes often reappeared in the questionnaire, field notes, and writing sample. Furthermore, the themes helped to better understand teachers' knowledge and methods of writing instruction. The themes that most often occurred include the following: the importance of modeling in writing instruction, an emphasis on spelling, capitalization, and punctuation in writing instruction, and then adaptations and support for struggling writers.

Before examining the three themes that emerged from the data it is also important to take a look at other important data that was collected, but did not necessarily fit under the three themes. A section in the questionnaire (Appendix A) that was provided to all three teachers questioned their preparation in learning how to teach writing. The first question asked participants how much formal preparation in learning to teach writing did they have during their teacher education courses. With an option to check off none, minimal, adequate or extensive, all

three participants responded with minimal preparation. The responses are not surprising considering that the literature review also found that teacher education programs provide a lack of preparation in learning how to teach writing instruction. According to Grisham and Wolsey (2011), teacher education programs have put a strong emphasis on teaching reading which made writing instruction have a less important status. In fact, there are very few states that require specific coursework in writing in order for teacher certification (Norman & Spencer, 2005). This finding from Norman and Spencer could be one of the reasons why the participants responded receiving minimal preparation in college. When it came to the participants describing their experiences of writing they had in their teacher education programs, it was difficult for them to recall having any formal education on writing. Jen, the kindergarten teacher stated, “I don’t recall a large emphasis on writing instruction in college. I think I had a one credit methods course in writing instruction” (Questionnaire, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). According to Morgan (2010), a literacy methods class is often where pre-service teachers learn about writing, so therefore the amount of time for learning about writing is limited to a few sessions. Sarah, the third grade teacher responded to this question similarly in stating, “I don’t remember having any formal classes on just writing, it was imbedded in reading based classes” (Questionnaire, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Furthermore, Kim the fourth grade teacher also shared a similar response by responding, “I remember many classes with regards to teaching reading. The writing lessons would be in response to what you read” (Questionnaire, February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012). The responses from the participants might suggest that learning how to teach writing has never been an important focus in teacher education programs. However, for some of the participants, it has been some time since they took college courses, and perhaps it was difficult for them to think back to college courses they have taken.

The questionnaire also asked the participants what kind of preparation in teaching writing they have received as an in-service teacher. Unlike the previous response of learning to teach writing in teacher education programs, all three participants responded that they have received adequate preparation in learning to teach writing as an in-service teacher. Workshops were identified as being the number one method for providing support and preparation in teaching writing. This evidence is unlike the study by Al-Bataineh, Holmes, Jerich and Williams (2010) who found that teachers were frustrated with the lack of training their district provided them in writing instruction. It was even more frustrating for the participants in Al-Bataineh's et al. (2010) study when the district did not provide support and help for a new writing curriculum that was introduced. However, the participants in my study found the resources and professional developments in writing to be helpful. For example, Jen recalled several specialists and speakers that have come for training related to writing (Questionnaire, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). Sarah also recalled a two day workshop on writing traits that was provided by Great Source Education Groups and also a one day writing workshop (Questionnaire, February, 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Sarah also commented on monthly writing collaborative meetings as another form of support and preparation in teaching writing. Although Al-Bataineh's et al. (2010) study did demonstrate an overall lack of preparation in teaching writing for in-service teachers, collaboration with other colleagues was found to have positive support in helping teachers find more ease in teaching writing. The positive collaborative relationships with other teachers helped make teaching writing easier. Finally, Kim, the last participant in this study also remembers receiving numerous professional development opportunities regarding writing. She recalls the most in-depth training was the 6+1 Traits of writing where she then attended two follow up presentations and then designed a presentation with another colleague that was given to the staff of the school

(Questionnaire, February, 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Perhaps Kim recalls this workshop as being the most in depth training because she actually had an opportunity to present information from other follow workshops in which she attended on her own time.

Another section under the questionnaire examined teacher's beliefs about writing in general, their student's knowledge of writing, and their confidence level in teaching writing. The following table identifies the responses of each participant.

Table 1

*Summary of Teachers' Attitudes Toward Writing*

Statements	Jen	Sarah	Kim
a. My students have the writing skills they need to do the work in my class.	MA	MA	SA
b. Writing is an essential skill for students, even after they graduate from school.	SA	SA	SA
c. Students are taught the writing skills in school that are needed to be successful in college.	AS	DS	SA
d. Students are taught the writing skills in school that are needed to be successful in the workplace.	AS	DS	SA
e. I feel confident when instructing my students in writing.	SA	MA	MA

*Note.* SA = strongly agree; MA = moderately agree; AS = agree slightly; DS = disagree slightly.

The participants were asked to rate each statement with the following scale of a strongly agree, moderately agree, agree slightly, disagree slightly, moderately disagree or strongly disagree. Jen and Sarah moderately agreed that their students have the writing skills they need to be successful

in the class whereas Kim agreed slightly to this statement. When it came to the importance of writing in general, such as in statement b, c and d, Kim strongly agreed that writing is an essential skill to have after school and felt that students are taught the skills needed to be successful in college and the workplace. As Kim stated in her writing prompt (Appendix B), she enjoys writing and finds herself still writing letters to friends and family often which could be why she strongly agreed with the previous statements. As for Jen and Sarah, they both strongly agreed that writing is an essential skill to have after students graduate from high school, but Jen agreed slightly that students are taught the skills to be successful in college whereas Sarah disagreed slightly. However, when it came to writing skills that are needed to be successful in the workplace both Jen and Sarah agreed slightly on the importance of having such skills. Kiuvara, Hawken and Graham (2009) also found similarities in Jen and Sarah's statements pertaining to college preparation in finding that 50% of high school graduates are not prepared to write well according to their professors. Finally, Sarah and Kim moderately agreed to the statement of having confidence when teaching writing whereas Jen strongly agreed to having confidence when teaching writing. Jen's confidence could be because of the number of years experience she has had teaching kindergarten and possibly because her students are just beginning to learn the basics of writing whereas Sarah and Kim get into more depth skills and topics with writing.

Now that I have examined some information that the participants shared about their experiences with writing and their beliefs about writing it is important to go back to the three themes that emerged from the data. These themes consistently showed up during the field notes which then also reflected on the teachers responses in the questionnaire and their writing prompt.



### **The Importance of Modeling in Writing Instruction**

The first theme to be present from the data analysis of the field notes was the extensive amount of modeling the teachers used during their observations. The modeling that was demonstrated through their observations also reflected the length and style of writing that was turned in. For example, Kim had re-created a graphic organizer for the students right out of the book, which normally they just write their responses in their notebooks. After examining the writing piece that Kim gave me, I noticed that she did the same thing on her writing prompt for the students. For instance, she typed it up on another piece of paper with a heading and re-typed the question. The reason for her doing this could be how she instructs her students all the time and she could be so used to modeling for the students all the time that she was unaware of doing this. Jen's writing piece (Appendix C) was also similar to how she modeled writing for students during the observation. Jen was the only participant to write out her response on the paper that was provided. The writing piece was short, but still answered the question. The similarities of Jen and Kim's writing prompt resembled the writing that they might expect from their students.

Modeling was often seen as an important strategy to use when instructing their students in writing. All three teachers proved to use modeling during the observations. First, modeling was present in Sarah's third grade classroom right from the beginning. After finishing a short video about how to write a friendly letter, Sarah engaged her students in review of what the parts of a friendly letter were. Using the smartboard, Sarah wrote the parts of a friendly letter on the board as students named them. For example, once students named heading as the first part of a friendly letter, Sarah wrote heading where it would belong on a letter, boxed it in, and then wrote what actually goes in a heading (Field Notes, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012). This method was done for each part of the letter. As a part of modeling, Sarah also brainstormed ideas with the students of

what they could put in the body of a friendly letter. Sarah's reason for doing this could be to help those students who struggle coming up with ideas on their own.

During Kim's observation of her fourth grade class, modeling looked a little different than Sarah's, but was still demonstrated through various activities. First, as previously mentioned Kim redesigned a graphic organizer for students to take notes on. Generally Kim has students answer questions from the book right in their notebooks, but during this lesson she had a graphic organizer with lined paper attached for the students. The graphic organizer not only helps students to organize their ideas but helps them plan what they are going to write about. The graphic organizer was also a guide for the students and helped set the purpose in writing a persuasive essay. In a study done by Moats, Foorman and Taylor (2006), students who were instructed to use graphic organizers before writing their paper found them meaningful and that they were helpful for setting up a plan and goal of their writing. Students in the study were found re-creating graphic organizers even when they were not required to. Furthermore, Kim identified in her questionnaire that she often models numerous tasks so that students can see what is expected of them.

During Jen's observation, modeling was done through a writing sample. Jen modeled for students what she wanted them to do by writing first on the smartboard with primary lined paper. As Jen modeled a writing piece for students, she thought aloud as she wrote and had to sound out her words so that the students could hear the sounds and then see her write down the letters that were associated with the sounds. For instance, as Jen came to the word 'pet' she sounded aloud each sound and then said the letters as she wrote them down (Field Notes, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). The think aloud through her writing allowed for students to hear and think about what they should be doing as they write too. This form of modeling can also be identified as interactive writing. In

the questionnaire that Jen completed, interactive writing was identified as the formal preparation in learning to teach writing through various workshops. According to Roth and Guinee (2011), “interactive writing is an instructional approach designed to provide powerful demonstrations of writing that help young children make progress as independent writers” (p. 335). Interactive writing allows for students to receive clear examples of instruction which pertains to their learning needs at that particular moment. Furthermore, interactive writing is primarily used with pre-k to first grade children because it is intended for those students who are just developing an awareness of reading and writing (Roth & Guinee, 2011). Jen might use interactive writing often because of the training she has received in how to implement it in her classroom.

### **An Emphasis on Spelling, Capitalization, and Punctuation in Writing Instruction**

A second theme that was identified through careful examination of the data was in regards to certain writing skills. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation; these were the words that were heard often during all of the observations. The teachers reminded students to check for all three before they began writing and questioned the students about it when they did not use them correctly in their writing. Some of the teachers also left out capitalization and punctuation when modeling and then asked students if anything was missing as a way of quizzing student’s knowledge of these certain writing skills.

In Sarah’s third grade class, students often had to be reminded to use correct capitalization and punctuation. As Sarah was modeling how to write the date under the heading of a friendly letter, she left out a comma. A student was able to identify that a comma needed to go between the date and year, and then Sarah explained the importance of the comma (Field Notes, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012). Throughout the lesson Sarah continued to leave out capitalization or punctuation and asked students if anything was missing. She also made reminders of certain

text features such as indenting the first line of a paragraph, lining up the closing with the date, using a capital letter for the first word of a closing and then a lower case if there is a second word to the closing, and using a comma after the closing. According to Sarah's questionnaire, capitalization and punctuation skills need to be re-taught frequently (Questionnaire, February 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012). During the actual writing time, Sarah went around to help students and check their work, which I often heard her commenting on missing punctuation or capital letters.

With time being the number one problem of getting work done during the first ELA block, Kim's fourth grade class did not get any actual writing completed other than the planning through their graphic organizer. However, on the graphic organizer that Kim created for students she put a reminder on the paper for students to check their writing for correct spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation. As students began to fill out the graphic organizer, she reminded students that they did not have to use complete sentences because they were just taking notes. If more time was available for the students I think that I might have heard more comments about reminding students to check spelling, capitalization and punctuation.

Finally in Jen's kindergarten class spelling, capitalization and punctuation were also seen as an important area of focus. However, when it came to spelling Jen stressed the importance of sounding out the word so that they could write down the letter they heard. She said it was okay if they did not know how to correctly spell words they haven't learned yet, but they need to try their best at getting down the sounds they hear (Field Notes, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). Jen stated in her questionnaire that because students in class use inventive spelling they often need support in connecting sounds with the appropriate letters (Questionnaire, March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). Jen might be supporting her students in becoming familiar with spelling patterns so that they will be able to use these strategies when they move on to other grades.

### **Adaptations and Support for Struggling Writers**

A third theme that was evident through the data analysis was the variety of adaptations and support for struggling writers that the teachers implemented. The adaptations and support were identified throughout the observations as well as in the questionnaire. The adaptations that were provided were specific to student needs. Scaffolding instruction is often needed in order for students to understand the topic better. Therefore, teachers have to be familiar with specific adaptations that they can use to help their students, which was not a difficult task for the participants in this study.

A section of the questionnaire listed several adaptations in which participants were required to check off any that they have used with students. Sarah and Kim checked off all the adaptations on the list while Jen did not check off the following adaptations; pair up a stronger writer to help a struggling writer, teach grammar skills, have student use graphic organizer, and give student an alternate writing assignment. This section in the questionnaire was helpful to look over after completing the observations because some of the adaptations that the teachers checked off were present in their lessons.

Throughout Sarah's lesson, it was evident that she had a clear understanding of the needs of the class as well each individual's need pertaining to the writing topic. First, the modeling which was discussed during the first theme can also be considered a form of scaffolding to help reinforce student's understanding of the layout of a letter. This strategy helped verify for students the information that they have already been taught. The review and several reminders of using correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation are also important to reinforce when instructing students in writing. According to Gilbert and Graham (2010), the most frequent adaptations that teachers make are in the following areas of "grammar, capitalization, planning,

revising, re-teaching skills or strategies, handwriting, spelling, sentence writing and text structure” (p. 500). Other adaptations that were also present were through the letter templates that she had printed off for the students. One template was a blank letter template and the other one gave an example of the heading, greeting, closing and signature. The differentiation in the two templates allowed for students to choose the template they were most comfortable with. Furthermore, as students came up to choose which template they wanted, Sarah encouraged some of the students to take the one with examples provided. After watching students choose their template I identified that students were choosing the template their friend was choosing so I don’t know if every student actually thought about what paper would be best for them. As students began writing, Sarah continued to provide support and adaptations for students as she walked around the room and sat down one on one with students to help them get started and check in with them.

It was difficult to examine the adaptations and support that Kim provided for her students because they never got to the written part. Again, time was a major factor because in thirty minutes much of the time was spent on discussing a text they read which was going to be used to help them write their persuasive essay. Without actually seeing Kim support students through writing, it was difficult to identify if any adaptations or support were provided during the thirty minutes. From what I saw, when Kim asked students to share their notes and responses to the question she would re-state their response and sometimes further ask questions (Field Notes, February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012). I think her reason for doing this could be to possibly demonstrate how to better word things and use more details and description when writing. If there was more time, I would have been able to see students begin their writing, but because of scheduling, students had to move on to another subject. I think that I would have also been able to see Kim using the

adaptations that she checked off on her questionnaire.

Jen used several adaptations throughout her observation. However, they were mostly seen once students started writing. The modeling that was mentioned previously was an important strategy to support students in giving them ideas and helping them identify their task of writing for that day. There were some students who needed adaptations to help them write. For example, two students needed a slanted board (binder) to write on. The slanted board was used to help them be visually aware of the lines on their paper and also gave them better support in their writing. Furthermore, one student needed her paper clipped to the white board as this was easier for her to write too. Other students would dictate to Jen what they wanted to write about and then she would draw lines for each word so that students could better sound out each word in their sentence. As students finished, Jen had the students read their sentence(s) to her and then if they made any mistakes concerning spaces, misuse of capital letters or punctuation she would ask them to fix it. The variety of adaptations that Jen used during the observation goes against the literature in which Cutler and Graham (2008) claimed in their study that primary grade teachers make few to none adaptations for struggling writers. It was evident that Jen knew the students that needed adaptations to help them write and put the modifications into action.

All three themes that were identified through the data analysis are important for writing instruction. Modeling for students demonstrates what is expected of them. Therefore, when teachers are modeling, it is important to consider if the material that is being taught is appropriate for the students. If students are not going to understand something after modeling for them, then it might be too difficult for them. As students become familiar with writing, they will continue to use correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation, but as seen through the observations, sometimes these skills need to be re-taught and reminded again and again. Finally,

the use of adaptations and support is often needed to help students complete their writing. The adaptations and support can come in various forms and often will pertain to a specific need of the student.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

### **Implications**

The findings of my study have important implications for me as a future teacher and teachers in general. Writing is an activity that students participate in several times throughout the school day. In fact, it would be difficult to go through the school day without writing or instructing students in writing. Therefore, it is important to examine the implications that this study has on me and other teachers.

The first implication of my study is impacted by what the literature said as well as what I found in my data collection. The lack of preparation in learning how to teach writing during teacher education programs has also affected me. I, too, have received very little instruction in writing during my college courses. My experience working with students during a practicum course led me to my research topic. I found myself struggling to teach writing and did not feel confident in teaching writing like I did when instructing in reading. After having a discussion with another teacher about my frustration with writing, I found out that I was not alone and she, too, did not necessarily feel confident in teaching writing because of the lack of preparation in college she received. Colby and Stapleton (2006) and Davenport (2006) conducted studies where pre-service teachers were connected with students to specifically work on teaching writing. The studies found that the pre-service teachers were able to build skills for teaching writing and felt more confident in teaching it. Colleges need to offer more opportunities like those that were conducted in the studies. As I realize that college did not prepare me enough for



writing instruction, I know I will be responsible for finding other ways to support myself in writing especially if the school district I work in does not provide support right away.

My findings demonstrate that teachers are aware of the lack of education they did not receive in writing instruction. Therefore, these teachers and other teachers look into professional developments or workshops that are provided by the school district as a way to better their understanding of writing and help their students. Teachers should always be finding ways to help instruct their students, especially when it comes to a topic or skill that they do not know well. Furthermore, teachers can find other ways to support their learning in writing instruction by doing research by themselves or having discussions with other colleagues.

Another implication presented from conducting this action research can be identified through the methods of writing instruction. Teachers need to use a variety of writing methods to ensure student success of writing. The findings demonstrated that spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were the most often skills focused on through the various grade levels. This finding indicated to me the importance of reinforcing and re-teaching skills that students are taught in the previous grades. It is important for teachers to understand that students will have various writing skills just as they would when reading. Furthermore, the findings have made me think about how I need to be familiar with all the correct spelling, capitalization, and punctuation skills so that I can help my students and ensure accuracy when discussing these skills with them.

If I were to do this research again, there would be a few things that I would change. First, I would add interviews as another form of data to be collected. These interviews would be conducted based on their responses from the questionnaire. The reason for doing this would help me obtain more information on my topic. Furthermore, the interviews would act as follow up questions to the questionnaire because some of the participants did not go into great detail with

their responses. A second thing that I would do differently would be to observe more than one writing lesson from each participant. Multiple observations would ensure the reliability of writing methods that teachers use. One observation only gave me a glimpse into these writing methods. In addition, as a limitation to the study, participants may have planned and prepared more than they normally would do since they knew that I would be observing. Therefore, observing more than one lesson could have resulted in other findings.

This action research study helped me to understand teacher preparation in writing and methods for writing instruction. However, there are still some questions that I have in regards to my topic. First, I would like to know if workshops and professional developments were the only formal preparation in writing instruction the participants have received as in-service teachers. The responses from the questionnaire did not indicate any other ways that the participants may have obtained any form of preparation in learning to teach writing. With this interpretation, it makes me question whether or not the participants actually have done any preparation on their own. I also wonder how long it took before the participants started to receive preparation to teach writing through the various workshops provided by the school district. Were the workshops and professional developments that were described on the questionnaire provided early in the year and how many were there? It would also be interesting to compare the number of writing workshops to the number of reading workshops each year. If writing is an essential skill to have in college and the workplace, then how can teachers prepare themselves for teaching writing when they have had little preparation during their teacher education program? Furthermore, what are the school districts demonstrating when they are mandating a certain amount of time to solely be focused on reading, therefore limiting the amount of time that is spent on writing? Should colleges be the only ones blamed or should school districts be blamed

too for limiting the amount of time that is actually spent on writing instruction?

### **Conclusion**

College education courses are often considered the number one way teachers receive preparation to teach a variety of methods. However, Smagorinsky, Wilson and Moore (2011) state that when it comes to writing, teacher education programs are lacking the preparation that teachers need to teach writing effectively to their students. Teachers need to understand how students acquire such writing skills and understand the importance of how new technology and inventions impact student's writing skills. The findings from this study supported the literature review in regards to the lack of preparation that is provided in teacher education programs. Furthermore, the findings implied that teachers need to have confidence in themselves as writers in order to instill the same feeling in students.

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**Appendix A**

**Writing Beliefs and Practices Questionnaire**

**Part One: Background Information**

1. I have completed the following degrees:  
 Bachelor's Degree in: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Master's Degree in: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other Degree in: \_\_\_\_\_

2. I currently teach \_\_\_\_\_ grade.

3. I have taught this grade level for \_\_\_\_\_ years.

4. I have also taught other grades:  
 Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years: \_\_\_\_\_

5. How many students do you have in your class this year? \_\_\_\_\_

6. How many of your students receive special education services? \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you use commercial programs/curriculum to teach writing? \_\_\_Yes \_\_\_ No  
 If yes, write down the names of the commercial programs you use:

Questions	None	Minimal	Adequate	Extensive
a. How much formal preparation on teaching writing did you receive in teacher education courses during college?				
b. How much formal preparation on teaching writing, did you receive after college (e.g. workshops, reading books and articles, assistance from another teacher, in-service preparation at your school and so forth)?				



c. Explain what your experience was like in college with regards to learning to teach writing.

d. What kinds of formal preparation have you received in teaching writing as an in-service teacher?

9. Check the box that applies to the statements below.

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Moderately Agree</b>	<b>Agree Slightly</b>	<b>Disagree Slightly</b>	<b>Moderately Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
a. My students have the writing skills they need to do the work in my class.						
b. Writing is an essential skill for students, even after they graduate from school.						
c. Students are taught the writing skills in school that are needed to be successful in college.						
d. Students are taught the writing skills in school that are needed to be successful in the workplace.						
e. I feel confident when instructing my students in writing.						

### Part Three: Writing Assignments

10. Check how often students do each of the following writing activities in your class.

Writing Assignment	Never	Several Times a Year	Monthly	Several Times a Month	Weekly	Several Times a Week	Daily
Stories							
Drawing a picture and writing something to go with it.							
Letters							
Completing worksheets							
Personal narratives							
Writing in response to material read							
Poems							
Writing summaries							
Lists							
Book reports							
Writing to inform							
Writing to persuade							
Autobiographies							
Biographies							
Comic strips							
Plays							

11. If there are any other writing assignments your students engage in that were not mentioned above, list what they are and how frequent the activity is completed.

12. How many hours in a school day are spent on writing?

**Part Four: Writing Adaptations and Assessment**

13. The following is a list of adaptations that can be used to help students who are struggling with their writing. Check off any adaptations that you have made for students.

- Conference with student about his/her writing
- Have students conference with each other about their writing
- Have student select his/her own writing topics
- Have student share his/her writing with their peers
- Pair up a stronger writer to help the struggling writer
- Allow extra time for student to complete writing
- Teach handwriting skills
- Teach grammar skills
- Teach punctuation/capitalization skills
- Re-teach writing skills or strategies that were previously taught
- Have student use graphic organizer when writing
- Give student an alternate writing assignment
- Give student extra encouragement

14. List or explain any other adaptations you often make for struggling writers that was not on the list above.

15. Explain how you evaluate students' written products? (Rubrics, professional judgment)

**Appendix B**

## Writing Prompt

February 29, 2012

Write about your favorite thing to do when you are not teaching. What kinds of activities do you like to do?

I enjoy many hobbies after leaving school for the day. Last year my husband and I joined the gym, Planet Fitness. It's exciting for me to improve my fitness and set specific goals for myself. For example, the first time I worked out on the Arc Trainer I could only step for two minutes. As the fitness trainer explained to me, the Arc Trainer is the next generation of Stair Master. I began by adding a minute a day to my workout and reached my goal of 30 minutes on this machine. Then I set a distance goal for myself of two miles daily. I am able to pump my arms as if I am running and feel proud as I'm able to complete my daily goal of two miles. My latest personal goal is to increase my arm strength. More specifically, I have begun using the machines to improve the strength of my biceps and triceps. Another goal is to improve my endurance on the machines which would include increasing my leg strength. The Hip Abductor is actually two machines which strengthen hip and thigh mobility. I am proud of my improved strength and have found great enjoyment in going to the gym every day!

Quilting is another activity that I enjoy during my free time. I took a quilting class last year to learn the techniques. I have been sewing my entire life and have always wanted to learn how to quilt. As my last child left for college and I became an "empty nester" I decided it was time to learn to quilt! It took me about a year to complete my first quilt and it was a major accomplishment. I have just completed my third quilt, but my first quilt is still my favorite! I take great pride in my newest hobby.

Letter writing and reading are two more of my favorite activities. As my children tell me, letter writing is a lost art, but I still enjoy writing letters to my parents and my children weekly. Believe it or not, even with the internet and daily texting, my children and especially my mother love getting my letters!

## Appendix C



## Writing Prompt



Directions: Please respond to the following writing prompt:

Write about what is your favorite thing to do when you are not teaching. What kinds of activities do you like to do?

When I am not at school I enjoy a variety of activities. In the winter I like to make cards and scrapbook with my friends and my daughter. My children and I enjoy snowshoeing with our dog.

When the weather is warmer my husband finds Geocaches for us to locate. We hike in new locations to find "treasure". We love to swim and spend time on our boat on Canandaigua lake.

Spending time doing things with my family and/or friends is always what I look forward to doing in my spare time.