Perceptions of Effective Strategies for Writing Instruction: Views from Fourth-Grade Teachers

Alana Salvatore Fajardo
alanafajardo723@gmail.com

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Perceptions of Effective Strategies for Writing Instruction: Views from Fourth-Grade Teachers

Abstract
Research has shown that “in today’s world, writing is essential to success” (Graham & Fulton, 2015, p. 767). It is imperative that teachers prepare students for a variety of different kinds of writing to best provide them opportunities for success. However, according to the 2012 NAEP assessment results, less than one fifth of fourth grade students tested nationally were able to write proficiently in a variety of areas (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012). This study sought to gather the perceptions of effective instructional strategies for writing at the fourth-grade level, from experienced fourth-grade teachers. In this qualitative study, semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with 10 participants, and was designed to answer four key research questions. Results showed that using effective strategies to teach a given writing skill is the gateway to student acquisition of those skills. Teachers felt that breaking down the writing task for students, modeling the expectations, and providing tools, leads to student success as seen through both formal and informal assessments. Recommendations for future study would be to conduct this study with a larger sample, to conduct the study across multiple grades at the elementary level, and to conduct a similar study with a quantitative approach. The findings of this study can be used to drive professional development, to assist curriculum writers in developing strong writing programs, and to help design stronger preservice education programs in writing at the college level for incoming teachers.

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Perceptions of Effective Strategies for Writing Instruction: Views from Fourth-Grade Teachers

By

Alana Salvatore Fajardo

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti

Committee Member

Dr. William Rolon

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving and supportive family. My parents have always stressed the importance of education and hard work, while teaching my siblings and myself that we can achieve anything. I would like to thank my parents, siblings, and my husband for supporting me throughout this journey. It is also dedicated to my grandmother, who was present at every graduation, award ceremony, and school affair through the years, with a proud smile on her face.

This work is dedicated to my husband, David. Because of his hard work and support, I was able to achieve my dream of obtaining a doctoral degree while staying home to raise our son. I would like to thank my son, Benjamin, for teaching me the true level of my strength. Becoming pregnant and raising you throughout my doctoral journey has been the greatest pleasure of my life. I look forward to welcoming your new sibling with you.

This work is also dedicated to my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti, and my dissertation committee member, Dr. William Rolon, without whom, my completed dissertation would not have been possible. I appreciate all of the hours that we spent on the phone, all of your guidance and advice, and for sharing your knowledge and expertise with me throughout this process. Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my team UCCA, your support has been beyond words.
Biographical Sketch

Alana Salvatore Fajardo is an elementary school teacher in the City School District of New Rochelle, where she has worked since 2011. Alana began her undergraduate studies at Hunter College in 2007 and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in childhood education and English Language Arts. She continued her education at Hunter College and received her master’s degree in literacy in 2013. After teaching for several years, Alana went back for her doctoral degree to St. John Fisher College, where she studied executive leadership and completed her dissertation on perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies at the fourth-grade level.
Abstract

Research has shown that “in today’s world, writing is essential to success” (Graham & Fulton, 2015, p. 767). It is imperative that teachers prepare students for a variety of different kinds of writing to best provide them opportunities for success. However, according to the 2012 NAEP assessment results, less than one fifth of fourth-grade students tested nationally were able to write proficiently in a variety of areas (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012).

This study sought to gather the perceptions of effective instructional strategies for writing at the fourth-grade level, from experienced fourth-grade teachers. In this qualitative study, semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted with 10 participants, and was designed to answer four key research questions.

Results showed that using effective strategies to teach a given writing skill is the gateway to student acquisition of those skills. Teachers felt that breaking down the writing task for students, modeling the expectations, and providing tools, leads to student success as seen through both formal and informal assessments.

Recommendations for future study would be to conduct this study with a larger sample, to conduct the study across multiple grades at the elementary level, and to conduct a similar study with a quantitative approach. The findings of this study can be used to drive professional development, to assist curriculum writers in developing strong writing programs, and to help design stronger preservice education programs in writing at the college level for incoming teachers.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“In today’s world, writing is essential to success” (Graham & Fulton, 2015, p. 767). Skill in writing is crucial in and out of schools, especially as students enter the working world (National Writing Project, 2010) and serves as “. . . a gateway for success in academics, the new workplace, and the global economy . . .” (National Writing Project and Nagin, 2006, p. 2). To be able to meet the demands of writing today, students need a rich array of writing experiences in school (National Writing Project and Nagin, 2006).

The art of writing is an essential skill, yet it can also be used as a strong tool to strengthen student learning in other areas (Ray, Graham, & Harris, 2015). Many teachers have reported that they often use writing to support learning in reading and the content areas (Ray et al., 2015). This can be achieved by having students take notes while reading and provide written responses to comprehension questions (Ray et al., 2015). Writing also extends to everyday situations in which citizens are ethically responsible for writing in a way that will allow as wide an audience as possible to understand what they are reading (Liebenberg, 2016). In doing this, all communities have the opportunity to read and learn which can support needed transformations (Liebenberg, 2016). When writing, it is important to stay in control of the work to ensure that the writers are refining their ideas in order to fully engage in the process and write effectively (Liebenberg, 2016). Furthermore, Wright (2019) finds that writing can be used as a therapeutic approach to support individuals in need. There is a growing field of research studying the potential of writing to assist therapists in supporting their patients through e-mail
exchanges and reflective writing by the patient (Wright, 2019). This is an important tool and the use of such writing has become central to several theoretical models (Wright, 2019). The skill of writing is essential to individuals as it can strengthen individual learning, support workplace communication, and serve as a therapeutic approach to those in need (Liebenberg, 2016; Ray et al., 2015; Wright, 2019).

The importance of writing is evident, yet, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 28% of fourth-grade students were able to write at or above proficiency level (National Assessment of Educational Progress, [NAEP], 2002). This assessment was conducted nationwide and except for a small percentage of English language learners and students with learning disabilities, all demographics were represented (L. Byrne, personal communication, October 28, 2019). In 2012, an assessment was given by the NAEP to approximately 13,000 fourth graders, expecting students to complete timed writing tasks (NAEP, 2012). Results showed that less than one-fifth of the students were able to meet proficiency standards in multiple areas including language facility, idea development, and organization (NAEP, 2012). Given the importance of students developing skills in written expression, it is alarming that students in the United States struggle with writing and are lacking foundational skills at the elementary level, which is when these skills should be taught and solidified (Koenig, Eckert, & Hier, 2016). Graham, Harris, and Santangelo (2015) support the claim that even though writing is widely used today, many students are not developing strong skills at the elementary level.

Becoming a proficient writer is a complex process of growth and development (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013), like the history of writing instruction itself. In the 16th century,
writing instruction was predominantly focused on mechanics, grammar, and penmanship, with little focus on one’s ability to express ideas and communicate with audiences through writing (Donsky, 1984). Some 300 years later, a shift in writing instruction brought this ability to communicate with audiences to the forefront, eventually becoming the main focal point of writing in schools (Donsky, 1984). Writing continued to change as the digital world made itself more of a presence in the lives of students and adults (National Writing Project, 2010).

Writing has always fallen behind reading and math instruction in its level of importance (Shaw, 1985). In researching writing curriculums in 18 different states, Shaw (1985) reported that none of the 18 states had specific writing requirements. Seven of the districts studied did provide curriculum guidelines which stated that writing should only be taught in any time left over after teaching mathematics, physical education, reading, and other subjects (Shaw, 1985). It was evident that writing instruction had a low priority on the curriculum.

Contributing to the lack of effective writing instruction is that teachers often feel unprepared to teach the new writing standards put forth by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Ray et al., 2015). Teachers admitted receiving minimal to no preparation in college on how to use strategies to support student writing (Ray et al., 2015). Furthermore, Troia (2016) found that in a study of approximately 500 teachers of Grades 3-8, fewer than half had taken a college course devoted to the teaching of writing and less than one third took courses on how to teach children to learn to write. Writing is a skill that requires deep thinking and therefore, teachers need a variety of procedures and techniques to encourage this type of thinking (National Writing Project and Nagin, 2006).
For effective learning to take place, children need explicit scaffolding and instructional conversations when learning to write (Gibson, 2008). In addition, Graham et al. (2012) reported that if a teacher understands why writing is important, that teacher is more likely to invest the time and energy needed to effectively teach the writing standards presented in the CCSS.

A larger problem with national writing instruction and assessment is that it does not reflect evidence-based practices (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013), even with the implementation of the CCSS. “Given the necessity of professional writing in today’s society, the failure of schools to adequately deploy evidence-based practices for writing has serious consequences for students in K-12 schools and beyond” (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013, p. 344). Schools are also at fault for their inability to provide writing tools essential for modern instruction to teachers. Even in schools where these tools are being distributed, teachers and students are not adequately instructed on how to use them effectively (Graham et al., 2012).

To strengthen education in the United States, the Bush administration aimed to provide equitable education to all students in order to close any achievement gaps and passed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002, p. 1). It mandated that each state should have yearly assessments in the areas of mathematics and reading or language arts, with no specific mention to writing assessments (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002). In 2009, the Obama administration proposed the Race to the Top grant program for all schools to make tangible steps towards improving education, increasing high school graduation rates, ensuring that students are prepared for college and the workforce, and implementing
plans for educational reform, again, without specific mention on state writing assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

Race to the Top introduced states to the CCSS which required children to be able to write for a variety of purposes and audiences, all while maintaining appropriate mechanics, grammar, and penmanship (“The Common Core,” 2019). The CCSS were developed because state school chiefs and governors recognized the value in consistent and real-world learning goals, believing that this was the best way to prepare children for college, careers, and life beyond school (“The Common Core,” 2019). These standards added an important element to the existing standards which only required students to write about their own experiences and opinions (“The Common Core,” 2019).

The CCSS expected narrative writing, argumentative writing, informative writing, and persuasive writing, as it was believed that the skills developed in those writing genres will better prepare students for college and life beyond school (“The Common Core,” 2019). CCSS placed a great deal of emphasis on written expression and encouraged an increased focus on writing in schools which would have positively shaped the practice of educators (Troia and Olinghouse, 2013). In addition, CCSS provided benchmarks for writing skills that students should have mastered in grades K-12 (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2012). However, there have been no formal student assessments to test these writing standards. In 2015, under President Obama, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was passed and aimed to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). While it produced many education reforms, ESSA did not present a new list of learning standards to be used in classrooms.
In 2017, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) adopted the Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS) to replace the CCSS. The NYSED has implemented a timeline for this transition to take place (“Next Generation Learning Standards,” 2019). The three-phase transition system includes raising awareness, building capacity, and full implementation and assessment, and may support teachers the best chance of success for learning and effectively teaching these new standards (“Next Generation Learning Standards,” 2019). Full implementation of NGLS will take place in the fall of 2020 with its first student assessment exams in 2021. Under the NGLS, the new writing standards aim to make learning more concrete so that it can become more realistic to students (Shannon & Bulla, 2017). Assessments of the NGLS are expected to reflect all English language arts standards which includes writing; however, sample assessment questions have not yet been released.

Problem Statement

According to the National Writing Project (2018), writing is the most important skill for academic and professional success for students. Demonstrating strong writing skills is of utmost importance from kindergarten through high school, postsecondary school, in the workplace, as well as in communities (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). Yet, according to the 2012 NAEP assessment results, less than one fifth of fourth-grade students tested nationally were able to write proficiently in a variety of areas including language facility, idea development, and organization (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2012).

In addition to the lack of writing standards and assessments, teachers voiced that they were unprepared to teach writing because most did not take courses in college
focused on the teaching of writing (Ray et al., 2015; Troia, 2016). Furthermore, schools were not always using evidence-based practices to teach writing, and though some provided tools to teachers, there was no accompanying training for teachers with these tools (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). It is imperative that all students receive equitable and effective writing instruction in order to have increased opportunities for success.

**Statement of Purpose**

While it has been determined and widely accepted that writing competency is critical for attainment of success in academic, career, and social development, writing standards in schools have continuously changed through the years. Policy makers have enforced legal measures to encourage improvement in student performance, standards have been evaluated and revised, and teachers have spoken out about their lack of preparedness to teach writing, yet results have not shown appropriate student growth.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of effective instructional strategies to be used in classrooms. By gathering the perspectives of the individuals who use these strategies to teach writing daily, a compilation of effective strategies can be developed and disseminated to help teachers strengthen their writing instruction and improve student writing skills.

**Research Questions**

1. What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?

2. Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?
3. What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?

4. What obstacles, challenges, and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area?

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it seeks to gather teachers’ perspectives on writing instruction in order to develop a compendium of effective strategies for writing instruction and suggest professional development to improve writing instruction. In a recent study on supporting elementary school teachers, 50% of participants admitted that they did not feel prepared to teach the new writing standards (Young, 2015). By conducting this study, effective strategies can be introduced to teachers, allowing them to feel more prepared in the field.

Second, this study can drive professional development at the district level by providing administrators with effective strategies for writing instruction as perceived by qualified teachers. The strategies given during the professional development can be rolled out across schools and districts. In addition, administrators can use these strategies and compare them to the strategies being used in the classrooms to focus on what works and what areas can be strengthened.

Finally, this study can be used at higher level institutions and training programs when putting together preservice classes for teachers. First, it can be highlighted to the institutions that there is a great need for preservice writing instruction classes. Secondly, the results of the study can show which strategies have been perceived to be most effective and can therefore be incorporated into the designing of the preservice classes.
Definitions of Terms

Evidence-Based Practices- interventions based on scientific evidence (https://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Evidence-Based-Practice-Resources-Original).

Literacy- the ability to read and write (https://www.dictionary.com/browse/literacy).

Instructional Strategies- the processes by which instruction is delivered which may include a conference, discussion, lecture, etc. This can also be referred to as the technique of delivery (http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/instructional-strategy.html).


Chapter Summary

Researchers today have taken deep interest in the quality of writing instruction in schools (Donsky, 1984; Ray, et al., 2015; Shaw, 1985; Troia & Olinghouse, 2016; Young, 2015). “Good writing is essential to students’ success in school and beyond” (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015, p. 498). From a historical perspective, writing instruction has changed dramatically from an emphasis on mechanics, grammar, and penmanship, to an increase in the importance of composition (Donsky,1984). When student work was not showing significant growth, the NCLB of 2002, along with other government programs, was enacted, but it was not until the implementation of the CCSS in 2010 that an emphasis on writing standards was put into place.

According to a 2002 assessment by the NAEP, 28% of fourth graders can write at or above proficiency level, meaning that approximately three-fourths of the nation’s fourth-grade students are not meeting school standards for writing (NAEP, 2002). A
2012 assessment by the NAEP showed that four-fifths of students tested were not able to write proficiently in a variety of areas (NAEP, 2012).

The proposed study seeks to emphasize the need for improvement in the quality of writing instruction being offered to students, specifically at the fourth-grade level. This study will provide teachers with effective writing strategies to be used for instruction, will provide administrators with effective writing instructional strategies to be implemented which can be modified by grade level, and will assist in raising the overall quality of teacher instruction and student writing.

The following chapter is a review of the literature related to student writing at the elementary level. It describes studies that have been done in classrooms across the nation to develop conclusions about overall writing instruction with the purpose of raising the bar. The literature review covers historical overviews of writing instruction, a variety of writing practices that have been studied, teacher perceptions on writing instruction, assessment tools, and writing frameworks.

As will be highlighted in Chapter 3, this study will differ from studies previously conducted in the literature review in that it will take on a qualitative approach to explore teacher perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies. This study will bring teacher voices to the forefront and support all teachers of writing in effectively teaching their students. The findings of this study will be discussed in Chapter 4 and recommendations for future studies, along with limitations of the study, will be discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

“Writing is fundamental to students’ success in school” (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012, p. 346). Through writing, students are not only able to demonstrate their knowledge, but also to gather, remember, and share what they learn (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012, p. 346). Over the years, writing has shown to become an increasingly important skill. As Zumbrunn and Krause (2012) point out, it is imperative that students learn to write effectively in order to demonstrate their learned knowledge and achieve mastery of skills taught in school. This is increasingly important for students to master because it has been found that many students are lacking the writing skills needed for success in college or the world of work (Cutler & Graham, 2008).

In addition, weaker writers are less likely than their counterparts to use writing to support their learning of different content areas in school, and therefore, their full knowledge is not demonstrated (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Recognizing this problem is important, but more so it is important that teachers are prepared to teach students effective writing skills. However, writing is often difficult for instructors to teach (Curtis, 2017). It requires explicit instruction by trained professionals, yet most teachers feel underprepared to teach writing (Cutler, 2017). It is important to understand also that writing is no longer simply being able to spell correctly and demonstrate neat handwriting, but rather to demonstrate competence across the curriculum (Fidalgo, Torrance, Rijlaarsdam, Van den Bergh, & Alvarez, 2014). Developing the ability to
write in a way that clearly communicates one’s thinking is an important focus in education (Fidalgo et al., 2014). Teachers must act as models for students to ensure growth in writing development.

To contribute to the improvement of student learning, NYS adopted the NGLS in 2017 and it is expected to be fully implemented in September 2020 (“Next Generation Learning Standards,” 2019). This change took place primarily due to the negative feedback from stakeholders with regards to the CCSS (Disare, 2017). The NGLS requires students to write for a variety of purposes; fourth-grade writing standards mandate students to be able to write narrative pieces, informative pieces, and argumentative pieces, all using supporting details (“4th Grade Writing Standards,” 2017). It also mandates that fourth-grade students engage in conducting research in order to build knowledge and write about it (“4th Grade Writing Standards,” 2017). The NGLS are aimed primarily to produce lifelong writers who are prepared for the world beyond school and who can take part in today’s world of written communication (“4th Grade Writing Standards,” 2017).

In contrast to the CCSS, the NGLS takes into consideration the varying learning needs and levels of student, and also, NGLS uses wording that is clear and understandable to a variety of audiences (Disare, 2017). Another major difference between the CCSS and the NGLS is that the NGLS take into consideration the varying needs and learning levels of all students and therefore has so far received less negative feedback from stakeholders (Disare, 2017).

Research on writing instruction and effective writing strategies can be broken down as follows: (a) seminal studies in the field, (b) general writing practices, (c) teacher
perceptions on writing instruction, (d) assessment tools for student writing, (e) writing frameworks.

Seminal Studies in the Field

A seminal work in the field of writing instruction is the work of Hillocks (1984). In this meta-analysis, Hillocks sought to provide a review of research related to composition. According to Hillocks (1984), the studies that he researched were in disrepute by researchers in the field at that time, and therefore he sought to show the importance of examining writing instructional practices. Hillocks (1984) collected all experimental treatment studies conducted from 1963-1982 that met certain criteria, including involving a treatment, using a scale for writing quality, exercising minimal control for teacher bias, having control for differences among groups of students, and having compositions that were scored under conditions that ensured validity and reliability.

Hillocks (1984) examined three dimensions of the data which were duration of the treatment, mode of instruction used, and the focus of prewriting instruction. Hillocks (1984) found that the dimensions of effective writing instruction as shown through these studies are different than the common writing instruction practices in place at the time. The most effective method is the "environmental" method because it allows for balance in the classroom and takes advantage of classroom resources (Hillocks, 1984). This study was different from other studies being conducted at the time because Hillocks looked for studies that were disregarded by his fellow researchers. His meta-analysis caught the interest of future researchers who widely refer to his work today.
Donsky (1984) also recognized the importance of studying writing instruction and developed a study to elicit trends in composition instruction from 1900-1959, broken down into three time periods, 1900-1917, 1918-1935, and 1936-1959. Donsky (1984) used a sample of nine representatives from English language textbook series for elementary schools and separated participants by time frames to measure if significant changes occurred over time, and to see if the differences were linear or quadratic trends. Donsky (1984) found that textbooks changed over time in order to adapt to changes in history such as immigration, industrialization, and instructional theories.

Though writing was always important, the 16th century focused mostly on mechanics, grammar, and penmanship with little focus on the communicative skills involved. By the mid-19th century, there was a shift in educational thinking which allowed for composition to emerge in the importance of writing instruction and by the end of the 19th century, composition became a main focal point (Donsky, 1984). Donsky (1984) found that by 1907, the number of immigrants had increased significantly causing educators to get rid of all nonessentials and refocus their teaching which led to an increase in oral language exercises, primarily because teachers felt that the English language was in trouble. By the 1930s, lessons became interdisciplinary and focused on writing, language instruction, and natural and social sciences with units beginning to become prominent in the field of education rather than daily separated lessons (Donsky, 1984). By the 1950s, literature and language instruction were taught as separate entities.

Donsky’s (1984) findings about the changing trends over time demonstrated the importance of the changes in textbooks over time to fit in with what was happening in the nation. This study was important in that it highlighted the need for studies on writing
instruction to ensure students were being taught to write efficiently, at a time when writing was not at the forefront of research, as Hillocks hinted in his study.

Hillocks (1984) and Donsky (1984) highlighted the importance of studying writing instruction in schools. If writing instruction is not adapted to the changing times, it will not be effective (Donsky, 1984; Hillocks, 1984). In addition, without all aspects of writing being studied, teachers will not be provided with a well-rounded toolkit of strategies with which to teach their students (Donsky, 1984; Hillocks, 1984).

**General Writing Practices**

As Hillocks and Donsky showed in their work, there is a strong need for more studies in the field of writing instruction. Several researchers have set out to study general writing practices employed in elementary school classrooms. In 2007, Graham and Perin conducted a meta-analysis of writing instruction to identify effective instructional practices for teaching writing to adolescents. They used a variety of criteria to select studies for the meta-analysis. Criteria included studies conducted in Grades 4-12, using public and private schools, studies that included a measure of writing quality, had a measure of writing quality scored reliably, studies that used an experimental or quasi-experimental design, provided data to calculate effect size, and were part of a broad search (Graham & Perin, 2007). After analyzing these studies, Graham and Perin (2007) found that there are a variety of instructional procedures that improve the quality of writing in adolescent students. These procedures include strategies for planning, revising, and editing; strategies for summarizing texts; encouraging kids to work together to peer edit; setting clear and specific goals; making word processing tools available; teaching to write increasingly complex sentences; giving teachers professional
development; involving students in their learning; engaging in activities that help
students create original ideas; and providing good models in the classroom (Graham &
Perin, 2007).

Some limitations to this meta-analysis included the fact that not all the studies
used the same measure of writing quality, certain procedures were studied more closely
than others, and there were problems of dissimilar control comparisons (Graham & Perin,
2007). However, this meta-analysis provides a broad overview of effective writing
procedures that can be used by teachers in all schools.

In 2008, Rogers and Graham partnered to conduct another meta-analysis to
expand on the work of previous research by use of single subject experimental design for
strategy instruction in writing. This meta-analysis set out to answer the research question
asking which writing practices tested with single subject design procedures are effective
with students in Grades 1-12. Rogers and Graham (2008) grounded this meta-analysis in
the behavioral theory. The major criteria for selecting the studies to be used were their
use of Grade Levels 1-12, studies conducted in regular public or private schools,
alternative schools, summer programs, or residential centers, studies using single subject
designs, studies that provided data to calculate an effect size, and studies conducted in a
very broad search (Rogers & Graham, 2008).

The interventions studied by Rogers and Graham (2008) included planning and
drafting, editing, and paragraph construction, with subtopics for each category. The
results indicated that the planning and drafting strategy was maintained over time and
was generalized by students to untaught genres. The strategy of setting goals also
showed to be productive with students (Rogers & Graham, 2008). This meta-analysis
supports other studies done in the field of writing that explored the effects of a variety of evidence-based practices on student writing achievement.

Another study conducted in 2015 by Coker et al., sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of first grade writing instruction across schools in the mid-Atlantic region. Participating schools included 13 schools from three districts in demographically diverse urban and suburban areas within the state (Coker et al., 2015). Coker et al. (2015) used a time-sampled observational protocol with a cross-sectional observation design methodology with the goal of providing a clearer picture of the nature and variability of writing instruction. The study was conducted over a 1 year period and developed classroom observation protocol. Results showed that writing on average was taught for 30 minutes or less a day and instruction in skills or process writing were common in the schools (Coker et al., 2015). This study referred specifically to first grade and therefore future studies might explore using this model with different grade levels to observe whether results are similar.

Koenig, Eckert, and Heir (2016) conducted a study using a randomized control trial design with the purpose of adding to existing research on the effects of performance feedback and goal setting interventions, two popular writing strategies that are often incorporated into writing programs. Koenig et al. (2016) grounded this study in the influential cognitive model of writing theory by Hayes and Flower. In this trial, 115 third grade students in two urban schools in the Northeast were selected to participate. Third graders were chosen because of the common developmental written expression at this age (Koenig et al., 2016). Students were given writing packets with an assessment probe to respond to with which Koenig et al. (2016) tested for handwriting and writing fluency.
The researchers tested these samples by calculating the total number of words the student wrote and the correct number of writing sequences for the probe they were assigned. Koenig et al. found that the students in the performance feedback groups showed significant improvements in writing sequences, whereas the students in the control group did not show significant improvements. In addition, providing students with the goal-setting component did not show to be highly effective in this study.

The limitations in this study include the possibility of diffusion of treatments, the lack of generalizability because of the small sample size, and the abnormalities observed which could have caused biased results (Koenig et al., 2016). This study contributes to others in the field as it tests the effectiveness of commonly used writing strategies in the field.

Williams and Lundstrom (2007) also researched the effectiveness of general writing strategies with the purpose of investigating explicit strategies paired with guided practice. This study used Wertsch’s concept of mediated action which focuses on how learners interact with cultural tools, and Rogoff’s theory of cognitive development as an apprenticeship in which learners learn how to use cultural tools through the modeling of a more knowledgeable person (Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). In this qualitative study, the researchers collected data from October through May and gathered evidence from daily lesson plans, reflective notes, in-process and post-lesson field notes on interactive writing activities, field notes on weekly observations of students writing in their classrooms, and photocopies of student writing samples (Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). Participants included six first graders who were struggling with reading and writing and met daily in a 30-minute reading group outside of the regular classroom.
Throughout the study, the teacher followed a schedule for instruction; Mondays teaching word study, Tuesdays-Fridays teaching partial word study and partial guided reading and incorporating interactive writing lessons throughout (Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). Williams and Lundstrom (2007) observed the methods used by the teacher and how the teacher scaffolded the strategies being taught. These methods were examined in line with the author’s research questions regarding the spelling strategies taught, the scaffolding of interactive writing skills, and the spelling strategies taught when students were to write unfamiliar words. Williams and Lundstrom (2007) found that student responses to teacher prompts demonstrated their understanding and ability to complete assignments acting on the teacher scaffolding of knowledge as well as success in spelling words and word parts as dictated by the teacher, through use of the strategies taught in the class. Therefore, by having structured and predictable lessons, student learning flourished.

In 2015, Ray, Graham, and Houston put together a sample of middle school teachers and surveyed them about their use of writing to support student learning in content areas. The purpose of the study was to determine what writing to learn strategies could be applied in science and social studies classrooms to teach children to better understand content through writing (Ray et al., 2015). Teachers reported that they used over 15 write-to-learn strategies in their classrooms including short answer responses, note taking while reading, and completing worksheets (Ray et al., 2015). Ray et al. found that there is a difference between using write-to-learn strategies in the content area classrooms and those not using specific strategies. This study confirms that the use of writing in the content areas can strongly support overall student learning.
It is useful to study general writing instruction as a whole because it provides teachers and administrators with an idea of which writing strategies are most effective (Coker et al., 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Koenig et al., 2016; Ray et al., 2015; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). There are a variety of writing strategies and techniques in the field of education that can be modified to be used at a variety of grade levels (Coker et al., 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Koenig et al., 2016; Ray et al., 2015; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). Several researchers note that some of these strategies include planning and drafting, following the writing process, and setting clear goals and expectations (Coker et al., 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Koenig et al., 2016; Ray et al., 2015; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007). This is an important contribution to the field as it provides teachers with a toolkit for teaching writing effectively with evidence-based practices.

**Teacher Perceptions on Writing Instruction**

“Teachers can be powerful models for students, so it is essential that they view themselves as confident writers” (Zumbrunn and Krause, 2012, p. 351). This section includes the works of researchers conducting studies on teacher and leadership perceptions of writing and writing instruction.

McGhee and Lew (2007) conducted a study to explore the perceptions of teachers regarding principal support and their understanding of effective writing instructional strategies along with the principals’ actions and interventions to support writing instruction. The study was conducted in elementary and secondary schools in urban, rural, and suburban areas and included 169 teacher participants (McGhee & Lew, 2007). In this quantitative study, teachers were surveyed on their perceptions of administration
involvement. Researchers found that there is a clear indication that principals who have a strong knowledge of writing instruction and support effective instruction in this area act in ways that help teachers do their best work (McGhee & Lew, 2007). As it relates to Zumbrunn and Krause’s (2012) statement, teachers are a very powerful tool for effective writing instruction and having support from knowledgeable administrators supports teachers in perceiving themselves as effective writing teachers.

In 2008, researchers Cutler and Graham conducted a study with the purpose of identifying types of instructional adaptations that teachers made for struggling writers as well as examining typical writing practices in order to draw recommendations for improving writing instruction in the primary grades. A random sample of participants were stratified by grade level and included 178 primary grade teachers in Grades 1-3. Teachers were asked to fill out questionnaires about their backgrounds, their attitudes toward writing and towards teaching writing, and the time spent on writing instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008).

Cutler and Graham (2008) found that of the 92% of responses, 28% of teachers in the study felt good about teaching writing, 42% felt adequate, and 28% felt poor or inadequate. Sixty-five percent of teachers also reported that they are not using a commercial program to teach writing. In terms of instructional time, it was found that 56% of instructional time is being spent on whole class instruction with only 23% to small group instruction and 24% spent on individual instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008). One limitation of this study is that it is self-reported data and therefore, it may not be entirely accurate. This study is like other studies in that it acknowledges the importance of positive teacher perceptions on writing and the quality of writing
instruction occurring in classrooms. It does not place blame on teachers but rather highlights the need for educating teachers on best practices for teaching writing.

Two years after Cutler and Graham’s (2008) study, Graham and Gilbert (2010) conducted a study with the purpose of providing policy makers with justification for changes in teacher certification programs. This study also assessed the contributions of selected classroom variables used to predict the teachers’ use of evidence-based writing practices and adaptations for weaker writers (Graham & Gilbert, 2010). This study surveyed a random sample of elementary school teachers of Grades 4-6 nationwide. Teachers were stratified by grade level and completed a five-topic survey which included the topics of general writing instruction information, evidence-based practices, teacher self-efficacy, writing assignments, and adaptations for weaker writers (Graham & Gilbert, 2010). The study examined how writing is being taught nationwide. Graham and Gilbert found three results from the conducted surveys; first being that two-thirds of teacher education courses in college did not prepare teachers for effectively teaching writing, secondly, teachers reported that they spent about 15 minutes on writing instruction and students practice writing for approximately 25 minutes a day, and finally, students are not being given a variety of purposes to write.

One limitation of Graham and Gilbert’s (2010) study is that it was based on the responses of 97 teachers. In addition, the survey responses may have been answered in a biased manner to produce desirable answers for the researchers. A final limitation of the study is that survey questions were based on the assumptions that teachers are aware of all elements of their teaching and can relate it to the topics covered in the survey (Graham & Gilbert, 2010). For a teacher to be a strong model for students, that teacher must trust
in his or her own writing abilities. Preservice programs require immediate action for
strengthening preservice teacher education programs, that allow teachers to feel confident
in their teaching abilities upon course completion (Graham & Gilbert, 2010).

In 2012, researchers Zumbrunn and Krause set out with the purpose of
discovering the underlying principles of effective writing instruction. In their qualitative
study, the researchers interviewed seven leading authorities in the field of writing, as
nominated by their peers, on their beliefs about writing and effective writing instruction
(Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Five major themes emerged from the qualitative data that
was collected on the effective writing instruction principles. First, effective writing
instructors realize the impact of their own writing beliefs, experiences, and practices on
student work; second, effective writing instruction encourages student motivation and
encouragement; third, effective writing instruction begins with clear and deliberate
planning, but can also be flexible; fourth, effective writing instruction is a collaboration
between teacher and student and is based on scaffolding student knowledge; and finally,
effective writing instruction and practice should be happening every day (Zumbrunn &
Krause, 2012). This study stands out among other studies as it centered the perceptions
of the instructors, rather than student work samples. It accounted for the knowledge and
experience held by writing instructors and their ability to effectively carry out instruction
as they see most effective and meaningful.

In 2015, a study was conducted by Wilcox, Jeffrey, and Gardner-Bixler to
investigate how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for writing and teacher
evaluation system might influence writing instruction in the classroom. In addition, this
study aimed to answer how teachers in schools with above predicted and predicted
outcomes on the English language arts (ELA) exam approach writing instruction (Wilcox et al., 2015). This study was grounded in the sociocultural theory of learning and used interviews, focus groups, and a case study approach to this mixed-methods study. Participating schools included six that performed above-predicted performance on the ELA exam and three that achieved predicted outcomes.

Results showed that teachers in these schools were using evidence-based practices, such as creative imagery instruction, peer collaboration, strategy instruction, presentation instruction, and rubrics among the many (Wilcox et al., 2015). Also, Wilcox et al. (2015) found that most teachers expressed having a positive view of the CCSS and felt that the modes of instruction they were using effectively rolled out the writing standards. This study lasted for 2 days and therefore many instructional practices may not have been accounted for in the recording of results (Wilcox et al., 2015). This study shows that positive teacher attitudes towards writing instruction and the use of evidence-based practices yields positive outcomes.

In 2016, a study was conducted to examine how five kindergarten-second grade teachers perceived, implemented, and reflected on the writing instruction in their classrooms (Korth et al., 2016). The researchers conducted a qualitative case study using interviews, surveys, and observational data (Korth et al., 2016). A purposeful sampling of participants included five teachers who engaged in early writing instruction in kindergarten through second grade and varied in years of experience as well as degree type (Korth et al., 2016). Korth et al. (2016) used a thematic analysis looking for patterns, differences, and relationships among the teachers and found two main themes: opportunities and obstacles.
The researchers found that opportunities for writing instruction was apparent in teacher accounts of the preparation they received for teaching writing and that they all felt prepared because of the professional development (PD) they were receiving. Two-fifths said that college did not prepare them to teach writing effectively (Korth et al. 2016). The obstacles found include a lack of time, testing, and their own teaching deficiencies. Teachers felt that they were unprepared to help students begin to write and even doubted their abilities to provide explicit instruction on writing conventions (Korth et al., 2016). The overall finding was that for teachers to be effective in writing instruction, ongoing support from preservice and professional development experiences is highly important (Korth et al., 2016). This study relates to other studies in its group in that it supports the idea that teachers require extra support to effectively teach writing to students.

In 2017, Curtis conducted a study with the purpose of investigating how the modeling of effective writing strategies impacted kindergarten teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes towards the teaching of writing as well as the examine the effects of modeling specific writing strategies by the district literacy coach on teachers’ knowledge, attitudes, and capacity relevant to writing instruction. This was a qualitative study which used two writing surveys, a pre and post survey, to measure the possible changes in teachers’ perceptions, knowledge, and attitudes towards writing instruction after observing the modeling of effective writing strategies (Curtis, 2017). The study was conducted in a public school in a small community in Mississippi and included two kindergarten teachers who taught 14 students each. After observing the district literacy coach, Curtis (2017) found that there was an improvement in teachers’ attitudes towards
writing as they were now given effective writing strategies to employ. In addition, students became more engaged during lessons and showed growth in their writing (Curtis, 2017). This study is like others in that it supports the need for teacher interventions towards teaching writing. These findings are consistent with related studies previously conducted.

There is continued need for studies highlighting the need for effective teacher training programs to promote the teaching of writing (Curtis, 2017; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham & Gilbert, 2010; Korth, et al., 2016; McGhee & Lew, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2015; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Overall, teachers do not feel prepared to teach writing because of a lack of preservice education programs that are conducive to the teaching of writing (Curtis, 2017; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham & Gilbert, 2010; Korth, et al., 2016; McGhee & Lew, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2015; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Many teachers share the viewpoint that writing instruction is a challenging area because they have not been properly trained in how to teach it and therefore struggle to keep up with the changing writing standards and how to effectively teach them to students (Curtis, 2017; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham & Gilbert, 2010; Korth, et al., 2016; McGhee & Lew, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2015; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). These studies support the above-mentioned problem that approximately three-fourths of students are unable to write proficiently nationwide.

It is important to have teachers as participants in such studies, as it is the teacher who is providing writing instruction. Therefore, these studies appropriately selected participants who could effectively answer the research questions at hand (Curtis, 2017; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham & Gilbert, 2010; Korth, et al., 2016; McGhee & Lew,
In addition, the studies support the idea that in order for students to feel confident in their writing abilities and to show growth, proper leadership is required on the part of teachers as well as administrators (Curtis, 2017; Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham & Gilbert, 2010; Korth, et al., 2016; McGhee & Lew, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2015; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012).

**Assessment Tools for Student Writing**

“Scoring and norming of student work not only allows teachers to closely evaluate student mastery, but also serves as a valuable form of proficient learning” (Bradford, Newland, Rule, & Montgomery, 2015, p. 463). Teachers should be well-versed on assessing student writing in order to provide effective feedback to promote student learning.

In 2015, Bradford, Newland, Rule, and Montgomery conducted a study to explore the effects of rubric use on writing instruction, with the focus of opinion writing for this study. Their aim was to determine how the use of these rubrics influences the overall quality of elementary school writing (Bradford et al., 2015). The study was conducted in a Midwestern elementary school that was termed in need of assistance and 20 first grade students were selected from two classrooms to participate in the study (Bradford et al., 2015). For this study, both classrooms used a minilesson to teach the content at hand but differed when they introduced the rubric. One classroom taught the rubric prior to the minilesson while the other introduced the rubric after the minilesson was completed. The designed used was counterbalanced, repeated measures in which students provided writing samples in response to given prompts (Bradford et al., 2015).
Results showed that by having teachers provide instruction to students on the skills outlined in the rubric beforehand, did in fact, improve student writing. Data also supported the importance of implementation of writing rubrics in the classroom through student writing scores and showed an improvement in attitudes towards writing (Bradford et al., 2015). Researchers recommend that their work be extended to other writing genres and perhaps subject areas and can even be tailored depending on student demographics (Bradford et al., 2015). This study is different from others in that it showed the importance of the interaction between teacher and student and the transparency of assessment tools being used to promote student learning and independence.

Studying writing assessments can benefit teachers and students nationwide. These assessments support the idea that student growth should be measured in order to ensure learning (Bradford et al., 2015; Casey et al., 2016). This group of studies shows also that students perform better if they are aware of the assessment tools being used for their writing and if teachers are transparent about their expectations (Bradford et al., 2015; Casey et al., 2016). In addition, teachers can use assessments to drive their instruction, if they feel prepared and confident to do so. If teachers are unable to use assessments to drive instruction or to score student work according to rubrics and assessments in use, it can be an indication that teacher training and professional development is needed in each school or district.

**Writing Frameworks**

In addition to informal writing strategies that are used in writing instruction, there are a variety of writing specific programs that are used in schools. One such program is Strategic and Interactive Writing Instruction (SIWI) which is an instructional approach to
guided, shared, and independent writing for use with deaf or hard of hearing students (Dostal & Wolbers, 2016). In 2016, researchers Dostal and Wolbers examined the growth patterns of writing for deaf and hard of hearing fourth through sixth grade students using with SIWI method during a 5-week study. SIWI combines interactive writing, strategy instruction, and metalinguistic development and was used to teach students narrative writing (Dostal & Wolbers, 2016). For the time period of the study, students were instructed 3.5 hours outside of the classroom with SIWI and Dostal and Wolbers (2016) results showed that all students were able to generalize the writing skills learned to untaught genres. This study shows the effectiveness of the SIWI model and can potentially be modified to fit into general education classrooms in hopes of yielding the same results.

A 2017 study attempted to examine whether the length of time teachers participated in professional development for this program impacted their ability to implement it in their classrooms (Wolbers, Dostal, Skerrit, & Stephenson, 2017). The study included participants with highly diverse teaching experience regarding years teaching, grade level, content area, and program philosophy taught (Wolbers et al., 2017). Wolbers et al. (2017) used data associated with the 3 years that teachers attended PD for SIWI instruction to examine their development of SIWI knowledge and their ability to implement it in the classroom. Interviews before and after attending PD were conducted and a one-way analysis of variance was used to assess results (Wolbers et al., 2017).

Results showed a significant improvement in teacher ability to implement SIWI effectively in their classrooms as their years of PD increased; those with the full 3 years of experience scored the highest rating on knowledge of SIWI implementation (Wolbers
et al., 2017). This study does not provide an entirely accurate results of whether PD was the main cause of teacher understanding and implementation of the SIWI program. It negates other factors that may have been involved in the strengthening of teacher understanding.

Writing to Learn is a writing program framework that was studied by Rouse, Graham, and Compton in 2017. The purpose of this study was to examine the Writing to Learn intervention in science education at the elementary level (Rouse et al., 2017). Sixty-nine fourth-grade students participated in this study and took part in the Writing to Learn treatment group, comparison group, or control group. Students in the treatment and comparison groups completed a science experiment and wrote four short responses and one extended response regarding their experiment, while students in the control group simply wrote about their favorite part of the experiment (Rouse et al., 2017). Results showed that on the posttest, the control group performed higher than the treatment and comparison groups on the lower order thinking questions, but the opposite was true for the higher order thinking questions (Rouse et al., 2017).

There were many limitations to this study including a highly controlled intervention, its lack of generalizability, and the fact that it was not designed to take other factors, such as writing practice, into account as a facilitator of student learning (Rouse et al., 2017). Rouse et al. (2017) recommend a future study using a larger sample size and including struggling students as participants.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) was studied by Saddler, Moran, Graham, and Harris (2004) to examine whether supplemental strategy instruction during the planning phase eased writing difficulties for students. Second graders experiencing
difficulty in writing from a suburban elementary school and two teachers participated in this study. Students were studied in two classes in which the teachers dedicated about 150 minutes a week to planning, drafting, revising, and editing, and their writing was monitored over time to first develop a baseline assessment (Saddler et al., 2004).

Throughout the study, students wrote three to five stories which were then evaluated by the researchers. Saddler et al. found that learning these strategies under SRSD had a positive effect on students and their writing. This student learning was maintained over time and students were able to write more complete stories (Saddler et al., 2004). This study relates to other studies in the field in that it studies the effectiveness of a specific writing program that can be used in many different schools, however, it does not take into consideration that there may have been other factors contributing to student success, outside of the additional 150 minutes of instructional time with SRSD instruction.

Mason, Snyder, Sukhram, and Kedem (2006) looked at two writing programs, Think before, While, and After Reading (TWA) and Pick Goals, List How to Meet Those Goals, and Make Notes and Sequence Notes (PLANS), under the SRSD instructional framework. Their study examined how these strategies helped nine fourth-grade students in an urban elementary school, with participants having been selected by the school principal and four teachers in the school (Mason et al., 2006). The researchers randomly assigned students to three instructional groups, a TWA group, a PLANS group, and a control group in which children were instructed accordingly (Mason et al., 2006). At the end, students were asked to write an essay based on reading passages. Mason et al. found that though no students in any group made use of writing an outline and baseline
performances showed no meaningful differences, students in the TWA and PLANS group showed growth in their ability to demonstrate reading comprehension through writing using the programs through which they were instructed in this study (Mason et al., 2006). This study related to other studies in its group in that it separated participants into groups and instructed each group on the same topic using a different writing program. It supported the idea that writing specific programs can foster student learning.

In 2009, Tracy, Reid, and Graham studied the effects of using SRSD and how it impacted student learning in certain academic tasks. Participants included 127 third grade students in a rural elementary school (Tracy et al., 2009). Tracey et al. formed two groups; one with 63 students, the comparison group which received traditional skills writing instruction such as spelling and grammar, and a group of 64 students receiving genre-specific strategies for planning and writing stories. Throughout the study, the teacher taught SRSD strategies in three phases with the goal of providing student-specific strategies to use throughout their writing and to accomplish a variety of writing tasks (Tracy et al., 2009).

Tracy et al. (2009) found that the students in the group receiving SRSD instruction wrote stories that were longer, stronger, and qualitatively better than their peers in the traditional writing skills class. In addition, the strategy instruction students maintained their skills for a period and showed gains from their pretests to posttests (Tracy et al., 2009). This study relates to Saddler et al.’s (2004) study in which researchers found similar results which supported the effectiveness of the SRSD model for providing students with specific strategy instruction to support writing development.
Wolbers et al. (2017), Rouse et al. (2016), Saddler et al. (2004), Mason et al. (2006), and Tracy et al. (2009), contributed to the field of writing by showing the importance of using specific evidence-based practices as instructional program models for teaching writing. By using programs such as SIWI, Writing to Learn, SRSD, TWA, and PLANS, teachers are not only given guidance on ways to improve their own instruction of writing, but students are taught effective practices that can promote their writing and learning overall (Mason et al. 2006; Rouse et al. 2016; Saddler et al., 2004; Tracy et al. 2009; Wolbers et al. 2017). These programs can be adapted to a variety of curriculum programs used in districts nationwide as a supplement for instruction.

**Chapter Summary**

Student writing at the elementary level is not where it should be. Many students nationwide are unable to write proficiently and are unprepared for college writing and writing in the work force. Teachers have the ability to improve this harsh reality, yet many teachers feel unprepared to teach writing because they have doubts in their own abilities or because they have not been properly trained in writing instruction. Furthermore, there are no formal assessment tools nationwide to measure student writing, yet there are many to measure math and reading standards.

More research is needed in the field of writing education in order to support teachers and students in writing instruction. Research thus far indicates that there is a need for further empirical research in the field, there is a need for the inclusion of writing instruction courses in preservice teacher programs, there is a need for professional development for teachers, traditional writing approaches are no longer most effective, and a variety of writing tools and strategies that should be in place. Though not all the
above studies are generalizable, as more empirical data arises in the field, stronger writing education programs and curriculums can be developed. Student success should be the primary focus.

Chapter 3 will provide a detailed description of the methodology to be used to fulfill the purpose of this study. It will explain the qualitative approach that will take place in an attempt to understand the phenomenon of the lack of student writing achievement nationwide.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Writing serves as “a gateway for success in academics, the new workplace, and the global economy” (NWP and Nagin, 2006, p. 2). National assessments have been conducted through the years with results demonstrating students’ lack of writing proficiency nationwide. In 2002, the NAEP found that only 28% of fourth-grade students were able to write at or above proficiency level (NAEP, 2002). In 2012, an NAEP assessment showed that only one-fifth of fourth-grade students out of approximately 13,000 assessed were able to write proficiently across three areas tested which included language facility, idea development, and organization of ideas (NAEP, 2012).

Over the last several centuries, modes of writing instruction have changed (Donsky, 1984). Changes from the 16th to 19th centuries included a shift from mechanics, grammar and penmanship, to composition, or the ability to express ideas through writing (Donsky, 1984). Writing instruction continued to evolve through the years combining mechanics as well as composition (Donsky, 1984). Research has shown a variety of writing approaches being used in schools today (Coker et al., 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Koenig et al., 2016; Mason et al. 2006; Ray et al., 2015; Rogers & Graham, 2008; Rouse et al. 2016; Saddler et al., 2004; Tracy et al. 2009; Williams & Lundstrom, 2007; Wolbers et al. 2017). These range from program specific instruction to use of a variety of strategies.
The study sought to generate effective writing strategies, as perceived by experienced teachers, to support writing instruction in fourth-grade classrooms, which can be modified at all elementary levels. A qualitative approach was used to generate conclusions for this study since qualitative researchers use the data collected to find patterns and to develop insight into lived experiences (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). The research questions to be addressed were:

1. What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?

2. Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?

3. What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?

4. What obstacles, challenges, and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area?

Research Context

The study took place in school districts north of New York City. The superintendents of four school districts were contacted for approval to reach out to the desired population at the elementary schools within that district. The districts were conveniently selected based on availability. Fourth-grade teachers were selected based on minimum educational and training standards and willingness to participate. Given the lack of participant volunteers, more districts were reached out to, however, it did not lead to great success. The researcher then switched to using a snowball technique sample to recruit additional participants.
**Research Participants**

The population for this study was fourth-grade writing teachers in school districts north of New York City. Qualified teachers were expected to hold a minimum of 8 years of teaching experience in the area of writing and hold a master’s degree in the field of education or a related area. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault, (2016) explain that the sample size for qualitative studies cannot always be determined prior to the beginning of the study, however, the sample for this study included 10 fourth-grade teachers of writing. The term theoretical saturation refers to the point in which data collection has reached a standstill and new data is not emerging (Hennink, Kaiser, & Marconi, 2016).

To protect participant confidentiality, a variety of methods were used. Prior to the study, e-mails were sent out to individual teachers within the population containing a screening questionnaire. Upon return, this questionnaire was seen by the researcher only. During the study, interviews were conducted using Zoom and only the researcher and participant were present. Originally, interviews were expected to be conducted in person, however, due to COVID-19 restrictions, interviews were moved to a virtual platform. Once the study was concluded and ready to be reported out, pseudonyms, rather than teacher names were used to report findings.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

Prior to the selection of participants, letters requesting permission were sent out to the superintendents of four school districts selected (see Appendix A). Closed-ended questionnaires were used to select participants. These questionnaires were exploratory in
nature and gathered information on potential participants including their number of years teaching writing at the elementary level, their highest level of education, their willingness to participate in the study, and their availability. An e-mail with this information along with a description of the study was sent out to all potential participants (Appendix B).

Due to the lack of participant responses, a snowball sample, also referred to as a chain-referral sample, was used to obtain participants for this study. “Using this approach, the sample size ‘snowballs’ bigger and bigger as each additional subject recruits more subjects” (Zach, 2020, para. 4), which allows the researcher to have a larger sample size from which to select qualified participants. Zach (2020) finds that this type of sampling allows the researcher to reach a wider group which may have been otherwise challenging to find. Being recruited by a trusted person makes potential participants feel more comfortable taking part in a study (Zach, 2020). Four separate strands of linear snowball sampling assisted the researcher in gathering participants. Linear snowball sampling is a specific type of snowball sampling in which one participant provides only one new referral and that new referral then provides one more referral, and so on, until the desired number of participants is reached (Snowball sampling, 2019). P1 began the first strand by recommending P7, P4 began the second strand by recommending P3, P2 led the third strand by recommending P9 who then recommended P10, and P6 recommended P5 who then recommended P8.

Once participants were selected, a letter of consent (see Appendix C) was sent via e-mail and interested participants were asked to read and return the signed letter of consent. An e-mail was then sent proposing a time that meetings would take place, as
well as an explanation of confidentiality throughout the study and once findings are published.

To collect data for the proposed study, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. An interview is a strong tool in qualitative research as it is an accepted way of obtaining the point of view of participants on their lived experiences in their field (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). There were 11 interview questions to be asked, however, using semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to ask follow-up questions that may not have been in the original planning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This provided the researcher the best opportunity to gain knowledge from experienced teachers who are well versed in teaching writing.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

As interviews were conducted, data was recorded to ensure accuracy in note taking. Once the data was collected, it was analyzed. First, the data was transcribed and read through to ensure accuracy. The data was then segmented into meaningful parts that relayed important information related to the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data was then manually coded to develop themes. To ensure trustworthiness, the coded transcript was peer reviewed by a third party not involved in the study. Following this, conclusions were made and reported out using a narrative format. The narrative discussed findings and conclusions based on themes that emerged from the interview and coding processes.

The advantages to these procedures are that teacher responses were transcribed and read for accuracy, so there was less room for misinterpretation. In addition, by using semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to ask follow-up questions to ensure
understanding, and again, to limit the possibility of misinterpretation. Furthermore, this method allowed for the findings to be transferred to other school settings which best helped teachers strengthen their teaching of writing.

Data collected was protected in two ways. Hard copies of the transcribed interviews were securely locked away in a file cabinet that only the researcher has access to. In addition, any information on the computer was safely stored as an encrypted file. After 3 years, hard copies of the information will be securely destroyed, and any online information will be safely deleted.

**Action Plan and Timeline**

The researcher sought to have the study conducted over an approximate 3-month period. Once the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this study, the researcher e-mailed the preliminary questionnaires to all fourth-grade teachers in the selected school districts with a return date no later than 1 week after the distribution date. After 2 weeks, follow-up e-mails were sent. When no responses were received, the researcher switched to a snowball sample and began reaching out to teachers in a variety of school districts. Upon receiving completed questionnaires and agreed upon consent forms, the researcher sorted through the data collected and participants were selected. Following this, a consent form was sent with the request to have it returned within 1 week. Once consent was received, interview times were scheduled, and interviews were conducted. Though interviews were expected to take 60-90 minutes, on average, they took approximately 30-35 minutes. Once completed, the researcher transcribed the data collected, conducted an analysis, and came to a conclusion.
Summary

Learning to write at the elementary level is crucial to student success. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers are equipped with a variety of effective writing instructional strategies. For this qualitative phenomenological study, 10 qualified fourth-grade teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Interviewee identities remained confidential throughout and beyond the process. Results will be published in narrative format highlighting a compendium of successful strategies identified in the study for writing teachers to refer to. In doing this, writing teachers can strengthen their own instruction, and therefore, better support student writing achievement.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study examined fourth-grade teacher perceptions of effective instructional strategies when teaching writing. Participants included fourth-grade teachers in five suburban school districts north of New York City. This study used a phenomenological qualitative approach to gather teacher insights of which instructional strategies for writing best contribute to student understanding and acquisition of fourth-grade writing skills. The study was based off of the phenomenon surrounding the lack of student achievement in writing, specifically at the fourth-grade level, which was demonstrated through a 2012 nationwide writing assessment by the NAEP in which less than one-fifth of fourth-grade students were able to write proficiently in a variety of areas (NAEP, 2012).

Research Questions

The following research questions were studied using semi-structured interviews:

1. What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?

2. Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?

3. What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?
4. What obstacles, challenges, and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area?

During the time that this study was conducted, there was an outbreak of a serious virus, COVID-19, leading the nation and the world into a global pandemic. Specifically in New York, schools, restaurants, and all non-essential businesses were indefinitely shut down. One result was that teachers and students were forced to quickly adapt to a virtual education experience. Teachers were expected to deliver virtual lessons using a variety of platforms. This led to increased anxiety and an increased workload for teachers. As a result, the researcher faced considerable difficulty obtaining participants for the study. Using the snowball sample, 10 participants were obtained and interviewed. By using this type of sample, participants were able to recommend other participants who fit the criteria, and through those recommendations, newly recruited participants felt more comfortable taking part in the study. Also, using this approach, “the sample size ‘snowballs’ bigger and bigger as each additional subject recruits more subjects” (Zach, 2020, para. 4), which allows the researcher to have a larger sample size from which to select qualified participants.

Each of the 10 participants agreed to participate in the study and gave an electronic consent using Qualtrics.com, an online forum which was also used to administer the questionnaires at the start of this study. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview that ranged from 25-40 minutes. Due to COVID-19, it was mandated that interviews be done online and not in person. For this study, one-on-one interviews were conducted online using Zoom. Interview questions were formulated to gather data on each of the four guiding research questions (Appendix D). Throughout
each interview, probing questions were asked to elicit details that would provide clarity for the researcher. Table 4.1 shows interview questions and their alignment with the guiding research questions.

Table 4.1
Interview Questions with Aligned Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Aligned Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When teaching writing at the fourth-grade level, what strategies do you find most effective in contributing to student understanding of the skill being taught?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking each strategy that you mentioned one at a time, what does it look like when they are used in your classroom? Would you say they are used daily, often, occasionally, or not often?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If asked to choose three to five of the most effective strategies for teaching writing skills, which strategies would you select?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You mentioned ______ as being an effective writing instructional strategy. In your opinion, what about this strategy makes it so effective?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What characteristics contribute to an effective instructional strategy for writing?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What evidence do you refer to when assessing the effectiveness of a given writing strategy?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you measure student understanding of a given writing skill?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What difficulties do you face when teaching writing?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you find best supports your ability to effectively teach writing?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Participants

To conduct this study, 10 participants took part in semi-structured interviews via Zoom. Information on each participant is listed below. Due to the closing of schools and businesses, along with the need to maintain safe social distancing protocols, it was determined that virtual interviews would be used for data collection. To maintain confidentiality, participants will be referred to by P for participant and an accompanying number.

Participant 1. P1 was a fourth-grade teacher with 9 years of teaching experience with both general education and special education students. P1 held a master’s degree in childhood education. P1 used a variety of resources to teach writing, including excerpts from specific writing programs, worksheets found online, and grade level mentor texts. P1 had access to tutors at the college level who come into the classrooms at this school to assist struggling writers and to support teachers during instruction, at the request of the teacher.

Participant 2. P2 was a fourth-grade teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience in a variety of grades but has taught fourth-grade for over 9 years. P2 held a master’s degree in special education. P2 used the Lucy Calkins Units of Study, as a primary means of writing instruction. The Lucy Calkins Units of Study are four writing units which use the writing workshop model and helps “...teachers provide their students with instruction, opportunities for practice, and concrete doable goals to help them meet and exceed any set of high standards” (Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing, 2020, para. 1). In addition to the Lucy Calkins...
Units of Study, P2 used outside resources, such as worksheets, mentor texts, and lessons from other published programs, as a secondary instruction tool.

**Participant 3.** P3 was a fourth-grade teacher for the entirety of his/her career. P3 has a master’s degree of science in educational technology. P3 used a writing workshop model, which is a framework for teaching writing consisting of a minilesson, active engagement, and independent practice. This model has been adapted to a variety of different curriculum programs on the market. P3 found that this model for instruction best suits the students’ needs.

**Participant 4.** P4 taught for over 8 years and has experience in both charter and public schools and holds a master’s degree in inclusive education. P4 was on multiple writing committees in which curriculum was designed and written out for all teachers in that school to use, in addition to other committees to find ways to encourage vertical alignment in schools. Most recently, P4 took part of a committee designed to move writing instruction from the classroom setting to an online setting while schools were conducting classes electronically. P4 was part of a district that encourages use of the writing workshop model but allows for supplementation.

**Participant 5.** P5 taught for many years and has experience in both public and private schools. P5 held a master’s degree in education as well as second language education. While working in the private school setting, P5 used a curriculum that had been written by teachers before arriving at the school. After moving to the public school setting, P5 described the change in writing curriculum as more of a constructive feel with more of a hands-on approach for the students.
**Participant 6.** P6 had 17 years of teaching experience and had worked in three different school districts, all north of New York City. P6 has a master’s degree in curriculum development. P6 had been in the school district for 2 years but has always been a fourth-grade teacher. P6 noticed a variety of differences within the three school districts over the course of 17 years. These include the lack of writing programs in certain schools, the lack of important components of a writing program within programs, and a variety of different professional perspectives on what constitutes an effective writing program.

**Participant 7.** P7 was a fourth-grade teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience with both general education and special education students. P7 held a master’s degree in reading. P7 did not stick to a set writing curriculum program but supplemented with resources found online, often from the NYS Modules for instruction. P7 found that the modules provide challenging work for the students, but with teacher support, these challenges can be met by students.

**Participant 8.** P8 was teaching for a total of 19 years and had spent that time in the same school. P8 had a master’s degree in education. P8 had taught math and science only for several years as a fifth-grade teacher, then moved to fourth grade as an all subject area teacher. P8 had seen many changes in writing curriculum and instruction, particularly with the use of technology to further learning. P8 used the Lucy Calkins Units of Study to teach writing.

**Participant 9.** P9 was a fourth-grade teacher in the public school system for over 20 years and holds a master’s degree in education and special education. In that time, there had been many changes in the writing curriculum and programs used. P9 described
current writing curriculum as encouraging students to take ownership of their writing in a way that has not been encouraged in previous programs. P9 worked in a school in which the Lucy Calkins Units of Study are used and follows the program very closely without supplementing.

**Participant 10.** P10 had been a teacher for over 20 years and had worked in a variety of public school districts, all north of New York City. P10 had a master’s degree and has an additional 60 credits above the master’s degree. P10 had seen changes in writing curriculum and materials, namely the replacement of textbooks with a variety of other resources including mentor texts and writing journals. P10 used Lucy Calkin’s Units of Study very closely, but supplemented daily to support the needs of students in this classroom.

Table 4.2 presents information on the writing programs used by the participants as well as writing instruction mandates by the schools and districts themselves. Three participants, from three different schools, are part of districts that mandate the use of a specific writing program, the Lucy Calkins Units of Study. The remaining seven participants have a preferred primary tool used for instruction; however, it is not mandated by the schools in which they work. Nine out of the 10 participants use supplemental materials in the form of online resources, mentor texts, excerpts from writing programs, the NYS ELA modules, and worksheets found through a variety of platforms. Seven out of the 10 participants expressed satisfaction with the tools they use for writing instruction, while three felt that they are still looking for other means to strengthen their instruction.
Table 4.2

*Writing Instruction Tools Used by Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Primary Tool Used for Instruction</th>
<th>Is the primary tool mandated by administration? (Yes/No)</th>
<th>Supplemental Materials Used for Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Excerpts from writing programs, online worksheets, mentor texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Worksheets, mentor texts, excerpts from published programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Writing Workshop Model</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mentor texts, exemplar pieces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Writing Workshop Model</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mentor texts, worksheets found online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Resources found online, mentor texts</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Resources found online, mentor texts</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>NYS modules, online worksheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Self-made lessons and worksheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Mentor texts, self-made lessons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After interviewing each of the participants, commonalities began to emerge in relation to the primary tools used for instruction as well as supplemental materials used. Table 4.3 refers to these commonalities among participants. The Lucy Calkins Units of Study emerged as a popular program used among participants. These units of study have evolved through the years to align with the changing state standards in writing.
Currently, the units of study for the fourth grade target opinion, information, and narrative writing (“Units of Study,” 2020). These lessons are scripted and are accompanied by resources such as mentor texts, anchor charts, checklists, and rubrics, for teacher and student use. In addition to the Lucy Calkins Units of Study, many teachers refer to supplemental materials which can be seen in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Commonalities Among Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods of Instruction</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucy Calkins Units of Study</td>
<td>2,5,6,8,9,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental Materials</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor Texts</td>
<td>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Resources</td>
<td>1,4,5,6,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-made Lessons</td>
<td>8,10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excerpts from Writing Programs</td>
<td>1,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis and Findings

Each participant took part in a virtual one-on-one semi-structured interview that lasted approximately 25-40 minutes. At the start of the interviews, participants were reminded that the sessions were being recorded for documentation purposes. Participants were eager to share their ideas on writing instruction and what it looks like in their classrooms and schools.

Data from each interview was transcribed using a transcription program and transcripts were read through for accuracy. Following this, open coding began. In vivo coding was used to pull out key words and ideas using the participant’s exact language.
Following this, descriptive coding was conducted. This allowed the researcher to create codes based on ideas put forth by the participant which was difficult to do with in vivo coding, because it forced the researcher to use specific vocabulary which did not show commonalities amongst other transcripts. Concept coding was also conducted to broaden the coding process. The researcher was able to then pull out ideas established by the participants in which different wording may have been used, but the ideas were similar or the same in nature. Finally, emotion and values coding were used to best represent teacher sentiments in a variety of areas.

As commonalities began to emerge, axial coding took place which led to the formation of categories. These categories reflected the ideas of most participants and were therefore compared and combined to create themes. This allowed the researcher to analyze findings in a way that provided concise answers and explanations to the given research questions. In order to strengthen findings, intra-coder reliability was used. The second coder has been in the field of education for close to 20 years and currently serves as a literacy specialist, professional development planner and creator, and literacy coach for all literacy teachers in the school in which the coder works. This coder looked at the existing codes, categories, and themes that were created by the researcher to ensure that it made sense, that themes were backed by relevant data, and that the codes, categories, and themes were all relevant to the field, which provided trustworthiness to the study. Based on suggestions from the second coder, language revisions were mutually agreed upon to strengthen the explanation of findings. Upon analyzing the data, it was evident that many teachers feel similarly on which strategies are best when it comes to delivering effective writing instruction.
Research Question 1. *What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?* Strategies are the tools used to assist students in mastering a given skill (Culatta, 2020). To gather data on this research question, two interview questions were asked, as seen in Table 4.1. After gathering data from the 10 participants, three themes emerged. According to the fourth-grade teachers interviewed, the strategies most effective in writing instruction can be grouped into following three themes: structure, gradual release, and scaffolding. Table 4.4 displays the codes, categories, and themes, based on the interviews conducted. Table 4.5 highlights the frequency of participant responses to certain categories within the themes.

**Structure.** Though teachers varied in years of experience, location and student demographic, and student learning levels, a majority of teachers agreed that having structured lessons is best. This strategy allows for students to master new skills by keeping work in accordance with the state writing standards, and by employing the practice with formal writing. This assists in providing students with a formula for writing and a framework that they can refer back to. These lessons provide tangible teaching where students are taught specific skills in a structured manner and can follow the formula in their writing pieces. As illustrated in Table 4.6, it is seen that two categories emerged within the theme of structure.
Table 4.4

*Codes/Categories/Themes- Effective Strategies for Writing Instruction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension, analyze/respond, formal writing in response to reading</td>
<td>Formal writing</td>
<td>Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of writing, language standards, grammar, organization</td>
<td>Writing Standards</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management, extremely guided, break it down, scaffolding, strengthen writing, modeling, teaching points, guide, graphic organizers, mini-lesson, write together, conference, build up writing, slow students down</td>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>Gradual Release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice, accountability, transfers to their work, track own work</td>
<td>Student responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal, checklists, anchor charts, writing notebook, student samples, graphic organizers, work together, peer conferencing, mentor text, proofread</td>
<td>Foster independence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jotting, key words, graphic organizers, outline, visual aid, practice, shared writing, steps, modify, slow students down, build up writing, foster independence, work together, ease student fears</td>
<td>Build up student writing</td>
<td>Scaffolding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallery walk, differentiation, work together (teacher and student), mentor text, rubric, checklist, student models, modify, writing tools</td>
<td>Tools for Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.5

*Effective Strategies for Writing Instruction and Frequency of Participant Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal Writing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Standards</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Responsibilities</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Independence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build Up Student Writing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools for Writing</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.6

*Categories and Identified Participants for Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal Writing (P5, P6, P8, P9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Standards (P6, P7, P9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Formal writing.** Four participants identified writing in response to reading as a strong way to strengthen student comprehension. These participants felt that by teaching writing through reading comprehension, student writing will be strengthened as it will provide students a focus to guide their writing and ensure that it is informed and has a purpose.
P6 feels strongly that writing should be done in conjunction with reading in order to best help students learn. When asked which strategy is found to be most effective when teaching writing, P6 responded, “I think it’s comprehension. You know, you have to intertwine writing and comprehension, because if they don’t understand the question, they can’t write…I don’t break my block,” block referring to the literacy block as a whole, whereas some teachers break it in half, the first half reading or writing and the opposite for the second half.

P5 agrees that comprehension is a key component to writing instruction and finds that it is beneficial to teach writing as a response to reading, rather than more of a narrative format. P5 stated a formula used in the classroom to help students remember how to respond to a question. “In fourth grade it goes restate, answer, detail, explain, detail, explain, conclusion” (P5). P8 also mentions the relationship between comprehension and writing and also has a formula that students can refer to when writing in response to literature and gathering key details from the text.

**Writing standards.** Participants in the study also addressed the importance of adhering to writing standards when teaching writing. This includes writing conventions such as proper grammar and spelling, as well as standards imposed by the state to address the expectations for student writing. Participants often refer to these standards to ensure that students are writing as expected by state standards and that students are able to communicate their ideas through writing. P6 finds that though it is important to teach to the topics within the writing standards which are narrative, informative, and opinion, it is important to “intermingle the grammar piece like transitions, indenting, and other grammar standards or language standards.” P6 goes on to explain that “we are trying to
become more vertical on the grammar piece of it at my school” and then describes a supplemental program that is used in P6’s classroom to support the teaching of grammar conventions. P7 had similar sentiments and found that it is important to teach “transition words and the structure of writing” which are often lost in today’s writing instruction.

**Gradual release.** The second theme to emerge from the data gathered for Research Question 1 is the strategy of gradual release. Many teachers are expected to use the gradual release approach in their classroom as a means to deliver instruction. Oftentimes, administrators look for evidence of gradual release during classroom observations. The gradual release model typically involves an “I do, We do, You do together, You do independently” approach to guide students through their learning. Many participants referred to this approach to teaching, however, one participant clearly described it in her instruction stating that “so I think the big transfer is in working together and modeling it and then having them practice it in their own writing and then going off and doing it themselves” (P3). Within this theme, the categories include guidance, student responsibilities, and fostering independence. Table 4.7 refers to the participants whose responses support the importance of using gradual release in the classroom.

Table 4.7

*Categories and Identified Participants for Gradual Release*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gradual Release</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guidance (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Responsibilities (P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Independence (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Guidance.** In alignment with Research Question 1, a majority of teachers felt that guiding students through their writing was extremely important. The strategies taught to guide students through their work allow students to break down their writing into more manageable tasks. This includes a great deal of scaffolding, modeling, use of graphic organizers, one-on-one conferences with students, and slowing students down in their work. Though not all lessons involve each of these aspects of learning, they are all embedded throughout a given writing unit. P1 feels that modeling and breaking down the information is extremely important for students. P2 agrees and finds that “I really need to slow them [the students] down and give them one little chunk,” and then went on to explain the importance of modeling before sending students off to work.

**Student responsibilities.** Also, in alignment with Research Question 1, teachers felt that students should also take control of their writing and be held accountable for their own learning. This involves a great deal of practice with writing and use of writing tools, transferring what is taught in lessons into their independent work, and tracking their own work. Many participants mention the use of strategies to encourage students to track their own work such as use of checklists, rubrics, and anchor charts. P4 stated that anchor charts are kept up around the classroom modeling strategies to achieve the skill taught and students “can look at the chart, be like, oh, first I’m supposed to. . .it just makes it more doable for them.” P2 has students track work by color coding their pieces. First, P2 models how to do this and then tells the students, “okay, so you need to go and dissect yours” and students are expected to use different colors to see their introduction sentences, details, explanations, and conclusion sentences and ensure that they are
“hitting every point.” P5 also uses a color-coding strategy to assist students in recognizing their areas in need of improvement.

**Foster independence.** The final category fitting into the theme of the gradual release strategy for writing instruction, is to ensure that teachers foster student independence when writing. This is closely linked to student responsibilities, in that students in this phase are offered tools to use to support their own learning, which in turn, will help them track their work and take accountability for it. Some tools provided to students to contribute to fostering independence are writing journals for ongoing practice, checklists, anchor charts to refer back to, exemplar student samples, peer conferencing, mentor texts, and instruction on how to proofread one’s work. One way to achieve this is by having students “work together and then practice it in their writing” (P1). P5 had a different approach to fostering independence and having students act as teachers for their peers and take part in peer editing sessions. According to P5, students read their partner’s work, suggest necessary changes or areas of improvement, and then go off and make corrections based on that feedback. In doing so, students are learning to proofread and edit and to develop critical writing skills. By working in pairs, P5 hopes that students will take pride in proofreading their own work in a similar way.

**Scaffolding.** Scaffolding is a very effective tool for instruction as it provides building blocks for learning and supports students in building off of their pre-existing knowledge. To effectively scaffold instruction for students, teachers feel it is important to build up student writing and provide tools for learning how to write effectively. In contrast to the tools discussed above, the tools provided in this section are generally provided during whole class instruction and cannot always be used at the independent
level to refer back to. In Table 4.8 it is evident that all participants find importance in building up student writing and a majority of participants also find the incorporation of tools for writing to be very effective.

Table 4.8

*Categories and Identified Participants for Scaffolding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scaffolding</th>
<th>Build Up Student Writing (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</th>
<th>Tools for Writing (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

*Build up student writing.* In order to build up student writing, practice is key. Students should not be entirely concerned with writing grammatically correct sentences at first, but rather including key words to convey their ideas. One way to encourage this is through the use of a writing journal (P8). This allows for free writing which is not graded and therefore gives the child more of a sense of freedom while writing. P8 starts off every writing unit with “a free writing journal” in which spelling, and grammar are not counted and there is no grade assigned. Also, teachers should be sure to ease student fears, provide visual aids, and employ a great deal of shared and interactive writing during lessons.

*Tools for writing.* As previously mentioned, teachers discussed the importance of providing tools to students that they can refer to and use to support their writing at the independent level. However, there are also tools that the teacher can employ at the class wide level. These include gallery walks, in which student work is displayed around the room and students are invited to visit each piece, read through it, and discuss its strength and areas for improvement, differentiated instruction, working one-on-one with the teacher, and use of modified work as needed, in relation to differentiated instruction. P10
also considers teaching points to be very effective in writing instruction by stating that teaching points should always be presented so that students can use them as a reference later on. Most participants used key words such as modeling, graphic organizers, use of exemplar writing samples and mentor texts. These strategies are viewed as highly effective in delivering writing instruction to fourth-grade students.

**Research Question 2.** *Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?* To gather data for Research Question 2, two questions were asked of participants. After analyzing the data from the information received, three themes emerged: emotional empathy, motivation, and expectations. Table 4.9 describes the codes, categories, and themes that emerged after interviewing 10 participants. Table 4.10 shows the frequency at which participants referenced the categories found within each theme.

**Emotional empathy.** As a teacher, it is important to keep in mind that students, especially those at the elementary level, are still developing emotionally and learning how to manage those emotions. As the participants of this study would agree, without addressing student emotions in teaching, effective learning cannot take place. One participant stated that at the start of each school year, and before each lesson, “we talked about the fears of writing because if those aren’t addressed, they’re not going to give you anything” (P8).
Table 4.9

Codes/Categories/Themes - Effective Characteristics of Writing Instructional Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jotting, I don’t need complete sentences, couple of words, graphic organizers, outline, visual aid, practice, steps, modify, work together</td>
<td>Slowing students down</td>
<td>Emotional Empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplify, fears, build trust, ease student fears, motivation, writing can be overwhelming</td>
<td>Easing student fears</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting student needs, relate to students, attainable, inclusivity, positivity</td>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership, self-advocating, thoughtful, independence</td>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect, redirect, pride, choice, enjoy writing</td>
<td>Writing engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gallery walk, work together, mentor texts, rubric, checklist, student models, writing tools, modify</td>
<td>Writing supports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted instruction, rigid mandates, level of challenge</td>
<td>Mandates</td>
<td>Expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation, expectations, teacher tracks student work, learning abilities</td>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building is aligned, teacher model, expectations, teaching points, monitor and follow-up, motivation, writing can be overwhelming, practice, teacher tracks work, collaboration</td>
<td>Teacher responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.10

*Effective Characteristics for Writing Instructional Strategies and Frequency of Participant Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slowing Students Down</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easing Student Fears</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Engagement</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Supports</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandates</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Responsibilities</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, another participant described that when she is sending students off to work independently, it is very important to allow students who do not feel ready to work independently, to stay with the teacher in a smaller group setting to continue strengthening their understanding of the skill being taught. This was a recurring theme in participant responses with P5 stating that most of the students in that classroom are ELLs (English language learners) and they especially struggle with writing and feel poorly about their inability to write like their peers. Therefore, P5 says that it’s important to
praise students when they accomplish a task in order to motivate them to continue writing. Seven participants spoke to the importance of understanding that writing can be overwhelming and of easing student fears, while nine participants spoke to the need to differentiate instruction so that all learners feel supported and accomplished. Table 4.11 provides a breakdown of participant responses in relation to given categories.

Table 4.11

*Categories and Identified Participants for Emotional Empathy*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotional Empathy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slowing Students Down (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easing Student Fears (P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusivity (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Slowing students down.** To best mitigate feelings of anxiety during writing, many participants spoke to slowing students down in their writing. Codes emerged such as graphic organizers, short piece, modify, visual aid, and outline. These are all ways that participants provide aid to students to break down the task so that it does not appear to be overwhelming. One participant felt strongly that it is not necessary for students to be able to write in complete sentences, but rather that they are simply able to communicate their ideas through key words. This participant, P6, states, “I don’t care about them forming a complete sentence, I care about the keywords, I don’t need the complete sentences,” comparing this to the importance of students being able to pick out key words in their reading. By lightening the burden of forming grammatically correct complete sentences, students do not feel as overwhelmed (P6). Participants also spoke to the reality that when giving a writing prompt, students often stress over how to get to a final product from having nothing on the page. Many slow students down by using graphic
organizers. P4 explains that “graphic organizers are mostly for gathering ideas, so when kids don’t know how to get started, that can help to just give them a visual.”

When assigning work to students, P5 tells the class, “I will let you choose from three options and you tell me what you want to write about.” P8 also finds the importance in slowing students down by breaking down the task “because it can be very overwhelming.” Participants unanimously agreed that slowing students down contributes to a less anxious writer.

**Easing student fears.** Within the category of easing student fears, key words emerged such as simplify, build trust, motivating, and the notion that writing can be overwhelming for students. P4 stated that “for kids writing can feel so overwhelming because there are so many parts and so many things to process” referring to the many writing conventions and skills that must be incorporated into all writing pieces. For teachers to recognize this, it demonstrates their emotional empathy and their capacity to deliver instruction with the realization that writing can be overwhelming for students. P4 goes on to state that when students are stuck, it is important to troubleshoot where possible. P5 furthered this idea by explaining that during the transition to online learning in the time of the coronavirus, “we weren’t able to transition in school, so it’s very difficult for them to be doing that right now” when talking about transitioning from formal writing in response to literature to a narrative format. In addition, P7 noted that when students feel overloaded, they will not produce. For this participant, it is important to remind students who are feeling overwhelmed to “take it day by day” so that “they don’t feel anxiety” (P7).
**Inclusivity.** With use of values coding, it became evident that participants find extreme importance in creating an environment of inclusivity for students. This includes meeting student needs, relating to students, setting attainable goals, and remaining positive. This also assists in building trust and comfort between teacher and student which creates a better environment for learning. When conferring with students, “I always give a positive comment, and then if I see that there’s something they can work on I use prompts such as ‘would you consider using this…” (P9). Similarly, P3 always likes to “start off with a compliment and show them something that they did really well and then I’ll try to add in a teaching point to focus on.” These participants find the importance in having a relaxed and positive learner.

In addition to keeping a positive environment, participants create atmospheres of inclusivity by making learning attainable and by relating to their students. P8 spoke often throughout the interview on the importance of relating to students. When explaining how to teach students to ensure that they answer the entire writing prompt in their work, P8 models “how do we answer it, because I’ve written things and it never even answered the question,” acknowledging that it is okay to make mistakes, because even as adults, teachers can do it too. P10 spoke about once noticing a student doing something wrong in their writing, and not only highlighted this wrongdoing to the class, but celebrated the “failure” of the student to show that failure is inevitable. Failure provides the chance to start anew and have a better understanding of what is being worked towards (P10). Having an environment of inclusivity is of extreme importance, as shown through the selected participant responses.
Motivation. According to participants of this study, motivation is a key characteristic of effective writing instructional strategies. Without motivation, students do not have the drive to engage in the lessons, or to produce their best work during independent practice. To achieve student motivation at the intrinsic level, it is important for students to connect with their learning and in this case writing. Teachers should also offer redirection strategies during lessons that students can use independently as needed. Several participants have demonstrated that motivation to do well is a crucial characteristic for effective writing strategies. One participant notes that by motivating students by adding fun and enjoyment to writing, it gets children into the mindset of “this is not just the teacher’s choice, this is something that I want to do as well” (P5). P10 agrees and states that by simplifying the checklists given to students, they are better able to understand the expectations which motivates them to continue working and to perform as best as they are able. Table 4.12 breaks down the frequency of participant responses in relation to the categories within motivation.

Table 4.12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and Identified Participants for Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ownership (P3, P4, P5, P9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Engagement (P3, P5, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Supports (P2, P3, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ownership. To encourage motivation, it is important that students take ownership of their work. This includes being thoughtful, advocating for oneself, and showing independence. To achieve these traits, teachers must educate students on how to
do so. When asked why a checklist was so effective according to P9, the response received was, “…the checklist is really super important, just having them [students] take ownership and independence of their own writing. . . .” By providing students with a checklist, they can refer to it often throughout their writing process and especially once they feel their work is completed, and assess their own work, which will give them ownership of it and a greater sense of pride, thus contributing to a more motivated student. P3 teaches students to take ownership of their learning by teaching them to track their work through modeling. P3 tells the students “your first lens is your introduction, do you have all of these things, do you have dialogue? Did you check for capitalization?” Using different lenses allows for students to break down editing and revising one step at a time. Similar to the checklist, this provides students a tool to refer back to in order to check their own work and take ownership of it.

**Writing engagement.** Having students engage in writing lessons is a critical component in ensuring student understanding. Encouraging students to participate requires effort on the part of the teacher. It is imperative that students find ways to connect with their learning, feel that they have choice in their work, take pride in their work, and most importantly, to enjoy writing. P5 often teaches her students the importance of advocating for themselves and taking charge of the learning. Additionally, to instill pride in the students over their own work, P5 chooses a student’s work without their knowledge, displays it for the class to see, and uses it as an exemplar piece. This motivates students to continue to do their best work, in hopes that their work will be selected as the exemplar model.
P5 states, “they are proud of having their work up there and of it being right.” Instilling pride in the students is a driving force for motivation, which is key to inviting a student to engage in writing instruction. P2 spoke to the way she differentiates instruction for her students in an effort to best reach their learning needs, but also because it gives students a sense of pride when they are able to complete, which in turn, increases student motivation. P3 also finds a great deal of importance in instilling pride in students as a driving force to motivate them to stay focused and engaged. When discussing why shared writing is effective for writing instruction, “I think it keeps them really engaged. . .you’ll see a crazy amount of engagement when they can actually write on the chart paper” (P3). Without motivation in writing instruction, students are less likely to achieve success in their independent writing.

*Writing supports.* Writing supports come in many forms such as those mentioned above. There can be supports done as a whole class, such as gallery walks, peer conferencing, use of mentor texts, as well as those done on a more individual level including rubrics and checklists. P9 uses gallery walks to highlight something that is being done right in writing by stating that, “if we’re working on a piece, and a student is writing something and it’s above grade level, or something that I want to show off, I’ll copy it, then I’ll post it without a name, so I’ll show off their work.” By doing this, as students walk around the room seeing exemplar pieces displayed, they have a better idea of what their writing should look like. P2 also displays exemplar pieces from within her classroom and provides copies of exemplar excerpts to students because, “it just guides them” (P2).
**Expectations.** Another factor that teachers must be clear on, according to the participants in this study, is the expectations for student writing. This includes what the writing should look and sound like, what should be included in the writing, and what demonstrates an exemplar piece. Without setting clear expectations, students are being set up to fail, whether it be because it is their first experience with this type of writing, or because they experience difficulty when writing. When asked why modeling is so effective, P3 responded,

I think so they [students] can see what is expected of them and understand visually what it should look like and what the ingredients are in what they are going to be writing. . .so that when they go off, they know what to expect.

P1 is clear on this through modeling, “I do a lot of guided work but also model how to write an exemplar piece. . .so they can see that this is an exemplar piece. . .and then hopefully it moves into their own writing.” Table 4.13 shows the frequency at which participants referenced the categories within expectations.

Table 4.13

*Categories and Identified Participants for Expectation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th>Mandates (P2, P3, P6, P9, P10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher Responsibilities (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Differentiation (P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mandates.** Within the field of education, there are several mandates that educators must follow, such as learning standards set forth by the state. Though we are currently in the transition phase from the Common Core State Standards, (CCSS), to the
Next Generation Learning Standards, (NGLS), all participants spent the last several years teaching the CCSS, finding that these were not always realistic goals for their student populations. Additionally, teachers at times felt that the programs being used set too high of expectations that students could not follow. P10 recalls, “there wasn’t a lot of flexibility to do any other things in between, we really stuck to the progressions.” The rigid mandates to follow the learning progressions from the Lucy Calkins Units of Study did not provide teachers the opportunity to reach their students on more individualized levels.

**Teacher responsibilities.** Most participants agree with the importance of being transparent with students in terms of their expectations for student writing, which is why many feel that it is important to use mentor texts and exemplar pieces while teaching. P1 states that “we’ll also give the rubric beforehand, so they know what’s expected of them, so they know what needs to be included, so that they are aware of what’s necessary to put in their writing.” It was also noted that modeling is of utmost importance “so they have an idea of what the expectation is” (P9). P4, P10, P7, and P3 also reference how crucial it is to use tools to demonstrate the expectations for student writing, all mentioning that it gives students an idea of what to write. P3, P4, and P10 find that modeling writing best supports instruction on clarifying writing expectations, while P7 finds that using a checklist best supports instruction on student writing expectations.

**Differentiation.** The ability to differentiate instruction for students with a variety of needs is of utmost importance in schools today. Each day teachers are faced with a classroom of students with a variety of learning levels. To best reach the needs of each child and effectively teach each student, teachers are encouraged to teach grade level
materials. However, this material should be modified for students below grade level to raise their understanding, and modified for students above grade level, to challenge them intellectually. Each of the 10 participants agreed that differentiation is an important strategy for instruction.

P2 recognized that differentiation is important to help elevate struggling students, particularly when it comes to narrative writing,

So before I even expect them ever to write, I actually model writing, and sometimes there are those that are ready to write on their own, and some use my ideas and kind of change them a little bit, but it’s okay because it’s a good start for those that are having a struggling time.

This participant realizes that some students may need to use teacher work as a starting point, while others are able to start from a brand-new starting point. P4 and P5 agreed with this notion and discussed frequently offering visuals to support students in their writing. In addition, P4 mentioned the use of small group instruction to meet the needs of the different learning levels.

**Research Question 3.** *What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?* After the data was collected and analyzed for this research question, two themes emerged from the data: formal assessments and informal assessments, which can be seen in Table 4.14 and broken down further by frequency of participant responses in Table 4.15. Often, these two types of assessments are found in a variety of formats but are used across all grades and content areas.
When it comes to assessments, there are the types that are found at the classroom level, schoolwide level, district level, state level, and in some cases, national level. Some are specific to a program being used by a school while others are teacher made and vary from classroom to classroom. Though assessments can vary, all 10 participants agree that they are used to develop their own perceptions of their instruction as effective or ineffective. Participants agreed that to assess the effectiveness of the strategies that they are using for writing instruction, they refer to the formal and informal assessments that are given. If they see progress in these assessments, it is evident that the strategies are effective, and students are learning. If they do not see progress, participants use it as data to see which students require additional support.

Table 4.14

*Codes/Category/Themes- Evidence to Support Teacher Perceptions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rubric, benchmark assessments, progressions, grade level expectations, checklist</td>
<td>Tangible scoring</td>
<td>Formal Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myself, nothing formal, progress, goals, collect, build on, see strategies in the text, transfer knowledge to writing</td>
<td>Informal gathering of data</td>
<td>Informal Assessments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.15

*Evidence to Support Teacher Perceptions and Frequency of Participant Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tangible Scoring</td>
<td>X X X X X X X X X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Gathering of Data</td>
<td>X X X X X X X X X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Formal assessments.** Formal assessments are those such as rubrics, benchmarks, progressions, and grade level expectations. These make up tangible scoring instruments that are objective in nature and can be used in a variety of classrooms. All ten participants agree that use of a rubric is a very effective way to grade student work. When asked which evidence is referred to when developing perceptions of effective writing instruction, “I would say using the rubric that we give them, if they accomplish the task correctly and they have everything included that was supposed to be in the rubric, that’s how we know that they mastered it” (P7). P1 and P7 stated that in the school in which they work, not only do they use the rubric provided by the writing program, but they also insert a section onto the rubric assessing the given strategy or skill that was taught in that specific unit. These modified rubrics allow participants to assess their own instruction specific to the strategies being used. Table 4.16 highlights the importance of formal assessments as all participants referenced this tangible scoring.

Table 4.16

*Category and Identified Participants for Formal Assessments*

Formal Assessments
Tangible Scoring (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)
**Tangible scoring.** P4 discussed formal assessments in relation to benchmark assessments specific to the writing program used in her building, using both a pre- and post-assessment. P6 also uses three benchmark assessment throughout the school year to see how students are progressing overall, not specific to a unit or skill. These assessments are offered at the schoolwide level across all fourth-grade classrooms. P3 also discussed the use of benchmark assessments, however, noted that these are used to track student progress and are often referred to when designing upcoming lessons. In addition to benchmark assessments, rubrics are used most often. P8 said, “We do use rubrics,” as did P2, who explained that the rubric is used during modeling and is displayed alongside an exemplary piece and then the class will work together to find evidence in the exemplary piece that fits into the rubric. P7 and P9 agreed stating that they mainly use rubrics to assess student work, while P5 noted, “I have checklists or the rubric, I like the rubric, because if you give kids the rubric, they can check it off as well.” Ten out of 10 participants use the rubric, making it a perceived effective means to assess student work.

**Informal assessments.** In addition to formal assessments, teachers, especially those with years of experience, have ways of informally assessing their students, as seen from Table 4.17. These include assessments that are done daily and provide teachers with in-depth understanding of how a student is progressing. These include, but are not limited to, teacher observations, goals set by the teacher for individual students, collect work daily to find evidence of use of strategy and progress, building on student writing, one-on-one conference, and evidence of a transfer of knowledge to writing.
Table 4.17

*Category and Identified Participants for Informal Assessments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal Assessments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Informal Gathering of Data (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Informal gathering of data.* Though all 10 participants spoke to the use and importance of formal assessments, many felt that informal assessments were an even stronger way of assessing student growth and potential mastery of a given skill by use of the strategies taught in class. P6 stated that the best assessment tool is “myself” as formal assessments do not always leave room to show student progress or areas of difficulty. P9 prefers informal assessments such as teacher observations as well, because formal assessments such as rubrics, are not specific to the individual child and therefore does not tackle individual needs or provide the teacher a true picture of student growth, simply because the area of intended growth may not be demonstrated on that particular rubric. P8 goes on to say, “I collect it [student work] and the evidence that I see from September to I would say like December, the amount of growth is tremendous.” When asked to explain how that growth is measured, P8 noted that it is measured through teacher observation and paying attention to whether or not the student grew in the intended areas set during one-on-one conferences throughout the given writing unit. Another way to use informal assessments, as noted by P5, is to collect student work and assess areas of improvement and continued areas of need. If these areas are not evidence enough, P5 will call a student over, and have them build on their writing “on the spot” and will note evidence of growth based on that newly revised piece. Similar to the sentiments of P6, P10 notes that the curriculum rubrics are not specific to the child and therefore, “I look at
it from the point of where the child is with their goals and things like that, or my goal is to try to push them to grade level.” In doing this, instruction is being differentiated and a truer snapshot of student achievement can be seen.

**Research Question 4.** What obstacles, challenges, and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area? For this research question, data was broken down into two areas; one being obstacles and challenges faced by teachers when teaching writing, and one being supports that teachers identify when teaching writing. The data from obstacles and challenges faced by teachers led to two themes: range of learner ability and external aggressors as seen in Table 4.18. Table 4.19 breaks down the information further by frequency of participant responses.

Table 4.18

*Codes/Categories/Themes - Obstacles and Challenges to Writing Instruction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistencies, differentiation, spelling and editing, ability to discuss, elaborate, difficulty generating ideas, stamina, disorganization, motivation, lack of grammar instruction</td>
<td>Student vulnerabilities</td>
<td>Range of abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated, struggle, tricky, intense, difficult, concern</td>
<td>Negativity</td>
<td>External Aggressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations from standards, no schoolwide vertical alignment, tools, more time for writing, teacher expectations</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Represents data for part 1 of Research Question 4, addressing the obstacles and challenges faced by teachers.
Table 4.19

Obstacles and Challenges to Writing Instruction and Frequency of Participant Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Vulnerabilities</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negativity</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X  X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Range of learning ability.** Overwhelmingly, participants felt that individual student factors which led to a range of learning abilities was the largest challenge faced when teaching writing. All participants agreed that having a classroom of students with vastly different learning abilities is a challenge and find it difficult to design instruction to meet the needs of all students using a whole class approach. Table 4.20 shows that all participants agree with this idea.

Table 4.20

Category and Identified Participants for Range of Learner Ability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of Learner Ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Vulnerabilities (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student vulnerabilities.** When asked to identify obstacles and challenges of teacher writing, teachers stated “I think it’s the different levels in my class,” (P5), “it’s the different abilities” (P8), “it’s the inconsistencies” (P6). At the heart of this study, a major problem faced in today’s educational world, is the lack of student achievement in writing. These quotations, along with the sentiments of the remaining 7 participants,
support that problem. Participants explain that some students are entering their classroom writing severely below grade levels, some students are very much above grade level, and others struggle in certain areas while show strength in others. Because of the many components contributing to strong writing, teachers are expected to cover a great deal during instructional time, while still meeting the vastly diverse needs of students.

**External aggressors.** Often times, teachers find obstacles from external factors, those found outside of the classroom. These can be statewide district wide, and even schoolwide policies and issues. A common problem is the lack of vertical alignment in schools. Often, the curriculum program being used is different across grade levels, making it more challenging for students to see a connection in writing lessons and the formats of the writing block, such as the writing workshop model. P6 states, “I think it’s the inconsistency of grade levels and just everyone is so horizontal like what are we all doing, it needs to be more vertical.” The lack of consistency causes learning gaps for students as they reach new grade levels, causing them to fall behind, at no fault of their own.

Four participants found that another major challenge is that schools and writing programs are not fully supporting writing standards in terms of editing and spelling. Because these areas are not always being taught in the classroom, students are entering the fourth grade unable to edit their work, insert punctuation, or use effective strategies for spelling words, with P5 stating that “editing can be very difficult.” P6 voiced frustration that her school does not mandate programs enforcing the teaching of editing and spelling skills and therefore looked into additional programs to supplement her teaching, stating that “if you look at it over the course of 20 years there’s never been a
place where we infused grammar.” Two categories were found to lead to the theme of external aggressors, negativity, and policy, as seen in Table 4.21.

Table 4.21

*Categories and Identified Participants for External Aggressors*

| External Aggressors | Negativity (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10) | Policy (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10) |

**Negativity.** Throughout the interview, many participants expressed personal feelings of frustration, struggle, difficulties, and concerns. Emotion coding was used in these areas to highlight participant feelings. When asked about the challenges and obstacles faced when teaching writing, body language and facial expressions changed among participants as they began to express themselves. Many participants found it tricky to change the mindset of their students, “encourage them, be creative, help them the best you can” so that they are willing to move from “I can’t come up with ideas” to “I can do this” (P9). One participant also found this a tricky task because “they’re [students] so stuck and they don’t want to change or let go of their ideas” (P2). The sentiment is also shared when trying to encourage kids to move along, “there are kids who are really hesitant to write,. . .it can be really tricky to just get them into the idea of just drafting, just writing long and strong and keep going” (P4).

In addition to finding it tricky to change student mindset, teachers also felt both frustration and concern when teaching writing. When discussing how instruction is differentiated, P8 feels that “keeping track of all that and making sure that all of my kids get what they need is difficult. . .” (P8). Another frustration is the lack of building
support in some schools. As P10 says, “we have AIS for math and reading, but not for writing, and that’s the biggest downfall in our district, the kids can’t write.”

**Policy.** In addition to the range of learner abilities, policy at the school, district, and state level, also poses a challenge to teachers when teaching writing. Policies are often made by administrators or government officials and teachers are rarely asked for input. Often times, the policies do not reflect an authentic understanding of student learning but are put in place as formalities that teachers are mandated to follow.

The data for this research question also provided insights as to what supports teachers identify in their teaching of writing. The two themes which emerged from this data are facilitating the writing process and collective teacher efficacy, as seen in Table 4.22, and is further broken down by frequency of participant responses in Table 4.23.

Table 4.22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes/Categories/Themes- Supports to Writing Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exemplar pieces, checklists and charts, collaboration with other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization, manageability, engaged, accountability, practice, build up writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other teachers, online resources, collaboration, support staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing your kids, love the workshop model, relief, excitement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Represents data from part 2 of Research Question 4, the supports that teachers find when teaching writing.
Table 4.23

*Supports to Writing Instruction and Frequency of Participant Responses*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Student Supports</td>
<td>X X X X X</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Responsibilities</td>
<td>X X X X X</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>X X X X X X X</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>X X X X X X X X X</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Facilitating the writing process.** Facilitating the writing process is the position of the teacher, to act as a facilitator of knowledge by delivering effective instruction to meet the learning needs of all students. To assist in this facilitation of knowledge, teachers identified supports in the classroom that are of assistance, as seen in Table 4.24.

Table 4.24

*Categories and Identified Participants for Facilitating the Writing Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitating the Writing Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Student Supports (P3, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Responsibilities (P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Classroom student supports.** According to the 10 participants in this study, these supports include exemplar pieces, checklists and charts, and collaboration with other students; supports which have also been discussed earlier as effective strategies for writing instruction. P6 states that “good literature” best supports writing instruction in that classroom as it provides students with real experiences reading strong writing pieces.
P4 models how to write exemplar pieces and finds that this supports instruction because the personal teacher experiences being shared through the modeling is something “they’re [the students] really excited about” which helps students maintain focus and engagement during lessons.

**Teacher responsibilities.** In addition to the supports provided for instruction, when facilitating the writing process, teachers themselves have responsibilities to remain organized, to manage instruction and student learning, to build up student writing while keeping them engaged, and to strengthen writing overall. P5 summed up the importance of teachers remaining organized in their instruction, “it’s a lot of organization when it comes to writing, from the teachers part, just making sure that we’re organized enough to know the steps to teach. . .if we lose our organization then the kids do too.” P3 also recognized the teacher’s responsibility to provide students with variety of strategies to support learning of a given skill and assesses her own teaching by having the students write down “three of the five strategies that you learned in this unit and show how you used those strategies to write your post-assessment.” Though not all strategies can be represented through a final piece of writing, such as checklists and anchor charts, to name a few, the growth shown from the pre- to the post-assessment proves that students have acquired the skills taught.

**Collective teacher efficacy.** “Collective Teacher Efficacy is the collective belief of teachers in their ability to positively affect students” (Waack, 2020, para.1). In addition, collective teacher efficacy is strongly correlated with student achievement (Waack, 2020). The theme of collective teacher efficacy has been thoroughly explored and supports the notion that when teachers work together and have a true belief that they
can cause change in their students, they can become stronger teachers, which in turn leads to stronger students (Waack, 2020). Therefore, it is very fitting that many teachers identified collaboration with their colleagues as a major support when teaching writing. Table 4.25 highlights the participants who related to the categories that emerged from the data.

Table 4.25

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories and Identified Participants for Collective Teacher Efficacy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collective Teacher Efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Resources.** P2 strongly agrees with this notion and stated, “I have to be honest, so many teachers have such amazing ideas and I really think that teachers we’re allowed to steal from each other and get great ideas.” When asked what best supports this participant’s ability to teach writing, P8 said, “conversations with my colleagues.” P5 also mentioned other teachers outside of the traditional classroom such as the librarian or technology support staff as being great supports because they can strengthen student learning by teaching students to research given topics and support the teacher’s instruction outside of the classroom. P3 also highlighted the work of the literacy coaches in the school who come in to support teachers in their instruction as they request. Many participants find a real sense of support from their colleagues, contributing to this notion of collective teacher efficacy.

**Connections.** Emotion coding was also used to code the data collected as teachers spoke to the supports they have when teaching writing. In order to have teacher
self-efficacy, participants showed that by making connections to their teaching, they find themselves supported. Relief and excitement were common sentiments displayed by participants. P4 enjoys small group instruction because “you can have one group of kids working on writing in complete sentences and another group of kids working on figurative language so you can reach all of their needs which is really cool.” P10 finds excitement in being able to pull from a variety of instructional strategies that were learned through years of teaching because “it’s the best thing for them [students] because there’s some kids that one thing may work and it may not work for others and it helps a lot.”

Summary of Results

This study took on a qualitative approach to gather fourth grade teacher perceptions on effective writing instructional strategies. Participants were selected based on their level of education, their level of experience, and their geographic location. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer four overarching research questions. Following data collection, interviews were coding using a variety of coding strategies including first round in vivo coding, concept coding, and descriptive coding. Once codes were matched by commonality and categories emerged, the researcher was able to develop key themes to answer the research questions.

In terms of effective strategies for writing instruction, participants felt that structure, gradual release, and scaffolding were all effective strategies. This revealed that according to the participants of this study, students learn best when their lessons and independent work follow a structured format which includes writing standards set forth by schools and state learning standards, when lessons and independent practice are
guided and broken down, in an attempt to increase student accountability and foster independence, and when lessons are scaffolded to build on students’ prior knowledge in order to strengthen their writing skills.

In terms of effective characteristics of writing instructional strategies, responses were quite similar to those used in the first research questions. The themes which emerged in this section, emotional empathy, motivation, and expectations, seemed to be characteristic of the effective strategies themselves. Participants revealed that by understanding and targeting student fears and emotions, allowing students to connect to writing, and have transparent expectations for writing among different classrooms and grade levels, students have a higher chance of success in their writing.

To ground their perceptions in tangible data, teacher participants unanimously agreed that both formal and informal assessments should be taking place within the classroom. Formal assessments were found to be useful in targeting areas of need, mainly by use of a rubric or benchmark assessment. However, participants all agreed that informal assessments are also necessary, mainly because formal assessments take on a one size fits all approach, which is not often feasible in a classroom with students of diverse learning levels and diverse learning needs. Informal assessments such as teacher observations and individualized goal setting can be modified to fit the specific needs of a specific child, the better help them to achieve success in the classroom.

Teacher participants were also asked about obstacles and challenges faced in the classroom in addition to supports when teaching writing. Participants unanimously agreed that the large range of learning abilities posed as a challenge for instruction as well as the lack of transparency within policies at the school, district, and state level.
However, teacher participants find support in tools used to facilitate learning for students such as charts and collaboration, as well as a collective teacher efficacy approach, in which teachers refer to one another to support their work in the classroom.

Chapter 5 will discuss how these findings relate to related studies that have been conducted and literature that has been published surrounding the topic of writing instruction at the elementary level. In addition, the chapter will discuss limitations of this study and recommendations for future studies.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

“In today’s world, writing is essential to success” (Graham & Fulton, 2015, p. 767). With the development of the Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS) students are expected to achieve more now than in recent years (“Next Generation Learning Standards,” 2019). The curve in learning standards which began with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) which are now being phased out, has the goal of achieving college readiness in today’s students as early as elementary school. However, with this shift in learning standards, schools across the nation are not seeing success in student writing achievement. In a nationwide writing assessment conducted in 2012, it was found that approximately four-fifths of students were unable to write at or above proficiency level in a variety of areas including language facility, idea development, and organization (NAEP, 2012). This lack of success continues to leave students struggling to keep up with grade level standards as they progress through the school system and into the workforce.

This study sought to gather the perceptions of qualified fourth-grade teachers on effective strategies for writing instruction. In doing so, teacher perceptions were gathered on what strategies they have found to be successful for students in their classrooms over the course of their careers. These results can be disseminated across schools and districts in hopes that more teachers will be able to use these successful strategies for teaching writing skills so that significant student growth in writing can be seen. Findings of this
study highlighted the importance of a variety of strategies when teaching writing such as
teacher modeling of skills, the use of mentor texts to provide concrete examples for
students, and guiding students through the writing process. Many themes emerged
through the data which will be discussed in detail below.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it seeks to gather teachers’
perspectives on writing instruction in order to develop a compendium of effective
strategies for writing instruction and suggest professional development to improve
writing instruction. In a recent study on supporting elementary school teachers, 50% of
participants admitted that they did not feel prepared to teach the new writing standards
(Young, 2015). By conducting this study, effective strategies can be introduced to
teachers, allowing them to feel more prepared in the field.

Second, this study can drive professional development at the district level by
providing administrators with effective strategies for writing instruction as perceived by
qualified teachers. The strategies given during the professional development can be
rolled out across schools and districts. In addition, administrators can use these strategies
and compare them to the strategies being used in the classrooms to focus on what works
and what areas can be strengthened.

Finally, this study can be used at higher level institutions and training programs
when putting together preservice classes for teachers. First, it can be highlighted to the
institutions that there is a great need for preservice writing instruction classes. Secondly,
the results of the study can show which strategies have been perceived to be most
effective and can therefore be incorporated into the designing of the preservice classes.

The study answered the following research questions:
1. What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?

2. Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?

3. What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?

4. What obstacles, challenges, and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area?

The participants in this study were all fourth-grade teachers of writing with a minimum of 8 years teaching experience, a master’s degree in education, literacy, English language arts, or a related field, and all work in suburban districts north of New York City. The participants took part in virtual one-on-one semi-structured interviews, consisting of 11 interview questions. The first two questions were used to gather background information about the participant. The remaining nine questions were directly related to one of the four research questions. Additional questions were asked of some participants to gain clarity or to further develop an idea being discussed.

After the interviews were conducted, an electronic program was used to transcribe each interview. Once the interviews were transcribed, they were read over for accuracy before being analyzed. To analyze the data, three rounds of manual line-by-line coding took place. First open coding was conducted using in vivo codes to pull out keywords directly used by participants. Following this, axial coding was done using descriptive and concept coding. In doing this, it became apparent that though participants may have used different wording, many alluded to the same ideas. The final round of coding used
selective coding to pull out categories which were then compiled into themes, based on the coding that was conducted. Out of this analysis, 12 themes emerged in order to answer the four research questions.

**Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study represent perceptions of fourth-grade teachers on which instructional strategies for writing are found to be most effective, which characteristics of those strategies makes them so effective, how strategies are assessed using evidence, and obstacles and supports faced by teachers as they teach writing. The implications of this study can potentially be generalized to better support all teachers of writing.

**Research Question 1.** Research Question 1 focused on which instructional strategies teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing. Three themes emerged from this research question: structure, gradual release, and scaffolding. Ten out of 10 participants agreed that strategies such as modeling, use of aids such as graphic organizers, mentor texts, and anchor charts, and breaking down the writing process are all effective strategies for writing instruction. Participants feel this way because it allows for writing to be a more attainable skill for students, and by mastering the writing process, students will be better prepared for college and the workplace.

Though it is the job of the educator to teach students how to write, it is imperative that students are also held accountable for their learning. Through the interviews conducted, participants viewed themselves as facilitators of knowledge, rather than the expert. In facilitating the writing process, teachers do not see their role solely as delivering whole class instruction, but rather as engaging students in discussions, conducting small group meetings, and having one-on-one conferences. These are all
strategies that provide opportunities for individualized instruction which is important in the learning process. This finding suggests that teachers prefer a more personalized approach to writing instruction.

**Research Question 2.** Research Question 2 focused on the characteristics that make a given writing strategy so effective. This question sought to understand that though the strategies themselves so important, and what it is about these strategies that makes them so effective. In understanding this, teachers and even curriculum writers can better tailor instruction to make it effective for students. Three themes emerged from the data provided from this portion of the interviews: emotional empathy, motivation, and expectations.

Participants agreed that effective strategies are those that allow the student to feel that they are in a safe learning environment. This shows the student that mistakes are acceptable and even encouraged, because that is where real learning takes place. This contributes to boosting student self-esteem, turning them into more confident and motivated writers. Participants all agree that this characteristic is crucial to the learning process.

The study, along with many others, also finds that many teachers do not feel fully equipped to teach writing at the elementary level. By providing those educators with this compendium of effective strategies for writing instruction, teachers are provided the opportunity to strengthen their own instruction which will in turn strengthen student learning. The findings of this study can also support the concerns that preservice programs are not preparing teachers for the workplace.
Research Question 3. The third research question sought to ground the data in evidence that refer to when developing their perceptions of which strategies are more effective than others in their writing instruction. It was found that participants utilize both formal and informal assessments. This research question withdrew a variety of ideas on types of assessments and how they are used in the classroom. Overall, participants preferred informal assessments because they were able to tailor the assessment to meet individual student needs.

As previously mentioned, formal assessments that have been conducted through the years have shown low achievement rates among fourth-grade students in writing. Participant responses in this study indicate that not all formal assessments are fair, nor do they show a true picture of student progress. Formal assessments look at how a student is performing, in relation to their peers, at their grade level. Formal assessments do not take individual factors, such as special needs, language impairments, and other areas of vulnerability into consideration. Therefore, nine of the 10 participants in the study prefer informal assessments, as it provides a better snapshot of student growth. The findings suggest that teachers should refer to both formal and informal assessments when grasping how a student is doing.

Research Question 4. The final research question in this study sought to understand the obstacles, challenges, and supports teachers face in their efforts to teach writing. This research question was broken down into two parts: obstacles and challenges identified by teachers and supports identified by teachers. The themes that emerged from obstacles and supports identified by teachers are the range of learner abilities and policy. The themes that emerged from the supports identified by teachers
are facilitating the writing process and collective teacher efficacy. This research question also looked closely at teacher feelings towards instruction and found that there is a great mix of frustration, difficulty, and even relief, throughout the teaching process, specifically the teaching of writing.

A finding of this study, which was supported by all participants, showed that the range of learner abilities is the largest obstacle to teaching writing. Each year, teachers are presented with a group of learners with such varying learning levels, that a whole group instruction approach simply will not work. There are some students who can write full stories, while others struggle to form complete sentences. There are some students who struggle to come up with ideas, while others struggle with generating ideas, and so on. The implications behind this show that there may be a variety of factors contributing to this, and teachers should target those factors over which they have control. One need is stronger vertical alignment of instruction within schools. Vertical alignment can be seen in schools where all grades use the same writing program, writing strategies and techniques, and other common resources, so that students have an easier transition from one grade to the next. This will provide consistency for students from year to year, making writing more achievable. Without vertical alignment, previously taught skills may seem brand new to students the following year. Most participants agree with the idea that vertical alignment of curriculum should be a goal within schools.

Furthermore, participants of this study expressed concern with outside policies, such as state and national mandates and districtwide policies, that are dictating what instruction in their classroom looks like. The findings of this study imply that outside factors do not take individual student needs into consideration and therefore continue to
contribute to the lack of student achievement in writing. Perhaps this will change with the adoption of the NGLS to make writing more attainable for all students.

This finding also found supports to teacher instruction of writing. Ten out of 10 participants agree that their biggest source of support is from other teachers. The idea of collective teacher efficacy allows teachers to depend on one another for lessons, advice, and support. The study implies that by working together, teachers can share ideas and strengthen their own teaching of writing. This would strengthen horizontal alignment among classrooms on the same grade level, where teaching looks similar from one room to the next.

Limitations

Limitations within this study that may have impacted its results can be seen in the break down below.

**Difficulty in gathering participants.** This study was conducted during the time of the COVID-19 global pandemic. At the start of this study, teachers were required to abruptly leave their classrooms and begin online instruction using forums that many had not used before. Modes of delivering instruction to students were drastically changing daily as directed by administrators, therefore, teachers were very busy and overwhelmed. Upon sending out invitations to participate to the first round of potential participants, no responses were received. Close to 100 teachers were invited to participate and only two responded. Therefore, the sample method was switched to a snowball sample which allowed the researcher to receive 10 total participants rather than a higher amount.

**Lack of generalizability.** The population interviewed was fourth-grade teachers in five suburban school districts north of New York City. Therefore, many of the
teachers interviewed worked in schools with very similar demographics. It is unknown how the findings of this study would work for teachers in schools with different resources and different student demographics.

**Recommendations**

This study stands as a stepping-stone in the field of education and can be used to strengthen writing instruction by training teachers in the strategies that were found to be most effective by experienced fourth-grade teachers. Below are recommendations for future research, recommendations for administrators, and recommendations for policy makers.

**Recommendations for future research.** First, future studies should be conducted by interviewing a wider population. This study worked with 10 teachers in school districts with similar demographics. Therefore, it is recommended that this study be conducted with a wider population, perhaps teachers in schools within New York City or teachers in other states with more diverse demographics. By broadening the population, future findings can be compared to those in this study to see if there are commonalities.

Second, this study can be conducted as a quantitative study that looks at the effectiveness of a given set of writing strategies. This would provide a different, numbers-based perspective on the topic of effective strategies for writing instruction. Pre- and post-assessments can be used that look for evidence of the use of strategies to produce a stronger writing sample when completing the post-assessment.

Third, this study can be broadened to look at all elementary grade levels. Strategies are often used to assist students in developing writing skills and can be adapted
to a variety of grade levels. Interviews can be conducted with teachers representing a variety of elementary grade levels to see if findings are similar to these findings, and if the given strategies are also found to be effective at younger and older grade levels. Though the lack of generalizability is a limitation of this, and qualitative studies as a whole, this may assist in making it more generalizable.

**Recommendations for administrators.** Given the importance of writing, these findings can be used to drive professional development at the school-wide level to provide proper training for teachers as needed. Professional development can help support teachers in their ability to teach effectively. It was found that professional development should be included in all schools as they plan for ways to increase success (Graham and Perin, 2017). Given the fact that many teachers feel unprepared to teach writing, this study can assist in driving the professional development so that it is focused and based off real teacher perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies.

Administrators at the college level can also use the findings of this study to strengthen their schools of education. It is a disservice to teachers and students alike, that preservice programs are not better preparing teachers for the field. Graham and Gilbert (2010) support the idea that preservice programs require immediate action for strengthening preservice teacher education programs allowing teachers to feel confident in their teaching abilities. Without a strong foundation in teaching writing, teachers are being set up for failure, a failure which then transfers to their students year after year. This study can be used to inform preservice programs on areas in which they can strengthen instruction. First, preservice programs should address the needs to teach upcoming teachers how to effectively teach writing. Second, the findings of this study,
along with relevant data in the field, can be used to design programs to support the teaching of writing instruction.

**Recommendations for policy makers and curriculum developers.** As schools in NYS transition to the Next Generation Learning Standards (NGLS), this study can be used to assist teachers in rolling out the new standards. The three-phase system in which the NGLS are being rolled out includes raising awareness, building capacity, and full implementation and assessment (“Next Generation Learning Standards,” 2019). As this process takes place, the findings of this study can also be rolled out within schools to support instruction based on the new writing standards.

Additionally, as new curriculum programs are being written, developers can use the findings of this study when creating assessments within the program. To better serve all students, the lessons, assessments, and rubrics within the programs should be differentiated, as all instruction within the classroom is expected to be.

**Conclusion**

Research has shown that students nationwide are struggling with meeting grade-level expectations in writing (NAEP, 2012). Several assessments have been conducted, and the latest nationwide assessment showed that less than one-fifth of fourth-grade students are able to write proficiently for in a variety of areas (NAEP, 2012). On a smaller scale, many fourth-grade teachers find that students enter their classroom each year struggling in writing and have difficulty producing a grade appropriate piece.

This study sought to explore this phenomenon, the lack of student achievement in writing, by interviewing fourth-grade teachers across five suburban school districts north of New York City, and gathering their perceptions of effective instructional strategies for
Participants qualified for this study based on their years of experience, level of education, and geographical locations. It was important to have experienced teachers who have seen a variety of different types of writing standards and programs, to best gather realistic effective strategies, from their points of view. Four research questions were posed in this study:

1. What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?
2. Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?
3. What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?
4. What obstacles, challenges, and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area?

Ten participants were interviewed virtually using semi-structured interviews. Once interviews were conducted, the data was transcribed and analyzed using a variety of coding types including emergent coding, in vivo coding, descriptive coding, emotion coding, values coding, and concept coding. The codes were then grouped into categories from which relevant themes emerged.

According to participants, the most effective strategies for writing instruction are those that maintain structure, utilize the gradual release model, and those that scaffold instruction for students. These come in a variety of forms including modeling, use of writing tools such as graphic organizers and anchor charts, and smaller group instruction, to name a few. Participants found that these strategies were most appropriate when
teaching writing skills because they could be tailored to meet the needs of given students as well as to challenge other students, and they give students tools to use that can frequently be referred back to. Participants also found that these strategies demonstrated emotional empathy, motivated students, and set clear expectations, characteristics which are crucial to the student learning process.

These perceptions were backed by evidence in the form of student work both formally and informally. Considering that writing programs, states, and schools use formal assessments, teachers always use these assessments in their classrooms to record how a student has performed according to grade level standards. However, teachers have a preference, as demonstrated through the interview responses, to informal assessments, which provide a better picture of individual student growth and acquisition of the skills being taught. These allow teachers to see progress rather than status.

The study also found that teachers often face challenges when teaching writing. A widely agreed upon challenge is the range of learner abilities in each classroom. Because of the diverse needs in each room, teachers must be sure to constantly differentiate their instruction to help all students achieve success rather than fall behind. Luckily, participants find supports at both the schoolwide level and internally, which assists them in their writing instruction.

This study can be used to assist administrators in developing professional development for teachers who do not feel fully prepared to teach writing. In addition, it can be used by policy makers and curriculum writers to gain a better picture of what effective instruction and assessment truly looks like in the classrooms of experienced teachers. The study can continue to be strengthened by interviewing a wider population,
being done from a quantitative perspective, or by broadening the research to all elementary grade levels. Overall, participants provided a strong picture of what constitutes effective instructional strategies in writing.
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Appendix A

Dear ________,

My name is Alana Fajardo and I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College and an elementary school teacher. For my dissertation, I will be conducting a qualitative study focusing on teachers’ perceptions of effective writing strategies, specifically at the fourth-grade level. The purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of effective instructional strategies to be used in classrooms to help teachers strengthen their writing instruction and improve student writing skills. By asking teachers their perceptions, responses can be used to inform teacher writing instruction and in turn, strengthen student writing skills.

I am writing to request permission to reach out to fourth-grade teachers in your school district to serve as participants in this study. All participants, as well as school and district names, will be kept confidential throughout the process and no identifiers will be included in the final write-up. I plan to reach out to fourth-grade teachers via e-mail and those interested in participating will receive further instruction.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out. Thank you for your time and support.

Sincerely,
Alana Fajardo
(917) 416-3543
Asf07651@sjfc.edu
Appendix B

Dear teachers,

My name is Alana Fajardo. I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College. I am conducting research on teacher perceptions of effective writing strategies at the fourth-grade level, and I am inviting you to participate because of your position as a fourth-grade teacher in a suburban county north of New York City.

This voluntary research will be conducted in the form of a 60-90-minute interview, at a time and location that is convenient to you. Confidentiality will be upheld throughout this study and beyond, with only the researcher knowing the true identities of participants, schools, and districts. You are not under any obligation to complete this interview and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, please complete the short questionnaire attached to this e-mail and return it to me at asf07651@sjfc.edu. If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me.

I thank you very much for your consideration and contribution to this important educational research.

Sincerely,

Alana Fajardo

Doctoral Student St. John Fisher College
Appendix C

Consent Form

St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Statement of Informed Consent for Adult Participants

Perceptions of Effective Strategies for Writing Instruction: Views from Fourth-Grade Teachers

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION:

- You are being asked to be in a research study of teacher perceptions of effective writing strategies for fourth-grade students. As with all research studies, participation is voluntary.
- The purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of effective instructional strategies to be used in classrooms. By gathering the perspectives of the individuals who use these strategies to teach writing daily, a compilation of effective strategies can be developed and disseminated to help teachers strengthen their writing instruction and improve student writing skills.
- Approximately 10-12 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for the strengthening of teacher instruction by sharing perceived effective strategies with teachers, allowing them to feel more prepared in the field. Furthermore, this study seeks to provide administrators with effective strategies to be rolled out across classrooms, schools, and districts. This study can provide schools with effective strategies as perceived by experienced teachers, allowing administrators to better assess what is working in the school, where improvements and supports are needed, and how to use the strategies to improve student writing.
- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be involved in this study for the duration of one 60-90-minute interview. If follow-up information is needed, the
researcher may reach out to you within one month after the interview has taken place. In addition, before taking part in the interview, you will be asked to spend approximately five minutes filling out and returning a closed-ended questionnaire to gather information for the researcher to determine your eligibility to participate.

- If you decide to participate, an e-mail will be received with a brief questionnaire to gather qualifying information. If you qualify, you will be asked to participate and to sign this consent form. Next, mutually agreed upon times and locations will be selected to conduct interviews which are expected to last 60-90 minutes in which the researcher will ask questions about your perspective of effective writing instructional strategies.

- We believe this study has no more than minimal risk. A minimal risk may include a colleague or administrator entering the interviewing area if it is in the workplace. A potential inconvenience would be giving 60-90 minutes of your time during the day to participate in the interview.

- This study allows the researcher to develop a compendium of perceived effective instructional strategies that can be used across school districts to support teacher instruction of writing, which in turn, can strengthen student writing achievement.

**DETAILED STUDY INFORMATION (some information may be repeated from the summary above):**

You are being asked to be in a research study of fourth-grade teacher perceptions of effective instructional writing strategies. This study is being conducted in four school districts in a suburban county north of New York City. This study is being conducted by: Alana Fajardo, under the supervision of Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti, in the school of education, executive leadership doctoral program, at St. John Fisher College.

You were selected as a possible participant because after completing the qualifying questionnaire, you hold a master’s degree in an appropriate field, you have eight or more years of teaching writing at the elementary level, and therefore, you are able to contribute knowledge to this study.

Please read this consent form and ask any questions you have before agreeing to be in the study.

**PROCEDURES:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

You will be asked to read and sign this consent form. The researcher will pick up the consent form, and a mutually agreed upon time and location will be set-up for the semi-structured interview.

At the time and location of that interview, you will be notified once again the purpose of the study. In addition, you will be reminded that the interview will be audio recorded. If you decide that you prefer to not have the interview recorded, the researcher will take notes.
instead. The researcher will then begin to ask open-ended questions related to your perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies at the fourth-grade level. The interview is expected to take 60-90 minutes. Within one month of your interview, if the researcher has additional questions for clarification, you may be contacted and asked these follow-up questions.

COMPENSATION/INCENTIVES:

You will not receive compensation for participating in this study. However, if the interview takes place during your lunch hour, lunch will be provided to you. Click here to enter text.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

The records of this study will be kept private and your confidentiality will be protected. In any sort of report the researcher(s) might publish, no identifying information will be included.

Identifiable research records will be stored securely and only the researcher(s) will have access to the records. All data will be kept in a file cabinet in the researcher’s home that only the researcher has access to. In addition, any information on the computer will be safely stored as an encrypted file on the researcher’s computer. All study records with identifiable information, including approved IRB documents, tapes, transcripts, and consent forms, will be destroyed by shredding and/or deleting after 3 years.

The data collected in this study as well as the results of the research can be used for scientific purposes and may be published (in ways that will not reveal who I am). An anonymized version of the data from this study may be made publicly accessible, for example via the Open Science Framework (osf.io), without obtaining additional written consent. The anonymized data can be used for re-analysis but also for additional analyses, by the same or other researchers. The purpose and scope of this secondary use is not foreseeable. Any personal information that could directly identify an individual will be removed before data and results are made public. Personal information will be protected closely so no one will be able to connect individual responses and any other information that identifies an individual. All personally identifying information collected about an individual will be stored separately from all other data.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Participation in this study is voluntary and requires your informed consent. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. John Fisher College. If you decide to participate, you are free to skip any question that is asked. You may also withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.
CONTACTS, REFERRALS AND QUESTIONS:
The researchers(s) conducting this study: Alana Fajardo. If you have questions, you are encouraged to contact the researcher(s) at (917) 416-3543 or at Asf07651@sjfc.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s supervisor, Dr. Anthony Chiarlitti, at (914) 654-6153 or at AChiartlitti@sjfc.edu. Dr. Chiarlitti’s office is located at 84 President Street, New Rochelle, NY, 10801.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact the SJFC IRB administrator by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT:

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understood the above information. I consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

Signature:__________________________________________ Date: _________________

Signature of Investigator:____________________________  Date: __________________

Retain this section only if applicable:
I agree to be audio recorded/transcribed _____ Yes _____ No If no, I understand that the researcher will be taking notes throughout the interview.

Signature:__________________________________________ Date: _________________

Signature of Investigator:____________________________  Date: __________________

Click or tap here to enter text.

Please keep a copy of this informed consent for your records.
The session will begin with introductions and expressions of thanks to the participant for their time. Following this, the interviewer will repeat the following script: “The purpose of this study is to explore teacher perceptions of effective instructional strategies to be used in classrooms to help teachers strengthen their writing instruction and improve student writing skills. The findings of this study will provide teachers with a list of best perceived writing instructional strategies to be used in the classroom.” The interview will begin with warm-up questions.

Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?
   a. If you have taught in a variety of districts, what are some of the major similarities and differences that you have noticed regarding writing instruction?

2. Approximately how many different writing curriculum programs have you used throughout your career? What are those writing curriculum programs, and can you briefly tell me a bit about them?

Research Question #1: What writing instructional strategies do teachers perceive to be most effective when teaching writing?

3. When teaching writing at the fourth-grade level, what strategies do you find most effective in contributing to student understanding of the skill being taught?

4. Taking each strategy that you mentioned one at a time, what does it look like when they are used in your classroom? Would you say they are used daily, often, occasionally, or not often?

5. If asked to choose three to five of the most effective strategies for teaching writing skills, which strategies would you select?

Research Questions #2: Which characteristics of writing instructional strategies, as perceived by teachers, contribute to the effectiveness of writing instruction?

6. You mentioned _____ as being an effective writing instructional strategy. In your opinion, what about this strategy makes it so effective?

7. What characteristics contribute to an effective instructional strategy for writing?

Research Question #3: What evidence do teachers refer to when developing their perceptions of effective writing instructional strategies?

8. What evidence do you refer to when assessing the effectiveness of a given writing strategy?

9. How do you measure student understanding of a given writing skill?
Research Question #4: What obstacles, challenges and supports do teachers identify in their effort to teach writing in their subject area?

10. What difficulties do you face when teaching writing?
11. What do you find best supports your ability to effectively teach writing?