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SUPPORT: QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**

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WRITING TEACHERS' PREPARATION, PERCEPTIONS AND SUPPORT:
QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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by

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ABSTRACT

WRITING TEACHERS' PREPARATION, PERCEPTIONS AND SUPPORT:

QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Rori Martello

This qualitative study investigated teachers' perceptions of their own writing abilities and processes, the adequacy of their pre-service teacher preparation, and the efficacy of in-service, school system and school building-level support, and how each of these components affected the educator's aptitude to teach students in grade six through eight how to write effectively. The embedded multiple case study design examined one parochial school system located in suburban New York with middle school teachers as the different cases. A qualitative survey was the research method applied. Subsequently, individual interviews were conducted to acquire more specific information from teachers with different educational backgrounds, years of teaching experience, and from different school buildings within the school system. Both thematic and cross-case analyses were used to analyze the collected data, which ultimately led to a synthesis of overarching commonalities and trends. First, teacher preparation programs did not fully prepare the educators to effectively teach middle school writing. Additionally, the teachers' self-perceptions as writers became a factor in effectively teaching writing, and finally, teacher support is misguided and largely ineffective in the school system. To increase the confirmability of the study's

findings, strategies that ensured the study was consistent, valid, and transferrable were implemented throughout the research process.

DEDICATION

For Mike, Mia, and Joey. You are my everything.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Embarking on the very first writing unit of the year is one of the most nerve-wracking and challenging steps for most middle school English Language Arts teachers. Teachers and students are getting to know one another, the early school year jitters still linger each morning, and a fog of uncertainty lies gently around the students' areas of strengths and needs, as well as the efficacy of the teachers' strategy toolbox. Students need effective writing instruction in the most urgent way, as statistics have repeatedly shown their underperformance in writing, particularly in the middle and high school years (Koutsoftas, 2018). Most students have gotten by previously with minimal revision and editing work—fixing capitalization here or adding a comma there—but are never quite sure how to go further with their drafts (Cramer & Mason, 2014). Each student enters their classroom with different experiences, proficiency levels, and writing stamina; full group, cookie-cutter instruction will certainly not be able to address the needs of most students in class (Gibney, 2012). In the same capacity, each teacher enters their classroom with different writing instruction experience and proficiency levels. Simply because they have become a certified teacher does not necessarily mean that they have been effectively prepared to teach students how to write in an explicit and productive way. Many teachers, whether they are new or seasoned professionals, may not have a solid understanding of their own writing process which can make teaching this vital concept to their students a much more difficult task (Hodges, Wright & McTigue, 2019).

Research has shown that teachers who perceive their own writing techniques and processes as successful and efficient are more likely to have the confidence and ability to create engaging writing instruction in their classroom (Hodges, Wright & McTigue,

2019). This type of instruction goes beyond simply utilizing the basic components of well-researched writing instructional frameworks or programs; it should intertwine the ins and outs of grammar and usage and provide a type of writing mentorship for students of all proficiency levels. Incorporating teacher models, mentor texts, and working through the writing process as a community of writers is an effective approach to writing instruction (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016). Without awareness of their own writing process, it can be difficult for teachers to coherently and confidently convey these skills and strategies to their students. Self-perceptions of their writing capability are as important as the core teacher preparation courses or professional development throughout the school year (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013). Adversely, teachers with low self-efficacy of their own writing techniques and abilities therefore create less effective writing classrooms and can be considered a factor in the foundational challenge of aiding students to reach necessary benchmarks as they progress through high school and beyond (Hodges, Wright & McTighe, 2019).

Schools and districts across the country have attempted to combat this challenge in writing instruction through the implementation of various writing programs and recommendations: from textbook series and instructional frameworks to on-the-go writing strategies or drive-by teacher professional development. However, one thing remains true nationwide: students are not yet writing to the set standards of success in high school and college (Hughes, Wright, Clark & Hacker, 2005). When studying how specific tools, strategies and practices create successful writing instruction and proficient student writers, questions still remain surrounding the long-term effects of the following factors:

- teachers' own perceptions of who they are as writers
- teachers' pre-service preparation
- the support provided by school leadership

Statement of the Problem

The consistent underperformance of student writing throughout schooling has been discussed and emphasized through national test scores, research, and within faculty meetings and planning sessions in schools and districts across the United States (Turner, 2006). Highlighting this instructional outcome discrepancy has not yet assisted teachers and school leaders to more adequately prepare all students to write both inside and outside of the classroom and prepare them for success in high school, college and career (Warner, 2019). While much of the attention has been placed on student results and scores, very little has been researched on how aspiring educators are prepared to take on this challenge within their undergraduate and graduate level preparation programs, or through the lens of support and development when they transition from college student to teacher.

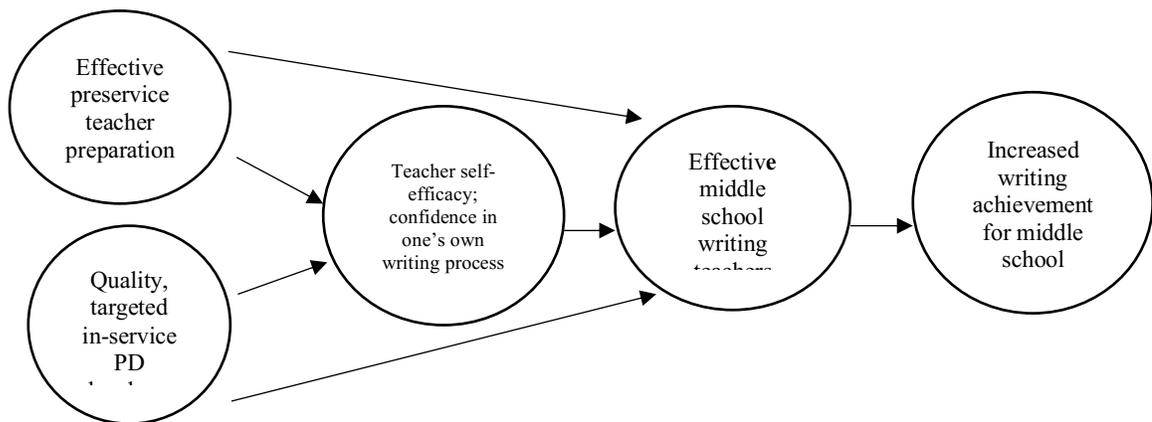
Purpose of the Study

This case study sought to develop a deeper understanding of middle school writing teachers' preparation and support within a Catholic regional school system that serves students and families of diverse backgrounds and socio-economic statuses. With this study's focus on writing teachers rather than students, the findings here add an important layer to the present body of literature on the topic of effective writing instruction. With a better understanding of the teachers themselves, as well as their experiences and perceptions, school leaders and staff developers will have more clarity

that can be utilized to further develop teachers' writing instruction abilities, self-efficacy, and confidence in order to improve their writing instruction and better prepare students for the writing rigors of high school, college, career, and beyond. See *Figure 1* for a graphical representation of the theorized relationships within this case study.

Figure 1

Graphic Representation of the Case Study's Theorized Relationships



Theoretical Framework

Hodges (2017) discusses Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory, highlighting the fact that students with strong self-efficacy in writing, and who have effective writing models and writing instruction, ultimately become more proficient writers. Through my time as a teacher developer and evaluator, one of the mistakes often seen during writing instruction was shifting from a minilesson directly into independent work and student conferences. This oversight may have occurred when the teacher did not know how they would utilize a particular strategy or were uncertain that their own writing would be a strong enough example for their students. Thus, the teacher would make the jump from instruction to independent practice, but certainly not without a cost. Each time I observed this faux pas, the students looked at each other with confusion and stared blankly at their writer's

notebooks during their independent practice time. Each time, it was abundantly clear that without a model, students could not visualize how to take the direct instruction and transform it in their own way onto their papers. They weren't certain they knew how to accomplish the task, and so they were hesitant to even try. Through the lens of school leaders, teachers can be seen in the same capacity as students within Bandura's Self-Efficacy theory. Teachers who are confident in their abilities to write are likely to be more capable in effectively teaching their students to write proficiently.

In education and teacher development, robust self-efficacy enriches teachers' accomplishments and their general comfort and happiness. This theory supports the idea that these educators can approach a challenge with an intrinsic motivation to master the undertaking, rather than avoid. Conversely, teachers who are unsure of their abilities to teach a certain topic or approach are more likely to elude these challenging tasks (Bandura, 1994). The Self-Efficacy theory directly supports one aspect of this study: *How does a teacher's self-efficacy affect their perceived ability to successfully teach writing?* However, further theoretical context is needed to support the other aspects of the case study.

Ryan and Deci's (2021) Self-Determination Theory is a psychological theory that includes motivation and the psychological human needs in order to be driven towards achievement. To fully understand how to develop highly effective writing teachers, taking the steps of exploring the motivational facets of teacher development through research is necessary. In addition to uncovering the drive behind educators to be better, researchers must also focus on teachers' experiences, attitudes, and emotions that is an important component to the Self-Determination theory we well.

The ability to accomplish difficult tasks—such as effectively teaching writing—cannot solely rely on one’s belief system, although an important element. Self-Determination theory offers three psychological human needs that should also be considered within this research: autonomy, relationships, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The preparation of aspiring teachers in their undergraduate and graduate level coursework, the support teachers receive from leadership, and teachers’ human connection and well-being through relationships in their school building are all factors in the present research study and fit within the Self-Determination theory. According to Ryan and Deci (2017), individuals need to feel control and choice in their experiences, as well as social connections within the workplace. The Self-Efficacy theory and Self-Determination theory overlap around the idea of competence: the basic human need to feel mastery and effective aptitude.

The utilization of both the Self-Efficacy theory and the Self-Determination theory as the framework for this qualitative case study enhances the body of research while delving more specifically into how the participating teachers’ insights can widen the understanding of teacher preparation, support, and self-perceptions for deeper future success in the realm of writing instruction.

Research Questions

This case study will explore the following questions:

1. To what extent do middle school teachers perceive their preservice training has prepared them to successfully teach writing?
2. How does a teacher’s self-efficacy affect their perceived ability to successfully teach writing?

3. How do schools support middle school teachers' successful writing instruction?

Significance of the Study

Understanding how teachers perceive their own writing abilities and uncovering how the teachers were previously prepared to explicitly instruct writing can aid school leadership teams in uncovering the professional development needs of their teachers. Specifically, professional development can be tailored based on the study results— which stem directly from teachers' experiences, understandings, and confidence. This case study intended to shine a spotlight on how teachers could learn more effectively, which in turn would help students be better prepared as writers moving forward. The current body of research surrounding middle school writing instruction is heavily centered on instructional practices, theories, strategies, or are centered around students and how they learn to write more effectively. In this case study, the teachers are the center of inquiry. Studying teachers as the learners themselves opens an important and often overlooked component to successful writing instruction on the middle school level.

Definition of Terms

Benchmarks: The set standards or expectations of student development by grade level.

Cookie-cutter instruction: An educator's use of the same teaching strategies and practices for every student in a class, regardless of the specific needs, proficiencies, and experiences of each student.

Diocese: A district under the pastoral care of a Christian church.

Drive-by professional development: Teacher workshops or webinars that are focused on one topic for one meeting with no plans for follow up.

Explicit writing instruction: Overtly and clearly teaching students how to write by breaking it down into steps and processes.

Self-efficacy: The perceptions one has on their own abilities to accomplish a task.

Successful writing: The ability to understand and follow a writing process, transfer original thinking into structured and coherent sentences, self-monitor challenges or difficulties through the process, and be able to troubleshoot as needed based on one's own strategies or the help of others.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Although teachers are well-aware of the urgency surrounding writing instruction and the need to create significant and effective writing lessons and units, oftentimes they are not well-equipped with the necessary tools, strategies, or general understandings on how to properly and explicitly convey this information and guidance to their students. Without understanding the extant literature on the topic, educators and education leaders cannot move towards confidently implementing deep, effective writing curriculum throughout the academic year. This literature review comprehensively examines the current research surrounding student preparation in writing, research-based writing instruction, and teacher support preparation, perceptions, and support.

Student Preparation in Writing

Middle school writing standards and curriculum

The development of writing instruction in America has ranged drastically from the turn of the twentieth century, where some record of writing instruction began, to the current curriculum and standards of elementary and middle school writing pedagogy. In the early 1900s, the main focus of writing instruction was the physical act and art of writing letters on a page. Teachers led extensive penmanship drills and practice, as the educational philosophy rested heavily on the spelling and construction of words and phrases rather than the context or meaning behind the words the single letters created. By the mid-twentieth century, penmanship as writing faded further into the background and eventually became nonexistent in America's writing curriculum. Legibility became the main threshold of proper penmanship and more emphasis rested on writing as a product. With the shift of focus in writing instruction towards writing as a product, students were

taught to know and understand specific vocabulary such as *sentence*, *capital letter* and *punctuation*, and then eventually were expected to recognize a sentence, and express themselves using short but accurately structured sentences themselves. Rather than the emphasis of letters creating words and perfect penmanship, during the 1920s and 1930s, education had progressed towards words and creation of sentences with meaning (Hawkins, Razali & Fink, 2012).

Over time, writing as a product shifted into writing as a process. This shift provided further emphasis on the “selecting, developing, and arranging ideas effectively,” (Runkel, 1985, p. 1 in Hawkins, Razali & Fink, 2012, p. 312). Rather than all attention and assessment of the finished product, the process of reaching the final product was of even more interest. Teachers, and as a result, students, began understanding that self-regulation and strategies that were taught and utilized throughout the writing process ultimately helped prepare individuals for better writing understanding and practice in the future. Class time was now spent on contemplation and revision, feedback from peers and the teacher, and ultimately changed the role of writing pedagogue from evaluator to facilitator (Hawkins, Razali & Fink, 2012).

With the passing of the Common Core State Standards in 2010, writing instruction and standards experienced another historic shift, and were ultimately separated into four categories: text types and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing (Hawkins, Razali & Fink, 2012). Although penmanship, product, and process are all still very much represented within the Common Core State Standards, current students must also display knowledge of keyboarding skills. Writing as a process is specifically highlighted as

educators are expected to guide students to “write routinely across varying time frames for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences; plan, revise, and edit their writing with guidance from both adults and peers; and use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing as well as to interact and collaborate,” (Hawkins, Razali & Fink, 2012, p. 315). Although the expectations of writing have certainly developed and expanded in American schools over the last 100 years, penmanship, product, and process remain the three components that help define what it means to write. The question still remains as to where pedagogy, standards, and general education guidelines and preparation must go in order to better train both teachers and students to be more successful and effective in writing instruction and production.

Writing rigors of post-secondary schooling

American high school graduates of varied backgrounds and demographics often enter college behind when it comes to writing abilities. These newly named college students could be returning to college later in life, immigrant or foreign-based students where English is not their first language, or, according to Huse et al. (2005), could also be high school honors students. According to Huse et al. (2005), many different types of students exist who, despite their previous education and experiences, were not properly readied for the higher education reading, criticizing, analyzing, and writing that was asked of them when they moved on from high school. No matter the background of the student, colleges and universities are constantly in need of more remedial writing introductory classes for their college freshman in order to prepare them for success later on in their program.

Often, students enter college underprepared by a school system and assessment practices that do not keep academic writing at the forefront of courses and curriculum. The lack of attention given to academic writing during these formative years has ultimately created students who are unaware of the actual demands and rigors of college and career (Bangeni & Kapp, 2017). Whether entering the workforce or college after graduating high school, students must have prerequisite knowledge and experience in formulating ideas in words, writing to express feelings or intentions, and the ability to effectively communicate and collaborate with peers and colleagues. The current in-school writing instruction across grade levels has not prepared students to effectively succeed in these aforementioned areas. The majority of both eighth grade and twelfth grade students' writing are approaching or below grade level standards, which does not set students up for success in college and career (Koutsoftas, 2018).

Students should be able to leave their elementary, middle and high school careers with the capacity to verbalize their understandings and ideas. Without the proper instruction, students often do not possess the skills necessary for succeeding in the workplace or on a college campus. According to Evans & Clark (2015), the majority of American students enter college unable to enroll in postsecondary-level classes. In 2006, 40% of graduates required remedial courses during their first year of college. Addressing these challenges and shortcomings in the elementary and middle school years will increase students' ability to progress through high school and enter college on-level, and ready to build upon their writing foundation with more critical analysis and written interpretation. Further research on how to explicitly address these needs and changes is still necessary.

Research-Based Writing Instruction

Strategy-focused instruction

Oftentimes writing instruction looks like reviewing checklists for proper components of whichever genre of writing is being introduced, rubrics that share how to do your best work, and teachers providing verbal explanation of how to pre-plan, outline, and think about what to write before students begin writing. With writing instruction that is heavily focused on strategies, students tend to check off the necessary items that make up an acceptable final product, as well as general strategies that help guide the student population as a whole through their writing processes as they progress towards the final piece (Torrance et al., 2015). While these bits of information and strategies can certainly be helpful when teaching students to write, no real hands-on mentoring or modeling exists in the process. Torrance et al. (2015) suggest that strategy-based instruction that focuses on product goals rather than the writing process is not as effective at producing students who are independent writers as other approaches that include modeling and mentoring at each step of the writing process; however, Torrance et al. (2015) does not explicitly share how to address effective changes in instruction to receive a better outcome.

Instruction and feedback

“I’m done!” is one of the most popular phrases inside a middle school writing class. The moment the last period is placed on the last sentence of a first draft, students accept their work as final and can’t wait to share what they’ve completed. Engraining the importance of revision and editing work, and the idea that the real writing occurs once the first draft is complete, is a challenging component to writing instruction in the middle

school years. Koutsoftas (2018) found that students often are able to complete first drafts and utilize writing strategies but are not as certain when working to revise and edit their work more deeply than addressing grammatical errors and paragraph indentation, for example. Cramer and Mason (2014) echo Koutsoftas's findings in their study: student writers need abundant, focused, and individualized feedback to be able to go further in their revision work. Students need to be shown how to do more than surface level revision techniques, and in turn teachers need to understand how to show their students to go deeper.

Benefits of writing workshop framework

A workshop approach is discussed descriptively throughout some literature on the topic of writing instruction, but little empirical research exists that questions the specific instructional tools, strategies, and practices within the workshop model that positively impact student writing development. Some research shows that a writing workshop could be a more effective way to teach writing, including the use of student choice and combining experience, knowledge, and viewpoints through varied forms of texts to model both reading and writing (Wiseman, 2011). One of the more significant benefits to implementing the writing workshop is the ability for students to engage with their work at various places and paces throughout the writing process. Students at the same table may be at different points in the process: one might be drafting while another revises and still another might be brainstorming, but all are writing everyday on self-selected topics and genres (Gibney, 2012). When students enter the room with various experiences, abilities, engagement, and interests, the ability to utilize instruction where students can be at their own pace and at different points in the process allows for much more effective and

engaged work to take place. The workshop structure is important to follow, as well, which begins with a mini lesson on a helpful skill, strategy or method, a teacher model, independent practice, and then both small group and one-on-one conferences (Gibney, 2012). The short mini lesson helps focus students on what to work on within their writing, no matter where they currently are in the process. With independent practice scheduled in as the majority of class time, teachers are able to confer one-on-one with students so that their individual needs can be addressed.

The use of shared writing (Read, 2014) and mentor texts add multiple layers of modeling which can be utilized within the writing workshop. Through a teacher model, students are able to experience the writing process with their teacher. This is particularly helpful for students who cannot visualize or grasp how to even begin to write on their own. When a teacher shares the journey with her or his students, displaying the struggles, challenges, and the ways to go about overcoming these difficulties by utilizing the specific strategies taught during a mini-lesson can be truly valuable instruction. A community of writers is built and fostered as the teacher displays her writing each day along with her students (Read, 2014). The use of mentor texts helps students observe how other authors are able to create the various moods, descriptions, or language usage that can help them within their own writing. Bogard and McMackin (2012) explain that students can see and hear the specific use of language or techniques that are taught by their teacher through the mini lesson right on the pages in front of them within the mentor text. They can look deeply at the examples and discuss their ideas and understandings with their peers before trying to write it for themselves. Rather than simply telling students how to write a personal narrative, for example, or sharing which components

make a “good” personal narrative, the use of mentor texts brings these lessons and words to life. It shares a tangible piece of language that exemplifies the topic at hand and can be much more accessible to students that struggle more than others in writing.

Teacher Preparation, Perceptions, and Support

Teacher preparation programs and self-efficacy

When a teacher considers themselves confident and able to tackle writing tasks on their own, no matter how challenging, they are more likely to incorporate effective writing instructional practices into their classroom. This idea of self-efficacy through the lens of writing is an important concept to consider when diving more deeply into the factors that catalyze change in students’ writing abilities as they continue through school (Hodges & McTigue, 2019). When teachers enter the workforce, so much of the profession exists outside of the world of instruction in its simplest form: paperwork, various building duties, parent communication, data collection, administrative tasks, and many other obligations bog down the role and dilute the importance of the art of teaching itself. Why, then, do school leaders and staff developers hope to support and guide teachers towards more effective writing instruction through professional development when they are already in the teacher role? Teacher preparation programs, where teachers are solely focused on their development of pedagogy, should be where this type of guidance occurs. “Reaching teachers who are still developing their beliefs about writing and writing instruction has the potential to proactively prepare teachers to more successfully integrate writing into their future classrooms rather than to reactively try to change entrenched behavior,” (Hodges & McTigue, 2019, p. 4). Making changes on the foundational level, where pre-service teachers are still developing their own

understandings of the writing process and as a result have a better notion of how to convey this knowledge to their future students, can be a more effective route in self-efficacy development. When trying to change old habits when a teacher is already in-service, it can be a much bigger and more challenging task.

Researchers Risko and Reid (2019) studied the concept of quality and robust teacher preparation programs, and ultimately argued “that the teachers who are likely to be the most successful in their classrooms are those who have had the greatest access to high-quality teacher preparation,” (Risko & Reid, 2019, p. 423). While this notion seems rather conspicuous, the idea of access is notable, nonetheless. Not only is high-quality education a must, but availability of this standard of excellence requires consideration as well. Teacher preparation programs should create consistency across the board; teachers, no matter where they are coming from, should be able to enter their first classrooms with “[p]edagogical content knowledge . . . specialized knowledge required for designing and implementing effective learning environments,” (Risko & Reid, 2019, p. 424).

Understanding who they are as learners, readers, and writers, along with the foundation of content knowledge and pedagogy, will increase teacher confidence and self-perception and ultimately pave the way for student success both inside and outside of the classroom.

Professional development and teacher success

The importance of professional development (PD) in schools extends much farther than teachers checking off required hours throughout the academic year. The term “PD” is utilized and tossed around extensively throughout school buildings and between administration and faculty. The question, however, of teacher access to quality professional development is still murky and difficult to pin down. According to Svendsen

(2020), “there has been a shift from teachers being passive participants to becoming active learners. This shift can therefore be distinguished from a technical-rational-top-down approach to [customizable professional development], towards a more cultural-individual interactive and newer approach to the professional development of teachers (Caena, 2011),” (p. 111). The shift away from drive-by workshops and professional development for the sake of completing requirements can ultimately increase the benefits of professional development in K-12 schools. With teachers’ needs at the forefront of professional development design and implementation, the more advantageous results can be garnered and executed within the classroom. Guided, purposeful, and orchestrated support of teachers, particularly with writing instruction and the practice of self-reflection on who they are as writers themselves, can be a more effective way to guide teachers who may not have been properly prepared for the urgency of writing instruction in both the elementary and middle school years.

CHAPTER III: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to investigate how teachers' perceptions of their own writing abilities along with their pre-service and in-service experiences affect their self-perceived capacity to teach their students how to write effectively. The research questions of this case study were:

1. To what extent do middle school teachers perceive their preservice training has prepared them to successfully teach writing?
2. How does a teacher's self-efficacy affect their perceived ability to successfully teach writing?
3. How do schools support middle school teachers' successful writing instruction?

This chapter begins with a rationale for choosing qualitative methodology and the reasons an embedded case study design is most appropriate for this research. The chapter elaborates on my positionality, philosophical framework, and role within the parochial school system. The chapter concludes with details on the research design, the process of data collection, and the methods of data analysis used within the study.

Rationale for Qualitative Design

Setting forth to understand research participants' perceptions, understandings, and insights into who they are as writers and teachers is inherently less statistical and numerical than other research designs, such as experiments or quantitative surveys. This study focused on experiences and understanding the "how" behind effective writing instruction in the middle school years:

Rather than determining cause and effect, predicting, or describing the distribution of some attribute among a population, we might be interested in uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 5-6).

Through a qualitative survey and individual interviews, teachers were able to accurately and descriptively share the specifics regarding how they see themselves as writers, reflect and describe how they were prepared to enter the classroom as a writing teacher, and share the details of their current professional development and support from the school leadership team within specific schools in the Diocese. Contextualizing feelings, experiences, perceptions, and backgrounds ultimately called for a qualitative approach, where words were used as data rather than numbers (Merriam, 2009).

Schools continue to focus on the student or curriculum to address writing underperformance; little research exists on how understanding teacher backgrounds and experiences could ultimately better support student writers. Shifting focus to the classroom instructor to find the solution to the present writing crisis in education (Warner, 2019) was the goal behind the research study's inquiries. A qualitative approach allowed for the fullest picture of the sample's experiences in teacher preparation programs, and how they are supported by school leadership teams. Many complexities accompany research designed to understand human behaviors, perceptions, and experiences (Putney, 2010), which led me to choose an embedded multiple case study design under the umbrella of qualitative research for the study.

Embedded Multiple Case Study

As an active member of the participating school system, I knew that utilizing teachers within this Diocese would be fruitful for access to future professional development and student writing outcomes. According to Merriam (2009), “a case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system,” (p. 37). With an embedded case study design, the school system was the bounded system, and the participating teachers created each case within the system. Salkind (2010) explains that with a multiple case study, “Findings are presented as individual portraits that contribute to our understanding of the issues, first individually and then collectively,” (p. 118). Through the data collection process, each participant’s “portrait” was described and outlined as separate cases within the study and bounded system, and in data analysis, came together to portray the overarching commonalities and patterns that exist throughout each case. Through the data analysis process, I hypothesized that the trends in data would provide evidence to the developing theory that a focus on teachers as students—individuals with varied backgrounds, proficiencies and experiences—can help this system of schools better support their school leaders in creating development and support for the Diocese’s writing teachers.

Philosophical Framework

The study followed a common type of philosophical framework in qualitative research: interpretive epistemological. My own biases, background, and understandings could not truly be removed from the research study, it must be understood that I was a component of the study itself. With interpretive research, this study’s findings could transform when completed through the lens of another researcher because there is no

single, observable reality. “Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event,” (Merriam, 2009, p. 9). Each teacher, or case, also provided their own reality and interpretation of how they are supported in school to teach effective writing. In interpretive research, reality is believed to be socially constructed. Therefore, it is understood that two teachers within the same school building could perceive the same professional development workshop or meeting with two radically different viewpoints (Merriam, 2009).

Role of the Researcher

My current position is an Assistant Principal within one of the schools in the case study’s parochial school system. As an administrator, I help the principal manage and develop forty-five faculty and staff members. I conduct classroom walkthroughs and formal observations of teachers across all grade levels, pre-school through eighth grade. Because I am a school leader in one of the schools within the bounded system, I only included teachers who are outside of my school building to participate in the proposed research study. Teachers within my building could have been unfairly influenced or would have been more likely to withhold information, particularly concerns, with current administrative support in the realm of writing instruction if their administrator were the one interviewing and facilitating their individual interview. To avoid this conflict of interest and opportunities for questionable validity, the sample was selected from teachers of any other school within the Diocese.

As a sixth, seventh and eighth grade English Language Arts teacher during the 2019-2020 school year, I was chosen to become a Diocesan-wide Curriculum Lead for Middle School ELA teachers. The program was initiated in March 2020, when, because

of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and students were forced to completely change how they teach and learn overnight. During those months teaching remotely, the Curriculum Leads facilitated a Google Classroom filled with plans and resources and hosted weekly virtual meetings to act as a support for the teachers within the Diocese who were teaching the same content area and grade levels. Curriculum Leads also provided unit plans that could be implemented across any school building so that teachers did not feel lost and alone during an uncharted time in the world of education. During those months, I was able to hear from and listen to teachers from all over the Diocese for the first time, and each individual shared a similar sentiment: sharing experiences and collaborating to reflect on instruction helped teachers become more effective in their practice. Widespread access to teachers of English Language Arts on the middle school level continued through the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, although I am no longer a Curriculum Lead.

It is important to note that who I am, my experiences, and my own perceptions play a role within this research. When I taught middle school writing, I felt extremely confident in who I was as a writer and my own writing process. I was able to guide my students through writing units with excitement, engagement, and ease. I was not fully prepared to be an effective writing educator through my teacher preparation programs, although I did become more aware of who I was as a writer through my undergraduate and graduate coursework. My professors helped me fine tune my craft, guided me through revisions, and groomed me to become a peer-educator in my college's Writing Center. These experiences ultimately informed me as a writer, a teacher, and now, a researcher. Bracketing my inherent biases based on my educational and personal

backgrounds here is a key factor in the qualitative research that is explained throughout this paper.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Reliability and Validity of the Research Design

In embedded multiple case study research design, the researcher is the “human instrument of data collection,” (Merriam, 2009, p. 16) has its advantages and limitations. As I facilitated person-to-person communications through individual interviews, I was able to adjust and expand on certain topics or ideas as ways to further the data collection of the three research inquiries. Experiencing the interaction firsthand also allowed for analysis of utterances, tone, and general feelings of the participants, which is not observable through text-only data. This advantage added to the layers of understandings and resulted in more in-depth documentation of teachers’ perceptions, preparatory experiences, and current school support within the realm of writing instruction.

Alternatively, with the research as human instrument, and ultimately a primary component in the case study, one’s implicit biases and experiences could not be fully compartmentalized to not influence the collection and analysis of the data. I made the subjectivity transparent through the process. As a member of the education field and an employee of the school system, my own knowledge and beliefs undoubtedly existed and played a part in the study, as well as in the creation of the instruments I utilized through the data collection process. It was my role, as qualitative researcher, to be aware of these subjectivities—on both the researcher and participants’ sides—and to identify them as a factor within the study’s findings.

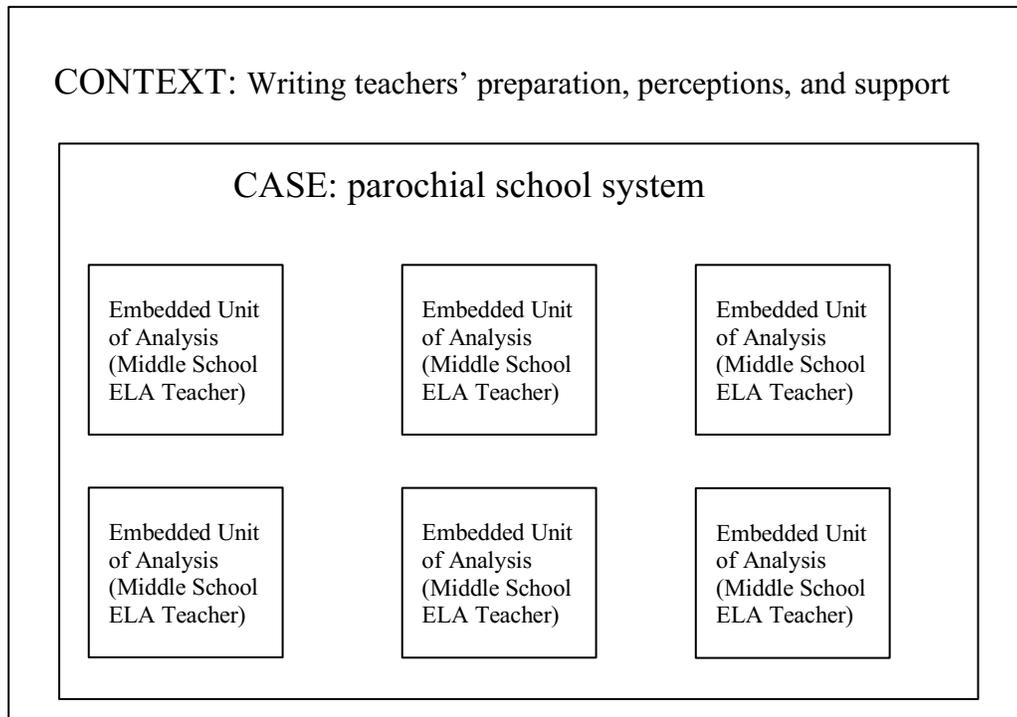
For proper qualitative verification, Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that data should be “transferrable, dependable, and confirmable,” (Scharp, 2018, p. 118). Scharp (2018) explains the importance of following the verification process by sharing how to create data that is exchangeable, reliable, and able to be validated. For example, analyzing only the first half of a data set fully before moving on to the second half can help a researcher compare and analyze information within the same data set. The researcher must also remain transparent about how the study’s findings were determined, which might be accomplished with the help of “peer debriefing,” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 118). Meticulous coding and maintenance of notes that link findings to the original data is important in the verification process as well.

Sample and Population

The sample and population for the study were chosen strictly from those teaching grade six through eight writing within thirty-one of the thirty-two schools in the chosen parochial school system. First, the qualitative survey was shared with all teachers who meet the criteria. Second, survey participants continued onto the next layer of data collection, which was individual interviews. The participants for the interviews represented different school buildings within the school system and ranged in teaching experience and educational background. The sample was ultimately “nonrandom, purposeful, and small” (Merriam, 2009, p. 18), and these teachers became the cases within the research study. See *Figure 2* for a diagram of the embedded multiple case study design.

Figure 2

Diagram of Embedded Multiple Case Study Design



Participant Background Information

After sending out the qualitative survey to all middle school ELA teachers within the Diocese, the following six teachers responded and were utilized as the sample within the case study. The teachers represented different schools and educational experiences and backgrounds.

Allie began her teaching career in a public school as a prekindergarten (Pre-K) teacher. She worked in this position for the first five years of her career, beginning immediately after her graduation from a 5-year Adolescent Education certification program. During her five years as a Pre-K teacher, she returned to school to work towards an additional master's degree in early childhood and Special Education B-2.

Allie moved to the parochial school system of interest in September 2020 and is currently in the middle of her second year at the same school. The 2021-2022 academic year is her eighth year as a teacher. Allie teaches sixth grade ELA, Social Studies, Health, and Religion and is not certified to English Language Arts; however, Allie holds a teaching certification in Adolescent Education 7-12 Social Studies.

Margaret graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English Language Arts grades 7-12 in 2018, and her Master's degree in English Language Arts and Literature in 2020. She is currently in her fourth year teaching seventh and eighth grade ELA, and has been at the same school within the system for all four years.

Caitlin chose teaching as her second career. Her professional experiences commenced in advertising at a large corporation. After deciding to move into education, Caitlin returned to school and became certified in English Language Arts grades 7-12, Elementary Education grades 1-6, Students with Disabilities grades 7-12, and Students with Disabilities grades 1-6. She is currently in her tenth year teaching, which began in high school level Special Education. Caitlin has been in her current position as sixth, seventh, and eighth grade ELA teacher for eight years in the same school within the parochial school system.

Debra is in her twelfth year of teaching, which is her second career. Her professional life began in business, where she worked for Coach in Marketing and Research. After pivoting to teaching full time, Debra has worked in three different schools. Her first school closed nine years after she joined the faculty. She worked for two years in another school after the closure and is currently at a new school for the first year. She is certified to teach English Language Arts on the secondary level, grades 7

through 12. When she first began teaching, Debra was placed in third grade where she taught all content areas, but then crossed over into ELA in the middle school grade levels and has remained ever since. She presently teaches seventh and eighth grade ELA.

Ellen has been teaching in the parochial school system for 26 years. Although she spent her first three years in the school system as a Spanish teacher, Ellen has since settled into Middle School ELA for the last 23 years. Her first school closed after ten years of teaching there and she has been a faculty member of her current school for the remainder of her teaching tenure. Ellen graduated from both her undergraduate and graduate studies in English Language Arts for grades 7-12, and currently teaches fifth and sixth grade ELA.

Nancy devoted the first 12 years of her career as a journalist, news reporter and editor. Her Bachelor's degree is in Journalism but after deciding to move into teaching, Nancy returned to school to become certified in English Language Arts grades 7-12, with an extension to teacher fifth and sixth grades as well. She has been the middle school ELA teacher in two different schools within the parochial school system since deciding to join the teaching profession and is currently in her eighth year teaching. Nancy presently teaches sixth, seventh, and eighth grade ELA. See *Table 1* for Margaretackground Information summary.

Table 1*Participant Background Information*

Participant	Years Teaching	Second Career	Certification(s)	Number of Schools Taught in	Bachelor's Degree in Education	Master's Degree in Education
Allie	8	No	Adolescent Education, Social Studies	2	Yes	Yes
Margaret	4	No	Special Education B-2 English Language Arts 7-12	1	Yes	No
Caitlin	10	Yes	English Language Arts 7-12 Elementary Education 1-6 Students with Disabilities 7-12 Students with Disabilities 1-6	2	No	Yes
Debra	12	Yes	English Language Arts, 7-12	3	No	Yes
Ellen	26	No	Elementary Education N-6	2	Yes	Yes
Nancy	8	Yes	English Language Arts 7-12	2	No	Yes

Instruments

Qualitative Survey. The qualitative survey asked participants open-ended questions to prompt reflection and responses regarding their teacher preparation

coursework and their resulting level of preparation to teach writing in their classrooms. It also asked the teachers to expand on their current writing instructional strategies and how they utilize best practices into their lessons and units. The qualitative survey asked participants to expand on their own writing abilities and writing processes to help transfer writing skills and strategies to their students. Information regarding school building level support, teacher supervision, and access to professional development, and then a reflection of the efficacy of this type of support was a main component to the qualitative survey as well. See *Table 2* for the Qualitative Survey questions and corresponding alignment.

Table 2

Qualitative Survey Questions and Research Question Alignment

Survey Question	Research Question Alignment
How would you describe your own personal writing process?	RQ 2
Do you consider yourself a skilled writer? Why or why not?	RQ 2
How do you explicitly teach writing to your students?	RQ 3
How do you feel while teaching a writing unit? Why?	RQ 2
What do you find to be the most challenging when teaching a writing unit? Why?	RQ 2
What do you find to be the most helpful when teaching a writing unit? Why?	RQ 3
How would you assess your school's current means of professional development for faculty members?	RQ 3
How did your teacher education undergraduate and/or graduate coursework prepare you to teach middle school writing?	RQ 1
How did you learn to write more effectively during your undergraduate and/or graduate coursework?	RQ 1

Interviews. The second instrument was applied by following the romantic ideology of conducting interviews (Roulston, 2019), in which the “interview talk is seen to be a reflection of people’s inner thoughts and beliefs. As such, descriptions generated in interviews are taken to be representative of ‘authentic selves’ (Koven 2014:504),” (p. 7). By employing open-ended questions to elicit expanded ideas and information on the teachers’ experiences and self-perceptions, I was able to understand each participant’s mindset and understandings, which ultimately provided insight into how teachers can be supported within the Diocese in the future. See *Table 3* for Interview categories and corresponding questions.

Table 3

Interview Categories and Questions

Category	Questions	Follow Up Prompts
Background Information	<p>How many years have you been teaching?</p> <p>Have you taught different subject areas besides ELA?</p> <p>What is your favorite part of teaching middle school ELA?</p> <p>What is your least favorite part of teaching middle school ELA?</p> <p>Do you enjoy writing for your own pleasure?</p> <p>As a student preparing to become a teacher, how did you go about completing your own writing assignments?</p> <p>How do you feel when beginning a writing unit?</p> <p>Could you explain how you plan for the writing units you complete with your students?</p>	<p>Why?</p> <p>Why?</p> <p>Did you follow a writing process of your own understanding?</p> <p>Why?</p> <p>Could you expand on...</p> <p>What has worked well?</p>

Teacher Preparation Programs	<p>Do you write your own piece along with your students? Where did you complete your undergraduate and graduate course work?</p>	<p>What was the least successful writing unit you've completed?</p> <p>Why would you describe it as unsuccessful? Why or why not?</p>
	<p>How would you describe the efficacy of these programs?</p>	<p>As a teacher now, would you have changed any pieces of your course work to better prepare future teachers to teach middle school ELA? Can you expand on...</p>
	<p>What components of teaching Middle School ELA did your teacher preparation coursework best prepare you for? Did your graduate and/or undergraduate studies help you become a more effective writer yourself?</p>	<p>Tell me more about...</p> <p>How would you describe your own writing process? How do past writing experiences help you to better teach writing?</p>
	<p>As a first year ELA teacher, what did you feel most confident about?</p>	<p>Do you consider yourself a skilled writer? Did this confidence transform and/or expand with each year you taught?</p>
Professional Development	<p>What types of professional development have you participated in throughout your teaching career?</p>	<p>How so? Could you tell me more about...</p>

Were most of the professional development sessions hosted in your school building by your school leadership team, or did you seek PD outside of your school?

Did you find in-house or outsourced PDs to be more productive and helpful for your teaching practices?

Why?

How would you rate the efficacy of these types of professional developments?

Why?

If you were given an opportunity to design a professional development series or workshop for new middle school writing teachers, what would you be sure to include in the work?

Have you ever completed a professional development workshop or series that truly made a difference in your writing teaching practice?

What was it like?

Why was it so impactful?

Where did you find this PD?

Procedures for Collecting Data

The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and thus adjustments were prepared and easily executed throughout the data collection timeline. Interviews were conducted through video conferences rather than in-person discussions. Without in-person access to teachers across various school buildings, data collection completed virtually outside of my own school building was imperative to the transferability of the case study's findings.

The two data sources within the study complemented one another in several ways. The data collected from the questionnaire allowed for more specific and essential conversations surrounding the three inquiry topics in the interview phase of data

collection. Participants for the individual interviews represented varied backgrounds, experiences, and school communities, which allowed for more transferrable findings for the overall study. See Appendix A and Appendix B for the Caitlinonsent Form used and the Interview Protocol Form, respectively.

Data Analysis

Two types of analysis processes most effectively dissected and found meaning within the survey data and within the six case study interviews: thematic analysis and cross case analysis. A thematic analysis was utilized to identify, analyze and inform trends and patterns within the body of data. Any type of data analysis method in research required me to ask several questions of oneself and the data collected. When looking at themes, the question must be devoted to quality over quantity. “. . . [R]esearchers engaged in thematic analysis ask whether a set of data answers the research question in a meaningful way,” (Scharp, 2018, p. 117). In order to analyze data to find underlying themes and meanings, Braun and Clarke (2008) outline the six steps to thematic analysis: “(1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating coding categories, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars” (Scharp, 2018, p. 118). Familiarizing oneself with the data included accurate transcription of interviews, as well as discerning important insights from the qualitative survey data.

Coding the data so that it can be accessed and reviewed in a systematic way is an essential aspect to the analysis process, as well. When analyzing the survey responses and transcripts of all individual interviews, a hybrid approach of both inductive and deductive

coding was utilized. MAXQDA software was utilized throughout the data collection, coding, and analysis phases of the research study.

Coding and Themeing the Data

Precoding

To begin the process of coding the data collected through both the qualitative survey and interviews, I read the entirety of each participant's datum as one unit before moving on to the next participant. This strategy created a starting point in which each case study's depiction of their perceptions, preparation and support began to take shape. No coding or categorical themeing of the data took place during this first phase of data analysis. Rather, my focus was to familiarize myself with the data collected and create clear, separate understandings of each participant's insights and experiences.

First and Second Coding Cycles

A hybrid approach to coding was used within this case study. The deductive first cycle of coding organized and highlighted extensive relevant data but did not fully encapsulate all insights from the participants. A second, inductive cycle of coding was necessary to fully include important discernments that did not fit into the first cycle's predetermined codes, but would still add value to the research study. Saldaña (2021) explains the reasoning behind this type of hybrid coding approach:

Induction and deduction are actually dialectical rather than mutually exclusive research procedures. As an inductive coding system is constructed and becomes solidified, it then becomes a deductive coding system for the data analyses that follow. One cannot help starting a project with some knowledge about what may be found. Yet, investigators must also remain open to new discoveries and

constructions of knowledge about the human condition. Otherwise, what is the point of research? (p. 41).

Following the initial work to become familiar with each Allies separate units of analysis, a first coding cycle took place. This cycle utilized a deductive approach to coding, where a priori codes were already in place and the data was categorized by these codes. The pre-determined codes were specific to the research questions, and allowed for targeted, logical coding to occur. See *Table 4* for a list of a priori codes used. With a focus on the specific codes derived from the study’s research questions, I was able to look specifically for relevant insights and explanations through each survey and interview transcript. After categorizing the data into the pre-determined codes, a second, closer look into the data was needed. Insights that were not able to be categorized into the a priori codes, yet were still important to the research study overall, needed to be coded as well. See *Table 4* for the codes that were derived during this inductive second cycle of coding.

Table 4

List of Codes for Surveys and Interview Transcriptions

<u>A Priori Code</u>	<u>Second Cycle Inductive Codes</u>
Perceptions	Challenges
Preparation	Writing Process
Support	
Writing Instruction	

Themeing the Data

Saldaña (2021) refers to categorically themeing the data as “provid[ing] descriptive detail about the patterns observed and constructed by the analyst. Rather than using a short code or category label, a theme expands on the major ideas through the use

of an extended phrase or sentence,” (p. 259-260). After the two cycles of coding were completed, I noticed that further categorizing could be accomplished through the analysis of themes within the surveys and interview transcripts. The process of themeing the data occurred naturally after already fully diving into the units of analysis three times prior. It’s important to highlight that all themes were created through my own understanding and analysis of each participant’s thoughts, insights, and experiences. Categorically themeing the data was accomplished by generating the broad topics and notions that were suggested within the data (Saldaña 2021). See *Table 5* for all themes that were utilized during this phase of analysis.

Table 5

List of Themes within the Data

<u>Categorical Themes</u>
Confident writers and teachers
Mini-lessons, engagement, and models of good writing are important
Collaboration and conversations with colleagues are key
Undergraduate/Graduate coursework provide minimal preparation to teach
Misguided support from leadership
Challenge to provide individualized feedback and attention
Challenge to grade

Cross Case Analysis

Throughout the multiple stages in coding and analysis of the collected data, I observed various comparative and contrasting phenomenon across cases within the study. With cross-case analysis, Yin (2009) emphasizes the importance of maintaining the

integrity of each case individually, and “to compare and synthesize any within-case patterns across the cases,” (p. 196). It was essential that I fully analyzed each case for patterns before looking to other cases for replication or commonalities. To accomplish this task, viewing each survey response and interview per Allies one unit of analysis was particularly important. After reading the data, then conducting both cycles of coding, deciphering comparisons and contrasts between each teacher’s experiences became a natural result of the analysis process.

Credibility

Recording interviews in addition to utilizing exact wording from the qualitative survey allowed for a more accurate transcription and data collection within the research study. Each interview took place via Zoom. The interviews were recorded, and the audio files of each interview were transcribed through Rev transcription service. Each transcription was reviewed and corrected as needed to ensure overall accuracy throughout the process. Method triangulation aided in the study’s credibility, as surveys and interview transcriptions were utilized to gather and focus the data. I also used persistent observation as a strategy to focus on the characteristics that were most relevant to the problem during interviews (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Transferability

To ensure the study findings could be utilized across settings and participants, I used thick description strategy. Merriam (1998) defined thick descriptions as:

Thick description is a term from anthropology and means the complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated (p. 29-30) . . . Rich, thick description – providing enough description so that readers will be able to

determine how closely their situations match the research situation, and hence, whether findings can be transferred. (p. 211)

Descriptively sharing the procedures, instruments, and any alterations to interview questions, additional data collection that may be needed, as well as the depiction of settings and participants in detail allows researchers in various school systems to utilize the research design and analysis outlined here to further develop teacher efficacy and therefore writing instruction (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Dependability & Confirmability

To address the need for dependability and confirmability within the proposed study, I completed an audit trail. This strategy allowed for complete transparency of the “data path” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018), and provides an explanation of the data collection and analysis processes, clear accounts of all decisions made, as well as the process that was taken to make each decision. To ensure impartiality throughout the process, completing member checks allowed participants to review interview transcripts and data to confirm the intent and content of the interviews remained true and accurate during the data collection process.

This embedded multiple case study utilized a qualitative survey and interviews through two data collection phases to garner the insights and experiences of six teacher participants. Precoding, two coding cycles, and themeing the data along with a cross case analysis allowed for the discovery of various findings that will be discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter provides findings from both cross case and thematic analyses and discusses the insights in narrative form. Findings based on each research question are provided, and graphic representation of relationships between self-perceptions, writing process, and writing instruction are depicted with figures focused on each participant from the case study.

Findings

Each case within this study shared two specific points across the board: providing feedback and catering to student needs are some of the biggest challenges in teaching writing on the middle school level. The teachers constantly feel pressed for time, and with so many other demands that must be met within an English Language Arts classroom, the grading, feedback, and individualized needs are the areas where they feel they are downing the most often. In this section, the study's findings are discussed through the lens of each research question. Specific quotes from survey responses and interviews are utilized as evidence for each finding presented. Within the sections for Research Questions 2 and 3, figures are included to clearly illustrate the theorized relationships and conclusions from the study.

Research Question 1: To what extent do middle school teachers perceive their preservice training has prepared them to successfully teach writing?

Teacher preparation coursework did not fully prepare participants to teach writing. Margaret, who received her Bachelor's degree in Adolescent Education, English Language Arts but her Master's degree in Literature shared several interesting insights that were starkly different from the other five participants in the study. She shared:

I took a course in both undergraduate and graduate school that was focused solely on the teaching of writing that I refer back to in almost every one of my units.

[Also,] my undergraduate mentor completely changed the way I write which helped mold me for writing my thesis last year which was the ultimate writing experiment and process.

Caitlin, Debra, and Nancy all came into teaching as a second career and shared a similar insight: their undergraduate/graduate coursework for their previous career and/or their previous career experiences better prepared them to teach writing than their coursework in education or teacher preparation programs. All three participants continually stated how they were pushed and guided abundantly when working respectively in advertising, marketing, and journalism, and have not received the same preparation as teachers of writing.

Ellen reaffirmed the efficacy of her undergraduate coursework, but with a focus on her journalism classes and professional experiences, rather than her education degree, stating: “My undergraduate journalism classes and professional writing experience prepared me more to teach middle school writing than my teacher graduate coursework ever did!”

Debra and Ellen firmly noted the lack of effective preparation they experienced prior to stepping into a classroom as a teacher. “I really don't think I was ever really taught how to write an essay . . . My undergrad program didn't really prepare me at all for this,” Debra stated. Ellen almost exactly reiterated this response, “My graduate coursework didn't prepare me to teach middle school writing.”

The teachers who described previous schooling or experiences that did equip them to teach writing on the middle school level were all referring to their schooling that prepared them for a different career, or their time in a previous career. The teacher preparation courses themselves did not give these educators the required skillset to effectively teach their students how to write.

Research Question 2: How does a teacher’s self-efficacy affect their perceived ability to successfully teach writing?

Self-perceptions of writing do not necessarily influence feelings on teaching writing. Two out of the 6 participants (Allie and Ellen) shared feeling “dread,” “inadequate,” or “out of control” when beginning a writing unit in their middle school classroom. However, Allie considers herself to be a skilled writer with a writing process of her own, while the Ellen does not enjoy writing and does not consider herself to be a “good” writer. This disparity shows the importance of utilizing both the Self-Efficacy and Self-Determination theories as a framework for this study; just because one teacher considers herself a good writer, does not mean she will feel confident when teaching it. The underlying emotions and attitude of Allie show the necessity of considering the psychological human need of competence and autonomy to be self-determined within a task.

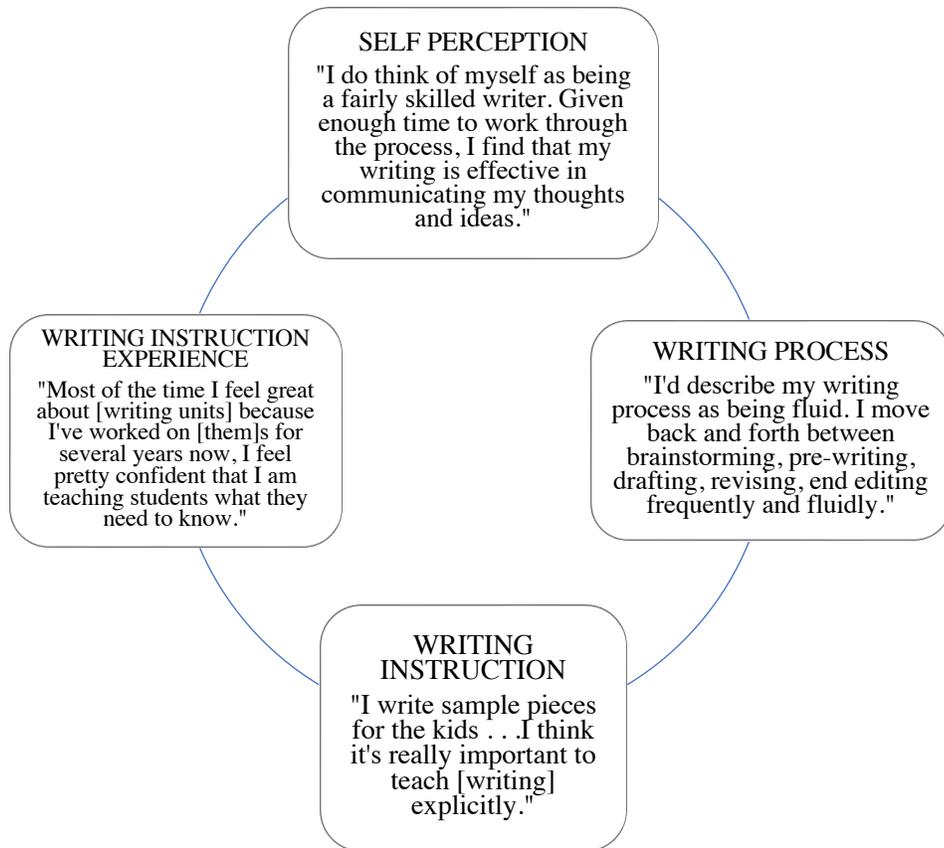
Five of the 6 participants in this case study showed direct connections between their self-perceptions as writers and how they feel while teaching writing units. Margaret, Caitlin, Debra, and Nancy all consider themselves to be skilled and organized writers. They elaborated on their writing processes and how they utilize their own skill set as an

advantage while teaching writing. See *Figure 3* for further demonstration of Debra's writing process and instruction.

Debra's confidence in herself as a writer allows for increased confidence as a writing teacher. Her experiences as a writer herself, including a real awareness of how her own writing process works for her, have allowed her to take control of writing instruction experiences in her classroom. Margaret clearly does not doubt that she is providing what is needed for her students to succeed, and finetunes her craft with each new year added to her tenure as middle school ELA teacher.

Figure 3

Debra's Relationship between Self-Perceptions and Instruction

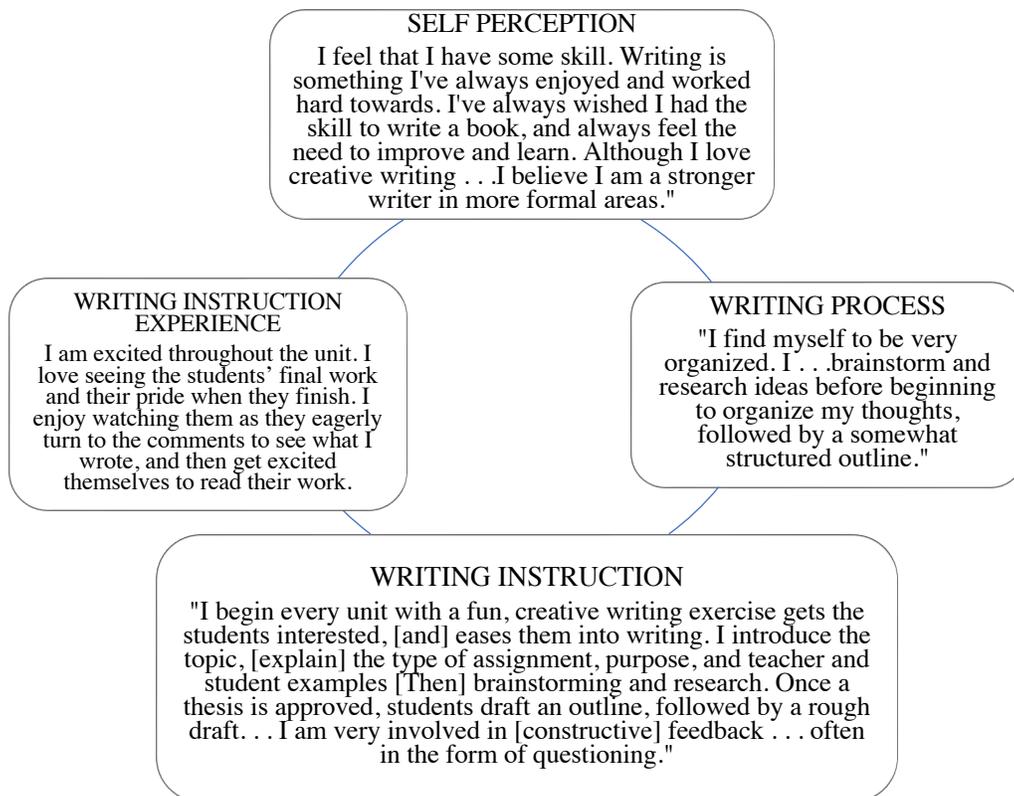


Similarly, Caitlin also views herself as a skilled and organized writer, which translates into a positive experience in her writing classroom. See *Figure 4*. Caitlin's

organization within her own writing process translates into a formulaic and structured type of writing instruction. Her own enjoyment—even a desire to write a book—make for moments of excitement and pride throughout her students’ writing unit. Both Caitlin and Debra shared the belief that being enthusiastic and selling the subject area was pivotal in student engagement and ultimate success. Through the lens of the Self-Efficacy and Self-Determination theoretical framework, these participants are prime examples of how believing they will be successful along with their competence and wherewithal to be autonomous and creative through the process align perfectly with both Bandura and Ryan and Deci’s theoretical viewpoints.

Figure 4

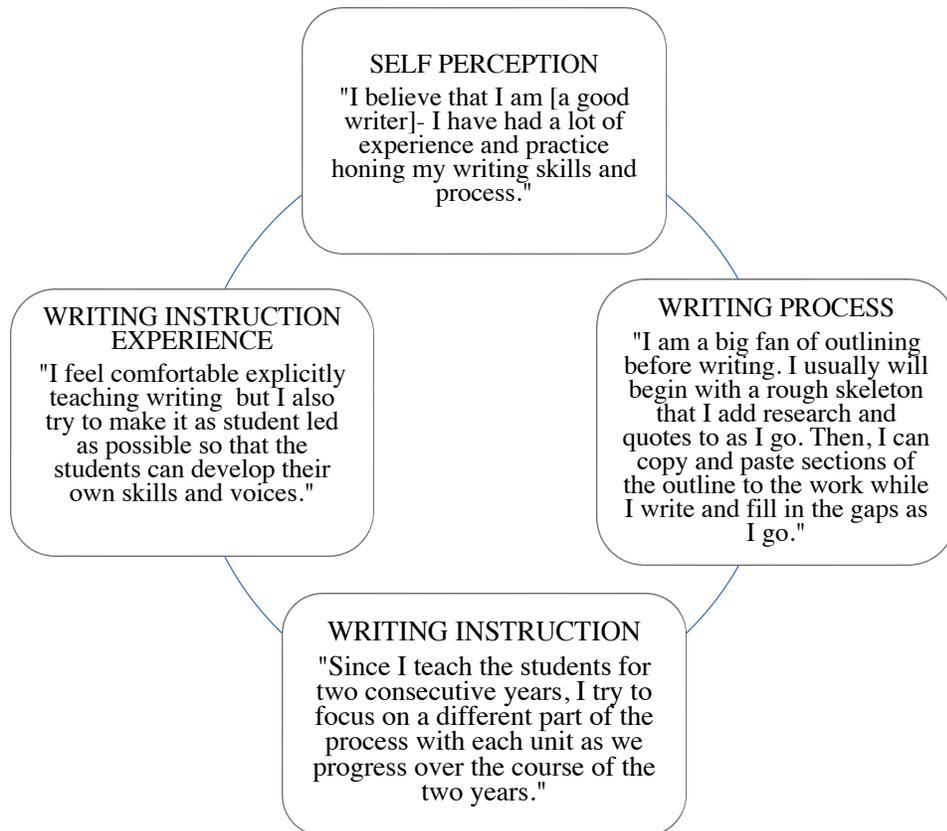
Caitlin’s Relationship between Self-Perceptions and Instruction



Margaret has a clear writing process that works well for her, which supports her certainty that she is a good writer who continues to hone her skills and process. Margaret's confidence translates seamlessly into her ELA classroom, where she not only is comfortable throughout all writing units, but also strong enough to facilitate student led work so her students are able to find their own voice and confidence as well. Student-centered instruction is a cornerstone of the research-based writing workshop framework (Read, 2014) and a major factor in the molding of independent writers, an important component of succeeding as writers in the real world (Torrence, 2015). See *Figure 5* for a depiction of the relationship between Margaret's perceptions and instruction.

Figure 5

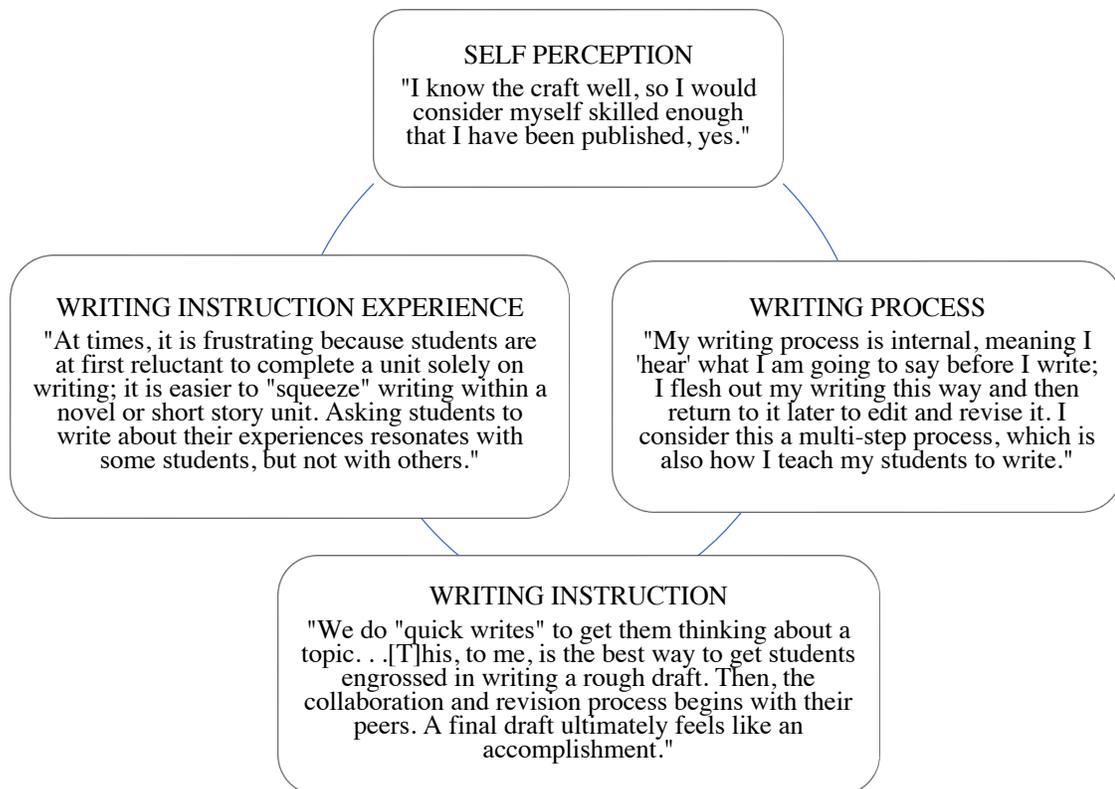
Margaret's Relationship between Self-Perceptions and Instruction



Nancy is a published writer and a lifelong student of writing. In both the qualitative survey and interview, she shared her love for continuously honing her craft by studying the writing of master authors and pushing herself to practice and work on her writing skills as much as she can. She is certainly confident in her own ability to write and mirrors her writing process in her writing instruction. Although, Nancy sometimes feels frustrated by her seeming lack of control over student reluctance or disengagement in writing. See *Figure 6* for Nancy's relationship between perceptions and instruction.

Figure 6

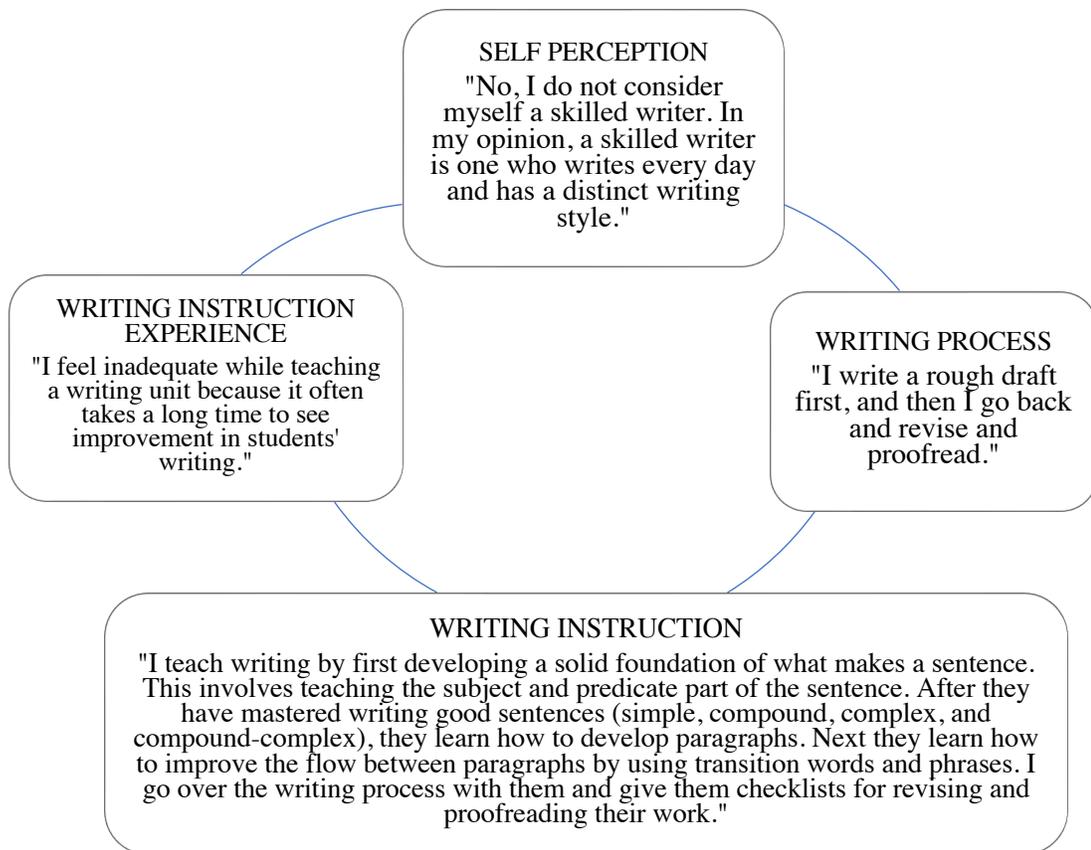
Nancy's Relationship between Self-Perceptions and Instruction



On the opposite end of this spectrum is Ellen and her perceptions and feelings towards writing instruction. Even as a twenty-six-year veteran teacher, Ellen finds any writing unit to be a dreaded component to her ELA curriculum. She does not consider herself to be a skilled writer, and admittedly depends on outside resources to aid her writing instruction as much as possible. Although the perception and feelings themselves are contrary to the other participants in the case study, the connection between perception and writing instruction is very much aligned. See *Figure 7* for further elaboration.

Figure 7

Ellen's Relationship between Self-Perceptions and Instruction

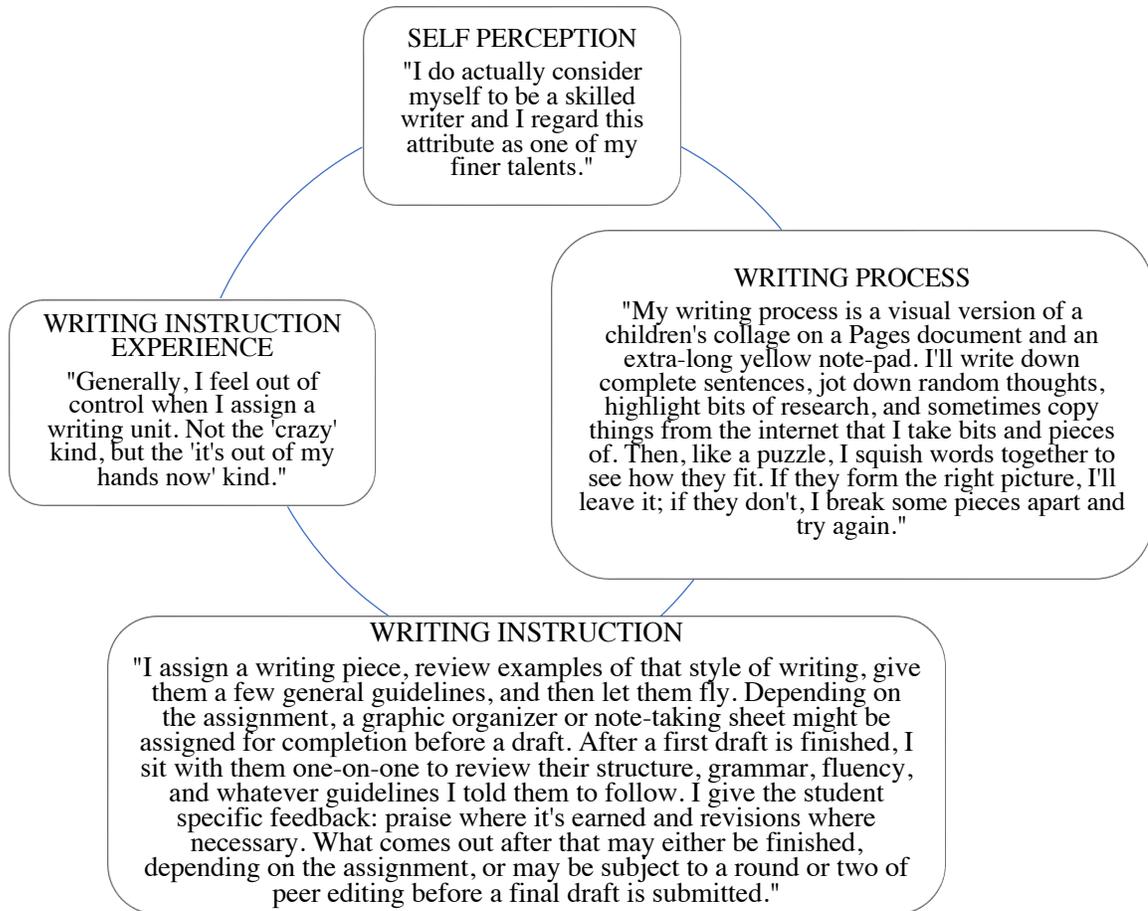


Allie proved to be the outlier within the connection between self-perceptions as a writer, emotions attached to writing instruction, and the instruction itself. She does not consider herself an ELA teacher at the core, as she is certified to teach Social Studies. Allie often questions her ability to teach her students writing, even though she finds herself to be a skilled writer. Her writing instruction has morphed into a very specific, graphic organizer-based teaching, where she provides students with a packet of resources that guide them through the writing process. Without this packet of graphic organizers and thinking maps where she shows students to gather their thoughts prior to writing them out, she does not feel confident in how to teach them to write through various genres. See *Figure 8* for further description of this process.

Allie was passionate in her sharing of what is missing and needed within the school system's approach to writing curriculum as well. She believes that without the proper tools and resources, teachers cannot feel truly capable of the difficult task of writing instruction. Although she is aware that this opinion could stem from her own insecurities as a writing teacher, she does believe that any extra support from leadership would be a welcome and necessary component to an improved writing program.

Figure 8

Allie's Relationship between Self-Perceptions and Instruction



Self-perceptions and instruction do relate in some ways, as seen within the data discussed here. Those teachers who were confident in their writing skills and their writing process were aware of what is needed to create successful student writers in their classroom. The teacher without a strong sense of self in writing utilized outside resources and programs to create the writing instruction for her students, and still described her writing units as being dread-filled and inadequate.

Research Question 3: How do schools support middle school teachers' successful writing instruction?

Effective teacher support is limited. A theme that was discussed multiple times throughout each survey and interview was that the professional development or supplemental instructional support for teachers within the parochial school system are heavily centered around a digital, standardized testing platform called iReady, rather than specific support for writing instruction on the middle school level. Allie shared that “Every PD since I came here last year has been on iReady,” and further elaborated that she has “not experienced one PD that has actually helped [her] to become a better teacher”. Along this same sentiment, Debra shared that “there's never been any PD that I've ever gotten from the diocese that I thought, ‘Wow, I've learned a lot here.’” Caitlin echoed the previously mentioned concerns when she stated, “I would like professional development to simply be offered. To clarify, professional development that goes beyond catering to state assessments or iReady.” Margaret and Ellen both agreed that few professional development opportunities for writing instruction, as well.

Additionally, Allie, Caitlin, and Debra shared how they look for and receive support outside of their school and school system. Most notably, they shared how they utilize digital resources, blogs, podcasts, and YouTube as ways to seek support outside of their own leadership teams. Furthermore, Debra attended a Teachers' College Reading and Writing Project summer workshop, which she personally paid for and is valued at one thousand dollars. This type of professional development is not realistic for all teachers, clearly, as time and money are not always as expendable. Nancy supports

herself through the studying of published authors whenever possible. Her perspective is unique, as one of her passions is for the written word. These teachers' self-awareness and passion for their profession motivated them to look outside of their workplace to find the support they need.

Outside of school or school system leadership support, Debra and Nancy also shared the importance of support from both colleagues and parents. Simply having the time to discuss strategies or to simply share notes on the instructional practices in writing that have worked well seemed to be an important component to feeling supported as a middle school ELA teacher. Debra discussed this idea in her interview: "The sixth-grade teacher at my school has suggested that she and I meet to discuss how we teach writing, and I am excited about that. I'm looking forward to it." This type of communication and collaboration, although seemingly simple in nature, was an important insight to emphasize within the findings.

Nancy shared the importance of having parent support when it comes to student proficiency in ELA. "I find it helpful to have parents' support. If the parents are not supportive, or aware, students who struggle with reading and writing often try to avoid completing the assignment." When parents are more aware of the work being completed in the writing classroom, they are able to help the student navigate their writing process, help with further revision work, or just share support for the writing in general.

When asked about the type of professional development they would create for writing teachers, the participants answers were heavily focused on dialogue with fellow teachers and practical implementation of writing instruction strategies—starkly different

from what they are currently receiving on the school and diocesan level. For example, Caitlin elaborated:

[Y]ou have to get [the teachers] involved. They have to actually do it. They don't want to hear to someone talk about things, they have to actually do it . . .

[W]orking together with other teachers is important because the people that might know a little bit more can help the people that are insecure. After most workshops you're like "But I don't know, can I actually apply this?" So, working together to actually use the strategies would help.

According to this sample population, shift from professional development from instructor-led to participant-centered, as well more targeted professional development on explicit writing instruction, would make a difference to the teachers.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

Teachers of middle school writing are more likely to feel equipped to teach their students effectively and guide them through a writing process as a community of writers when they have a strong self-perception of they are as writers themselves. Feeling autonomous and supported in their writing instruction are also important factors when it comes to fostering proficient student writers. Current professional development and building level support within the parochial school system in this case study does not benefit educators in their instructional practices—rather, it is focused on standardized testing and data mining. The teacher preparation programs the participants complete largely did not equip the teachers to enter a writing classroom with all the tools necessary to succeed. Teachers who first were members of professions outside of education, such as advertising, marketing, and journalism, were much more thoroughly prepared to teach writing based on the coursework for those career paths or from their writing experiences within the business world itself.

Relationship to Prior Research

Teacher Preparation

The findings here have highlighted the importance of Risko and Reid's (2019) research on quality teacher preparation programs being accessible to all. Five of the six participants within this embedded multiple case study shared that their teacher preparation programs did not prepare them to teach writing on the middle school level, or at all. Furthermore, the participants who worked in different fields prior to teaching explicitly pointed out that they felt more prepared by those professional experiences, or

the coursework related to those fields of study than by their education undergraduate or graduate programs. The need for consistency in teacher preparation programs discussed in Risko and Reid's work is an important consideration and are corroborated by the units of analysis within the present case study.

Self-Perceptions

The findings outlined in this study enhance the already present literature surrounding self-perceptions in teaching and how confidence affects teaching abilities. However, more specific study surrounding self-perceptions and writing instruction would be important additions to the present educational research. The Hodges, Wright & McTighe (2019) study on pre-service teachers' beliefs on writing and writing instruction provided insight into how teachers feel and perceive themselves as writers prior to entering the classroom. Following pre-service teachers into their time as full time educators to continue the study of their perceptions and how they continue to help or hinder their teaching capacity in writing would be a significant addition to the extant body of literature. The findings in this case study support this notion that self-perceptions of teachers as they continue their work in the classroom are just as important as understanding their perceptions as pre-service teachers.

Teacher Support

The body of research on teacher support and professional development show that teachers taking the role of active learners rather than passive participants is how educators work to become more effective in their profession (Svendsen, 2020). Although support within data mining and the iReady program has its benefits, with a continuous professional development focus on the standardized testing platform alone, teachers are

left to actively learn about teaching strategies and ideas elsewhere in their limited free time.

Implications of Findings

To fully understand the proficiency levels of teachers, school building leaders must learn about their educators just as teachers learn about their students. If a school leadership team is aware that certain teachers have a passion for the written word, consider themselves to be a skilled writer, or are confident and excited to begin each writing unit, then the professional development and support for those teachers should look very different from the teacher who admittedly does not feel confident as a writer, or dreads the beginning of a writing unit. With that understanding of your faculty, although a large undertaking, teachers will feel understood and supported, resulting in further engagement when it comes to challenging tasks. This practice of viewing teacher as student would only further connect the school building leader to their faculty and simultaneously propel morale and culture within the building.

Professional development of teachers who are unaware of their own writing process or hate to write themselves should be much more skills-based than pedagogy-based. The findings of this study mostly showed that the participants who explicitly teach writing and the writing process to their students understand themselves as writers as well. Fostering this type of awareness through professional development would ultimately engage both the teacher and their students. This type of professional development would look like a writing course where teachers are engaged in the actual lessons and objectives that they may include in their own mini lessons. While it's important to not belittle the teachers, this type of support could be both engaging and beneficial while maintaining

high level writing skills and encounters. This work would address all aspects of the research questions stated in this study: teacher self-perceptions, teacher preparation, and teacher support.

Limitations of the Study

The school system used within this study is a somewhat small organization of private schools and serves a mostly general education population. Families who enroll students in any school within the Diocese are paying tuition, and thus are inherently more advantaged than the families whose only option for their children's schooling is a free and public education. These students may present at varied in proficiency levels, but are not students with many restrictive special needs, as the school system cannot properly serve this student population. As a result, the product of successful student writing may be reached with less support from a teacher than in a traditional public school setting, depending on the student or grouping.

The teachers within the study are certified teachers, but many teach across grade levels and content areas as well, and some may be teaching out of certification. The undergraduate and graduate level preparation of these teachers are innately less robust than those educators who are currently teaching in the exact grade level and subject area in which they were prepared. This sample size may not be as generalizable than if larger, more dynamic and diverse school systems were utilized as the case study population.

This case study was completed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Teachers are pulled in several different directions throughout their day; many are balancing simultaneous remote instruction along with live, in-person instruction, attempting to support student proficiency gaps from extended remote instruction during formative

school years, in addition to the regular personal stressors that accompany a work/life balance during year two of a pandemic. Teachers' willingness to expend further energy in extracurricular matters, such as educational research, has shown to be a limitation to this study.

Utilizing a total of six participants to share their insights and experiences in both phases of data collection can be viewed as a limitation to this study. While the participants did represent varied backgrounds, experiences, and different school buildings, a well-round sampling of more educators in the initial qualitative survey data collection phase would have enabled me to choose participants who more widely represent the pool of educators within the school system.

With limited participation and access to teachers, I was unable to add an additional data collection phase, which would have been three focus group discussions between the survey and interview data collection phases. Along with more voices and perspectives, more data sources would only increase the trustworthiness of the study itself. While method triangulation did still occur, a third data source would have added a deeper inquiry to the analysis process and ultimately the findings described here.

Recommendations for Future Research

Probing the efficacy of teacher preparation programs is an area of need within educational research today. Without this type of inquiry, it will be difficult to bridge the gap between teachers who are struggling within the classroom, and how undergraduate and graduate education programs can better prepare those individuals to take on the rigors of teaching today. Since graduating my own teacher preparation programs, which have spanned four different colleges and universities, there has been no follow up to

inquire about the efficacy of these programs on my ability to complete the actual work on both the classroom teacher and school building leader levels. The bridge that connects the two points of schooling and the workplace is a murky, unknown structure. There is a need to fill this space in the realm of teacher preparation research today, which was further supported through the experiences of the six participants in this case study.

While the research surrounding self-efficacy and how perceptions and confidence increase ability to accomplish challenges is robust, the specifics of utilizing this theory to better support teachers of writing is an important extension needed in the body of literature. Studying professional development where teachers are the students, or active learners, and the focus is to increase their own confidence in the work asked of them would be eye-opening educational research that could inform those supporting a new generation of teachers coming into the workforce.

The ultimate objective for this research and the future inquiry recommended here is to create a generation of teachers who are confident writers and who can convey their knowledge and practice to their students. Researchers and school leadership teams could enhance teacher experiences, and in turn student achievement, by learning who teachers are as individuals, as learners, and as educators. Targeting professional development based on teacher needs is an important step forward in the realm of support for the school system within this case study. Working to improve teachers' sense of self-efficacy as writers is an important factor in student writing achievement, as well, and can be accomplished through consistent and effective teacher preparation programs and applicable professional support when teachers enter their classrooms.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I am asking you to participate in a research study titled “Writing teachers’ preparation, perceptions and support: qualitative case study”. I will describe this study to you and answer any of your questions. This study is being led by Rori Martello, a student in St. John’s University’s Doctor of Literacy program. The Faculty Advisor for this study is Dr. Claire Irwin, Adjunct Professor of Research at St. John’s University.

The purpose of this research study is to investigate how teachers’ perceptions of their own writing abilities along with their pre-service and in-service experiences affect their self-perceived capacity to teach their students how to write effectively.

As a participant in the study, I will ask you to complete a questionnaire comprised of ten open-ended questions. The total time to complete the questionnaire will be approximately 15-20 minutes. The final stage of data collection would be an hour-long individual interview. The interview questions will go into more specific detail of the topics studied. The total participation time commitment would be approximately two hours and fifteen minutes, over the course of a month’s time.

I do not anticipate any risks from participating in this research. Reflecting on your experiences as a teacher may lead to a better understanding of oneself and aid in your pedagogical development. Information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future as we hope to learn more about successful writing instruction and how it relates to the perceptions and proficiencies of writing teachers.

Survey participants will receive a \$5 Starbucks gift card, and interview participants will receive a \$25 Visa gift card.

Audio recording of individual interviews will be used so that coding and transcription through data collection and analysis can be as accurate as possible. Upon completion of the research, the recordings will be archived and destroyed after two years.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM

Project: Writing teachers' perceptions, preparation and support: qualitative case study

Date:

Time:

Location: Zoom, virtual meeting

Interviewer: Rori Martello

Interviewee:

Notes to Interviewee:

Thank you for your participation. Your input will be a valuable addition to the education research and help future school leaders and teachers improve middle school writing instruction.

Confidentiality of responses is guaranteed.

Approximate length of interview: one hour thirty minutes

Purpose of research: This case study seeks to develop a greater understanding of the preparation and support of educators tasked with the responsibility to effectively teach writing to students. With a better understanding of the teachers themselves, as well as their experiences and perceptions, school leaders and staff developers will have more clarity that can be utilized to further develop teachers' writing instruction abilities, self-efficacy, and confidence to improve their writing instruction and better prepare students for the writing rigors of high school, college, career, and beyond.

- I. Background Information
 - a. How many years have you been teaching?
 - b. Have you taught different subject areas besides ELA?
 - c. What is your favorite part of teaching middle school ELA?
 - i. Why?
 - d. What is your least favorite part of teaching middle school ELA?
 - i. Why?
 - e. Do you enjoy writing for your own pleasure?

- f. As a student preparing to become a teacher, how did you go about completing your own writing assignments?
 - i. Did you follow a writing process of your own understanding?
- g. How do you feel when beginning a writing unit?
 - i. Why?
 - ii. Could you expand on...
- h. Could you explain how you plan for the writing units you complete with your students?
 - i. What has worked well?
 - ii. What was the least successful writing unit you've completed?
 - 1. Why would you describe it as unsuccessful?
- i. Do you write your own piece along with your students?
 - i. Why or why not?

II. Teacher Preparation Programs

- a. Where did you complete your undergraduate and graduate course work?
- b. How would you describe the efficacy of these programs?
 - i. As a teacher now, would you have changed any pieces of your course work to better prepare future teachers to teach middle school ELA?
- c. What components of teaching Middle School ELA did your teacher preparation coursework best prepare you for?
 - i. Can you expand on...
 - ii. Tell me more about...
- d. Did your graduate and/or undergraduate studies help you become a more effective writer yourself?
 - i. How would you describe your own writing process?
 - ii. How do past writing experiences help you to better teach writing?
 - iii. Do you consider yourself a skilled writer?
- e. As a first year ELA teacher, what did you feel most confident about?
 - i. Did this confidence transform and/or expand with each year you taught?
 - 1. How so?

III. Professional Development

- a. What types of professional development have you participated in throughout your teaching career?
 - i. Could you tell me more about...

- b. Were most of the professional development sessions hosted in your school building by your school leadership team, or did you seek PD outside of your school?
 - i. Did you find in-house or outsourced PDs to be more productive and helpful for your teaching practices?
 - 1. Why?
- c. How would you rate the efficacy of these types of professional developments?
 - i. Why?
- d. If you were given an opportunity to design a professional development series or workshop for new middle school writing teachers, what would you be sure to include in the work?
- e. Have you ever completed a professional development workshop or series that truly made a difference in your writing teaching practice?
 - i. What was it like?
 - ii. Why was it so impactful?
 - iii. Where did you find this PD?

IV. General Comments

- a. Is there anything more you'd like to share regarding anything discussed?
 - i. Perceptions/Efficacy?
 - ii. Teacher preparation?
 - iii. Professional development?

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