

12-2014

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## Recommended Citation

White, K.M. and Hall, Anna H., "Examining Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Writing Strategies and Barriers to Implementation" (2014). *Publications*. 24.

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# **Examining Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Writing Strategies and Barriers to Implementation**

## **PURPOSE**

For years researchers have sought to better understand how children successfully acquire literacy skills. While much attention has been paid to children's early reading development, less attention has been paid to children's writing development (Clay, 2001). Writing is a complex and demanding task for children (Lienemann et al., 2006). It involves a great deal of cognitive effort, attentional control, and self-regulation (Graham & Harris, 2003) as children must use and integrate a variety of skills and processes, while also attempting to make their writing meaningful for the intended audience. Given this complexity, children need strong instructional support to create coherent, well-written texts.

Writing is often neglected in the early grades, even though data consistently show many students struggle in this area. Only twenty-four percent of students at both grades 8 and 12 performed at the Proficient level in writing in 2011 on a national writing assessment. Fifty-four percent of eighth-graders and 52 percent of twelfth-graders performed at the Basic level and only three percent of eighth- and twelfth-graders performed at the Advanced level. Furthermore, college instructors estimate that 50% of high school graduates are not prepared for college-level writing demands (Achieve, Inc. 2005).

Research has demonstrated specific instructional strategies that teachers use to effectively support children's writing. These include scaffolding (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Bruner, 1966) and modeling (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Chapman, 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997). Yet we know very little as to how often teachers use such strategies and/or what barriers they perceive in implementing practices identified as effective. In general, researchers currently have little data on what effective writing instruction actually looks like in schools (Cutler & Graham, 2008).

The purpose of the present study was to identify strategies for teaching writing that teachers deem effective and the barriers they perceive in implementing these strategies. Research

questions included a) what instructional practices are elementary school teachers using to teach writing?, b) what do teachers perceive as barriers to effective writing instruction in early elementary school?, and c) how are teacher beliefs and characteristics (education, experience level, etc.) associated with these perceptions?

Through the use of a state-wide survey, randomly-selected teachers responded to items from the Classroom Practices Survey (Cutler & Graham, 2008), Teacher Efficacy Scale for Writing (Graham et al., 2001), and the Writing Orientation Scale (Graham et al., 2001), as well as questions regarding teacher demographics. The knowledge gained from this study will help us better understand what teachers perceive as effective writing instruction and what impedes teachers from implementing best practices in writing. This information will be helpful for researchers, teacher educators and professional development personnel to help improve and guide future instruction.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research has established teacher self-efficacy as an important contributor to successful student outcomes. Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as a teacher's beliefs in his/her capabilities to organize instruction and manage the classroom. He argued teachers' beliefs about their competence are subject-specific and rely heavily on experience. Teachers who are more efficacious are more organized (Allinder, 1994) plan and implement lessons of higher quality (Rubech & Enoch, 1991) and are more enthusiastic and more committed to the teaching profession. Several studies by Graham and colleagues have begun to investigate teacher efficacy in the area of writing. Results indicate classroom practices of high- and low-efficacy teachers differ in several ways (Graham, et al., 2001). The current study was particularly focused on assessing perceived barriers to writing instruction that may be above and beyond teachers' sense of efficacy. It was hypothesized that some teachers may feel rather competent in their ability to teach writing, yet weren't always implementing evidence-based instructional strategies due to multiple barriers. We wanted to better understand what those barriers might be.

## METHOD

### **Recruitment**

Elementary school teachers were recruited from randomly selected districts across a single southeastern state. The first point of contact was the principal at each site. Principals were sent an email explaining the purpose of the study and were provided with a link to the electronic survey. This proposal describes the results of the first round of data collection. Given the small sample size resulting from this first round of data collection, the decision was made to collect a second round of data in spring of 2014. Results for the larger sample will be reported at the time of the conference.

### **Participants**

Over 120 teachers began the survey, but only 80 completed it. Of those, 96% of the teachers were female. Over 90% were White and only 7% were Black. The remaining 2% reported their ethnicity as Asian or American Indian. In regards to teaching experience, 39% had been teaching for less than 10 years and over 16% had been in the field for over 25 years. All grade levels (preschool through 5<sup>th</sup>) were represented fairly equally. Over 60% of teachers had a master's degree and all but one was certified as an early childhood or elementary school teacher.

### **Measures**

Teachers completed an electronic survey in which they responded to items from three different surveys used in previous research. The survey included 16 items from Teacher Efficacy Scale for Writing (Graham, et al, 2001). This measure assesses teachers' beliefs about their own competence as teachers of writing. Each item was rated on a six-point Likert scale. Response options ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Sample items included "When students' writing performance improves, it is usually because I found better ways of teaching that student" and "If one of my students could not do a writing assignment, I would be able to accurately assess if the assignment was at the correct level of difficulty."

Teachers responded to 18 items from the Writing Orientation Scale (Graham et al., 2001) which measured teachers' beliefs regarding effective writing instruction. Each item was rated on a six-point Likert scale. Response options ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Sample items included “A good way to begin writing instruction is to have children copy good models of each particular type of writing” and “Children's initial attempts to write should focus on content or meaning, not upon mechanics or form.”

Teachers also responded to over 30 items from the Classroom Practices Survey (Cutler & Graham, 2008) in which teachers reported how often they used specific instructional strategies. For example, writing conferences, journaling, and worksheets. These were rated on an 8-point scale ranging from “never” to “several times a day.”

Finally, teachers responded to an item measuring the perceived barriers to writing instruction. Response options included not enough instructional time or materials, and lack of administrative support, among others. Teachers were also encouraged to write comments in response to this item to allow for further elaboration.

## RESULTS

Teachers reported using a variety of instructional practices to teach writing. The most commonly used practices included use of mini-lessons, conferences and writing centers. However, while it was clear a majority of teachers (97%) valued conferencing with students, only 75% made time to do it on a daily or weekly basis. The least commonly used practices included assigning writing homework and use of worksheets.

Few teachers reported using technology in their writing instruction. For example, only 40% allowed students to use computers for writing on a daily or weekly basis and 46% of teachers reported “never” letting students use additional technologies (digital cameras, iPads, etc.) during the writing period. Even more interesting was the fact that only 57% of teachers saw use of additional technologies as important.

In response to the item assessing perceived barriers to writing instruction, 70% of teachers indicated not having enough instructional time to teach writing. 32% mentioned lack of materials/resources needed and 21% cited lack of professional development or training in writing. 21% of teachers cited classroom management or behavioral issues as a barrier to

effective writing instruction. Other barriers reported included students' reluctance to write and students' lack of previous knowledge of or experience with writing.

Additional results reporting how these findings are associated with teachers' efficacy and characteristics (education, experience level, etc.) will be reported in December after the second round of data collection and analysis has concluded.

### IMPLICATIONS

The knowledge gained from this study will provide helpful information for planning teacher education and professional development activities designed to enhance teachers' writing instruction. It will also inform research by further investigating the connection between teachers' beliefs and instructional practices.

### CONNECTION TO AUDIENCE

This research will be of interest to teacher educators in attendance at LRA given their role in informing and advocating for best practices in the instruction of writing. Furthermore, the study is aligned with the conference theme in its' focus on multiple perspectives regarding how literacies are constructed and taught. This study gives voice to practicing teachers, as it identifies practices they see as effective and reveals barriers that they experience in their day-to-day work with elementary school students.