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Investigating What Matters for Writing Instruction in South Carolina Elementary Schools: Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Writing Strategies and Barriers to Implementation

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ABSTRACT — Research has demonstrated a variety of instructional strategies that effectively support young children's writing, yet little is known about how often teachers use these strategies. The purpose of the present study was to identify instructional strategies for writing that teachers deem effective, how often they use them, and what they perceive as barriers to implementation. The sample included approximately 100 randomly selected elementary school teachers (grades K-5th) from across the state of South Carolina. Survey results indicated teachers use a variety of effective practices to teach their young writers, notably use of modeling and mini-lessons. However, teachers reported having little time to teach writing with exceptional limitations in the use of technology to build writing skills.

Introduction

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, Graham, Leader-Janssen, & Reidk, 2006) because it involves a great deal of cognitive effort, attentional control, and self-regulation (Graham & Harris, 2003). In order to write effectively, 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.

Despite a wealth of data indicating many students struggle with writing (National Commission on Writing, 2003), in general, writing instruction does not often get the attention it deserves in elementary school classrooms. 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 (defined as partial mastery; the level below "proficient") 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).

Students attending South Carolina schools are no exception. In 2014, close to 30% of eighth graders did not meet the

benchmark on the state's annual PASS test for writing (see <https://ed.sc.gov/data/pass/2014/>). Similarly, 22% of third graders and 20% of fifth graders also did not meet the benchmark. In particular, third graders struggled the most in using voice and in the development of their writing. In fact only 23% of third graders showed strengths in the use of voice and only 19% of eighth graders, indicating a lack of notable growth in this area of writing in the elementary and middle grades.

Research has provided specific instructional strategies deemed effective for building and enhancing struggling young writers. These include scaffolding (Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Bruner, 1966) and modeling (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Chapman, 1996; McGee & Purcell-Gates, 1997), yet we know little as to how often teachers use such strategies and/or what barriers they perceive in implementing practices that have been 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 instructional strategies for writing that teachers deem effective, determine how often they used these specific strategies, and examine what teachers perceive as barriers for implementation. Research questions included: 1) what instructional writing strategies are South Carolina elementary school teachers currently using that they deem effective, b) how often are they using these strategies, and c) what do these teachers perceive as barriers to implementing effective writing instruction? The knowledge gained from this study will help to better understand what teachers perceive as effective writing instruction and what impedes teachers from implementing best practices in writing. This information is beneficial for researchers, teacher educators and professional development personnel to help improve and guide future work in this area.

Literature Review

Research has documented a variety of effective instructional strategies for the teaching of writing in the early grades. Graham and colleagues (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of research on writing with the purpose of identifying effective practices for writing instruction in the elementary grades. After reviewing over 100 studies, results indicated explicit teaching of writing

processes and skills was effective, as were strategies that involved teacher scaffolding. This included involving students in prewriting activities, providing opportunities for peer editing and student goal setting. Finally, analyses also revealed students whose teachers adopted a process approach to writing and those who used the self-regulated strategy development model made greater progress across the school year (Graham, et al., 2012).

While this study helped to highlight what is important for effective writing instruction, less is known about whether or not teachers actually implement such approaches. Cutler and Graham (2008) administered a survey to a large, national sample of primary grades' teachers to see which practices they were using to teach writing. Results indicated 90% of the teachers reported using most of the writing instructional strategies included in the survey. Yet there was wide variability in how often they used them. They also found 65% of teachers reported they did not use a commercial program to teach writing, but instead used a combination of instructional strategies they deemed effective.

While Cutler and Graham called for teachers to spend more time teaching writing as a result of their national study (as did the National Commission on Writing convened in 2003), more recent research suggests teachers continue to spend little time teaching writing. Puranik and colleagues (2014) observed over 20 kindergarten classrooms and found wide variability in the amount and type of instruction observed. On average, these kindergarten teachers only spent 6.1 minutes teaching writing in the fall and only 10.5 minutes teaching writing in the winter. Furthermore, students spent a majority of that time writing independently versus receiving instruction from their teachers. When teachers did provide writing instruction, it was more often focused on handwriting versus spelling or the writing process (Puranik, et al., 2014). De Smedt and Van Keer (2014) conducted a research synthesis of studies on writing instruction and found, despite overwhelming evidence for the efficacy of such approaches, across studies teachers rarely used strategy-based instruction, made little time for students to write collaboratively, and often had great difficulty integrating technology into their writing instruction.

Furthermore, research on reading has indicated strategies used are not always those teachers deem to be effective. For example, some teachers feel pressure to use literacy strategies recommended by their districts versus those they know to be effective, especially when under immense pressure for students to perform well on standardized tests (Dooley & Assaf, 2008). We wondered whether this holds true for writing instruction in elementary classrooms. Although previous research highlights various ways teachers approach writing instruction, it is not clear how often teachers employ specific strategies or how these align with what they deem as effective. The current study attempted to answer these questions through the use of survey methodology.

Survey research was selected for the current study because it allowed random sampling of multiple teachers throughout South Carolina; thus giving a broader picture of writing practices used than had we simply sampled teachers from one school or

district. In addition, an online survey was used because teachers typically have easy access to email and are more likely to answer questions when given a flexible timeframe. The online format also provided anonymity which we thought was important for accurately assessing teachers' perceptions and reported practices.

Method

Recruitment

Elementary school teachers were recruited from randomly selected districts across the state of South Carolina. 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. Given the small sample size resulting from this first round of data collection in the spring of 2013, the decision was made to collect a second round of data in spring of 2014.

Participants

Over 150 teachers began the survey, and 103 completed it. Characteristics of the sample can be found in Table A. The majority of teachers were White females. In general, they were fairly experienced (most had been teaching for more than five years) and well educated (over 60% had Master's degrees) and they represented a range of grade levels. Class sizes ranged from 8 to 25 students, with teachers most commonly reporting a class size of 20. A majority of teachers (65%) reported having 10 or more students who received free or reduced lunch and 74% of teachers had between 1 and 5 students with special needs in their class. A majority of students (45%) served by these teachers were White, 35% were Black and 12% were reported as Hispanic. See Table A.

Table A. Teacher characteristics.

Variable	n	%
GENDER		
Female	100	97%
Male	3	3%
ETHNICITY		
White	93	89%
Black or African American	7	7%
Asian	2	2%
Hispanic or Latino	1	2%
EDUCATION LEVEL		
Bachelor's degree	22	21%
1 year or more beyond Bachelor's	15	14%
Master's degree	64	61%
Doctorate	1	1%
EXPERIENCE		
0-5 years	38	39%
6-10 years	27	28%
11-25 years	30	31%
Over 25 years	3	3%
GRADE LEVEL		
Preschool	8	8%
Kindergarten	18	17%
1st	18	17%
2nd	13	13%
3rd	13	13%
4th	11	11%
5th	14	14%

Measures

Teachers completed an electronic survey in which they responded to approximately 100 total items. Most teachers were able to complete the survey in 20-30 minutes. The items were taken from several surveys used in previous research. Items about barriers to effective writing instruction were created for the purpose of the present study.

Classroom Practices Survey. Teachers also responded to 35 items from the Classroom Practices Survey (Cutler & Graham, 2008) in which teachers reported whether or not they saw each practice as effective and also reported how often they used each strategy. Sample items included use of writing conferences, journaling, and worksheets. These were rated on an 8-point scale ranging from “never” to “several times a day.” The survey was developed by Cutler, Graham and colleagues who created the items based on a review of research on writing. Additional researchers established reliability of the measure by correlating observed practices with teachers’ survey responses. Reported and observed practices were not statistically different (Lane,

et al., 2010; Olinghouse, 2008). In the present study, correlations between practices reported as effective and those used by teachers ranged from .20 to .69, demonstrating reliability of the measure.

Barriers. Finally, teachers responded to an item measuring the perceived barriers to writing instruction. Response options included “not enough instructional time,” “lack of 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. These items were created after discussion and review by teachers in several focus groups conducted as part of another study undertaken by the principal investigators.

Results

Teachers reported using a variety of instructional practices to teach writing. Table B includes data on which practices teachers deemed effective and how often teachers reported using each

Table B. Practices deemed effective and rates of use.

Question	% of teachers who see this practice as effective (N=98)	N	Never	Several times a year	Monthly	Several times a month	Weekly	Several times a week	Daily	Several times a day	Mean
Tchr models enjoyment	88%	97	0%	0%	1%	5%	20%	22%	30%	19%	6.36
Explicitly models strategies	94%	98	0%	0%	1%	5%	22%	21%	35%	14%	6.29
Provides minilessons	95%	98	1%	0%	1%	7%	20%	19%	41%	9%	6.17
Writing across content areas	92%	98	2%	0%	3%	8%	13%	20%	41%	11%	6.15
Tchr monitors progress	81%	97	0%	2%	3%	3%	26%	20%	34%	10%	6.04
Stdnts monitor own progress	83%	98	0%	4%	3%	2%	26%	18%	34%	11%	6.01
Stdnts use invented spellings	76%	97	5%	2%	5%	5%	18%	8%	39%	16%	5.94
Teacher reteaches	90%	98	0%	0%	3%	9%	29%	25%	21%	11%	5.87
Use writing to support reading	90%	98	0%	3%	3%	11%	24%	14%	33%	10%	5.86
Write in journals	95%	98	2%	3%	2%	9%	19%	20%	36%	7%	5.85
Write during free choice time	88%	96	2%	4%	3%	8%	18%	18%	33%	11%	5.84
Stdnts “plan” before writing	97%	97	0%	2%	1%	10%	31%	22%	29%	2%	5.70
Stdnts write at their own pace	83%	97	1%	1%	1%	11%	36%	14%	30%	4%	5.68
Use graphic organizers	88%	97	2%	2%	4%	4%	30%	22%	30%	3%	5.67
Work at writing centers	74%	98	7%	4%	4%	8%	17%	19%	30%	9%	5.51
Tchr reads own writing to stdnts	91%	96	0%	4%	8%	13%	20%	22%	22%	7%	5.48
Use writing prompts	82%	97	0%	3%	5%	14%	24%	27%	20%	4%	5.47
Tchr conferences with students	98%	99	1%	0%	3%	21%	27%	27%	18%	2%	5.38
Stdnts help classmates	85%	98	3%	5%	6%	8%	26%	22%	24%	4%	5.36
Stdnts share writing w/peers	94%	96	0%	3%	5%	14%	32%	21%	20%	2%	5.35
Stdnts “revise” writing	94%	96	0%	1%	6%	13%	37%	21%	17%	2%	5.34
Stdnts write informational texts	86%	97	1%	11%	9%	16%	25%	14%	15%	6%	4.91
Stdnts select their own topics	85%	98	3%	6%	8%	21%	29%	14%	15%	2%	4.83
Stdnts use writing portfolios	83%	97	8%	7%	10%	12%	25%	14%	17%	4%	4.74
Stdnts conference w/peers	88%	99	6%	8%	8%	13%	27%	27%	8%	2%	4.72
Stdnts “publish” writing	90%	97	0%	6%	9%	30%	32%	10%	8%	2%	4.65
Stdnts use rubrics	85%	98	13%	10%	6%	8%	32%	10%	15%	4%	4.49
Use computers during writing	62%	98	22%	15%	10%	13%	14%	7%	13%	4%	3.77
Assigns writing homework	47%	98	15%	18%	12%	18%	18%	8%	8%	1%	3.68
Use worksheets for writing skills	38%	98	21%	12%	18%	8%	23%	9%	7%	0%	3.56
Use worksheets for writing process	27%	97	27%	9%	20%	10%	18%	9%	4%	0%	3.27
Stdnts dictate compositions	41%	97	32%	16%	11%	9%	16%	6%	4%	3%	3.10
Use worksheets for handwriting	28%	98	35%	11%	17%	5%	18%	7%	5%	0%	3.01
Uses addl technologies (iPad, etc.)	57%	97	48%	10%	8%	5%	12%	5%	7%	3%	2.82
Use worksheets for homework	15%	97	54%	14%	5%	8%	9%	4%	4%	0%	2.32

practice. The most commonly used practices included use of mini-lessons and writing centers. Approximately 80% of teachers saw rubrics as an effective way to assess student writing and 60% reported using rubrics on a frequent basis. A majority of teachers (93%) valued conferencing with students, yet only 70% made time to do it on a daily or weekly basis. Allowing students to help one another while writing was seen as effective by over 80% of teachers, but less than 70% made time for it on a weekly basis. Many teachers (85%) reported student choice in topic as important (see Table B), as was providing opportunities for students to work at their own pace (83%). However, only 61% of teachers provided opportunities for children to choose their own topics on a weekly or daily basis. Teachers also overwhelmingly reported allowing children to use invented spelling in their writing. Over 40% provide at least daily opportunities to do so, and another 26% provided opportunities for this at least weekly or several times a week.

Few teachers saw assigning writing worksheets for homework as effective (15%). Yet approximately 50% reported doing so (see Table B). In fact, few (25-35%) saw value in the use of any kind of worksheets (even those focused on punctuation, grammar or handwriting). However, approximately 22% reported using worksheets for handwriting on a monthly basis (or more than once a month), 25% used them at least weekly (or more than once a week) and 5% used them on a daily basis.

Few teachers reported using technology in their writing instruction (see Table B). For example, only 26% 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 about 50% of teachers saw integration of additional technologies in writing instruction as important.

Teachers reported a variety of barriers to effective writing instruction. Table C includes data on what percentage of teachers perceived each item as a barrier. The most common response was lack of instructional time, with 68% of teachers reporting this as a barrier. Around 30% mentioned lack of materials/resources needed, which included technology, and 20% cited lack of professional development or training in writing. Close to 25% of teachers cited classroom management or behavioral issues as a barrier to effective writing instruction. "Other" barriers teachers wrote in the comment box included students' reluctance to write and students' lack of previous knowledge of and/or experience with writing.

Table C. Perceived barriers to writing instruction.

N = 74	Response	%
Not enough instructional time	50	68%
Lack materials/resources needed	22	30%
Classroom management issues/students' behavior	18	24%
Received little to no training/professional development	15	20%
Received poor quality training/professional development	3	4%
Receive little to no support from my administration and/or school district.	3	4%
What I believe to be effective practices are not supported by curriculum used	3	4%
Other barrier(s)...	15	20%

Discussion

In order to avoid proposing "solutions that do not fit the most relevant problems" (Gilbert & Graham 2010, p. 495) this study focuses on the voices of practicing teachers, as it identifies practices they see as effective and reveals barriers they experience in their day-to-day work with elementary school students. Graham et al. (2012) made four primary recommendations for effective writing instruction for elementary students including: 1) providing students with opportunities to practice writing daily, 2) teaching students to use writing for a variety of purposes, 3) teaching students to become fluent with handwriting, spelling and sentence construction and 4) creating an engaged community of writers. While it is clear that a majority of the teachers in this study agreed these would lead to effective writing instruction, all of these recommendations require a strong instructional time commitment, which is the area that teachers in this study felt they struggled with the most.

In general, there were a variety of instructional strategies teachers deemed effective. However, rates at which teachers used individual strategies did not always align with those they deemed effective. For example, quite a few teachers reported use of worksheets as ineffective, yet also reported using them from time to time. We believe this data supports the need to encourage teachers to rely on what they know is best practice and use it to critically evaluate curricular materials, rather than just adopting them at face value. Rather than using worksheets for homework (which, once again, most teachers saw as ineffective), teachers could design writing homework that requires students to write with family members for more authentic reasons. For example, co-creating the week's grocery list with a parent, composing an email to a family member who lives far away, keeping a family blog, or writing thank you notes for birthday gifts.

A lack of time to teach writing is not a new problem for teachers. Research has indicated that teachers do not think they have enough time to include writing on a daily basis nor integrate technology (Hutchison & Reinking, 2011). In order to address this issue, it is important for administrators to make writing a priority in their schools and to set expectations for writing instruction across content areas, as well as across grade levels. Writing instruction can easily be integrated into instruction in other content areas. In fact, helping students write about

what is learned during math lessons has been found beneficial for mastery of new content (Brandenburg, 2002). In addition, writing about what is learned in other content areas brings meaning and authenticity to writing assignments (Moss, 2005).

In this study, teachers found conferencing to be an effective strategy, but reported little time for it during the school day. It can be difficult to confer with each student on a weekly basis. Most teachers who use a writing workshop approach to instruction try to conference with only 4-5 students a day, while the rest of the class may be engaged in independent writing. Teachers generally keep these conferences to no more than five minutes each. Others could build in conferencing during literacy centers. Another idea might be to recruit parent volunteers to help with conferencing. Furthermore, children can be taught to confer with one another and often find value in the feedback provided by their peers.

To address lack of time for writing, teachers should be encouraged to use mini-lessons in their writing instruction. An effective mini-lesson is one in which the teacher identifies a specific focus and highlights the strategy or skill using their own writing, authentic literature, or the students' own writing (Tompkins, 2011). The teacher then provides explicit modeling of the strategy and provides time for guided practice. Research has demonstrated mini-lessons can be a powerful way to focus students' attention on an individual writing skill or strategy when followed by an immediate opportunity to write and apply what is learned (Tompkins, 2011).

To be most effective, professional development on writing should be focused and ongoing. Darling-Hammond (1996) argues that professional development should involve opportunities for teachers to reflect and collaborate with other teachers. Further, professional development opportunities should include opportunities that incorporate demonstration, practice, and coaching (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Lang & Fox, 2004) so that teachers are encouraged and supported in practicing new strategies when they return to their classrooms. For example, trainers could visit classrooms to perform model lessons as well as observing teachers' writing lessons and providing immediate feedback. It is also critical that teachers receive professional development on integrating writing across the curriculum in order to help teachers maximize their instructional time and use writing as part of instruction in other content areas. The National Writing Project has close to 200 sites and serves all 50 states to provide such training, including opportunities for teachers to become instructional leaders at their own schools through participation in summer institutes.

Furthermore, in a previous study by Graham and colleagues (2012) only 12% of teachers indicated their college coursework adequately prepared them to teach writing. Teacher preparation programs should be encouraged to improve preparation in this area by offering additional coursework and/or improving existing literacy courses to increase the focus on writing. Local efforts in response to Read to Succeed legislation at both the College of Charleston and Clemson University have included the creation of a new course focused almost exclusively

on writing to better prepare pre-service candidates.

Another barrier that teachers discussed was the lack of resources available to teach writing. With a focused professional development model, teachers can learn to collaboratively develop new materials and lesson plans without additional financial burdens. There are also a variety of resources available on the internet, including websites of the Teacher's College Reading and Writing Project (<http://readingandwritingproject.org/>) and the National Writing Project (<http://www.nwp.org/>).

Results of the present study indicated a need for teachers to better integrate technology in their writing instruction. Previous research found use of technology in classrooms helps to improve children's writing quality (Graham, et al., 2012). Administrators should look to provide greater professional development in this area, as well as find ways to purchase appropriate technology tools for teachers to use in their classrooms. In order for students to be prepared for the work force, they must feel comfortable using technology to communicate their ideas (Skinner & Hagood, 2008). For example, teachers might provide opportunities for students to try journaling on an iPad, share classroom news via Twitter, or compose digital stories with VoiceThread.

Finally, results of the present study indicated some teachers saw classroom management issues and students' reluctance to write as key barriers to effective writing instruction. Perhaps, the management issues are driven by lack of structure during the writing block which could be addressed via professional development on the writing workshop model. Behavioral issues could be related to a lack of student motivation or interest in writing. Our data does not provide enough explanation in this area so this may be an avenue for future research. For example, we need to know more about the particular behaviors and management issues teachers face before we can suggest appropriate solutions. However, students' reluctance to write may be addressed by providing more choice in topic and genre. Research has demonstrated when students are given opportunities to write about topics that matter to them, they are more motivated to write (Ghisso, 2011). It might also help to find more opportunities for students to write in the context of play and/or for more authentic reasons. For example, creating menus for play in the grocery store or writing letters to the principal to ask for help funding a classroom project.

Teachers have also found success in providing opportunities for peers to collaborate when writing. This allows children to build off one another's strengths and provides opportunities for them to learn from one another in an environment that feels safe, especially to the reluctant and struggling writers. In a meta-analysis of what works in writing interventions, Graham and Perin (2007) found peer response highly effective in improving writing of students across grade levels. Furthermore, collaboration between peers when writing was found most effective when facilitated by a supportive teacher (Hoogeveen & van Gelderen, 2013).

There are several limitations to this research. First, we relied solely on teacher reported data to measure frequency

of instructional strategies used. We know survey data may be less reliable than classroom observations because teachers may report what they want to do rather than reporting what actually happens in their classrooms (Mayer, 1999). We are cautious interpreting the results of this study due to the possibility of response bias which sometimes occurs when teachers with positive dispositions toward the topic of the survey (e.g., writing) respond to the survey more frequently than teachers with a negative disposition. In addition, we are aware that survey respondents sometimes interpret items differently.

It is also important to note that this study only allows us to examine teachers' perceptions of classroom practices. Therefore, the survey design does not encompass school or district policies that also shape instruction, nor does it examine all possible aspects of writing instruction due to the necessary brief nature of online surveys. Though fairly representative of the larger population, we also know the study is limited given the sample is fairly small. While still informative, this study would need to be replicated with a wider pool of teachers in order to be fully generalizable.

In conclusion, it is encouraging that state legislation such as the Read to Succeed Act has placed an increased emphasis on writing instruction in South Carolina and that teachers report using many effective writing strategies identified in current research. This study helps identify roadblocks that teachers may face in implementing these strategies and provides many implications for teachers, teacher educators, and professional development personnel in order to support teachers in improving their writing practices. As educators' literacy paradigms continue to shift to see writing as equally important as reading, students will experience the benefits of more balanced literacy instruction.

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