


12-2017

Writing for Keeps-Instruction and Achievement

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Writing for Keeps – Instruction and Achievement

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The study was conducted in a small rural Texas district. Students within the district were struggling with successful writing initiatives. Achievement and accountability within the district were below state and regional averages consistently for many years. Writing instruction in the district needed attention to help students and teachers experience writing success. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) What instructional practices do Frazier ISD teachers utilize to teach writing? (2) What aspects of writing do Frazier ISD students struggle to understand? (3) To what extent does the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test impact writing success at Frazier ISD? And (4) How do teachers and students describe the learning process associated with writing at Frazier ISD?

A mixed methods approach was utilized to gather information and data on writing in the Frazier ISD. Information was gathered from interviews with teachers and students, and surveys administered to teachers and students. The data indicated areas of: inconsistent instruction, struggles for teachers and students, disgust for state assessment, and unpredictable learning opportunities.

The results of the study solidified a need for writing instruction that was consistent, and not STAAR assessment driven. The need for quality writing instruction was across all grade levels and content areas. Study results also indicated a strong need for on-going professional development on how to incorporate writing effectively to impact student learning and growth.

Acknowledgements

I am in this position because of the people who have supported me throughout my career. From students, teachers, professors, and colleagues, I thank you. My dissertation committee was instrumental in my progress and successful completion. Dr. Bengtson, Dr. Lasater, and Dr. Smith, thanks for all your feedback and guidance. Y'all were awesome throughout the entire journey.

To the 2015 cohort, my school board, my staff, and my students, thank you for your assistance and cooperation throughout this process, and for helping me grow professionally.

Finally, to my wife Crystal and son Kolby; the two of you have been unbelievably supportive throughout this experience. You have stood by, and encouraged me the entire way.

Dedication

This study is dedicated to my wife and son. To Crystal and Kolby, I hope you understand that this journey was for us. I love y'all!

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CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify instructional practices that influence and promote writing that is meaningful and leads to higher academic achievement. Writing can present extreme challenges for some students and can place them in a strenuous academic situation (Dunn & Finley, 2010). Students struggle to meet the requirements and basic standards needed to become successful writers. According to Graham and Harris (2005), information from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that students have difficulty with writing, and the skills and knowledge needed for successful writing endeavors. Graham and Perin (2007a) added, "improving writing instruction for adolescents, a topic that has not received enough attention from research or educators, is a necessity for writing as a predictor of academic success..." (p. 445). Students need quality writing instruction and assistance to perfect their writing skills. Students in the Frazier Independent School District (ISD) had low performance on writing assessments according to Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR) from 2012 to 2016. Local assessments and writing samples also indicated that a writing problem existed with students at Frazier ISD. Students continuously had low results on state and local writing assessments and change was long overdue. Data from the TAPR showed that Frazier ISD students were well below state and regional percentages for writing and postsecondary readiness standards. Students needed quality writing instruction and writing assistance. Therefore, the study was significant in order to provide the needed instruction to improve the writing skills of Frazier ISD students.

Effective instruction should be evident in classrooms to provide students with an appropriate and meaningful education. Teachers must possess the appropriate knowledge and

skills to be valuable instructors and have the ability to teach effective writing skills.

Implementing these techniques leads to successful students. Graham and Harris (2005) stressed:

writing is critical to school success. It is the primary means by which students demonstrate their knowledge in school, but even more important, it provides a flexible tool for gathering, remembering, and sharing subject-matter knowledge as well as helping children explore, organize, and refine their ideas about a specific subject. (p. 19)

If teachers are truly effective, then they have the ability to reach their students on levels that promote, encourage, and stimulate knowledge. Students deserve great instruction and innovative ways to improve their writing skills. Without a focus on writing instruction, the status quo will continue to dominate the lack of writing success students were experiencing. The challenge was getting teachers to use the tools and best practices of excellent instructors to motivate students in a way that learning how to write effectively becomes a priority and a fundamental piece of lifelong learning. Fink-Chorzempa, Graham, and Harris (2005) stated, “Providing effective and appropriate instruction right from the start, provides the foundation needed to ensure that all students become competent writers. The success of such efforts depends...on making instructional adaptations for students who find writing difficult” (p. 64). Simply stated, student writing needed to improve. Writing skills were lacking and instruction needed adaptation to provide better practices to improve writing success. The goal of this research and problem of practice was to identify gaps that existed in writing instruction. By identifying these gaps, appropriate measures could be taken to improve the writing ability and success of students. The aim was to identify concepts and techniques that could improve writing skills for all students, and provide assistance to schools that were experiencing similar difficulties with writing success.

Problem Statement

The students in Frazier ISD were not performing well on state writing assessments according to TAPR data (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2016). There was a gap between

instruction and learning for the students in writing. Evaluation records from 2013 to 2016 for teachers associated with writing at Frazier ISD indicated instruction performance ratings of exceeded expectations and/or proficient in domains I through IV of the Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS). In the PDAS evaluation tool, exceeds expectations was the highest evaluative mark a teacher could receive. Domains I through IV of the PDAS specifically evaluated instruction. However, information from the Data Management for Assessment and Curriculum (DMAC) Solutions were used to compare state exam scores to teacher evaluations. The results indicated that student results associated with these teachers were below proficient in writing on state mandated assessments from 2013 to 2016. The intent of this research was to identify this gap and provide teachers and students the necessitous tools for successful writing instruction and learning. According to Fisher and Frey (2003), “despite two decades of instructional reform around writing curriculum, in many of these... programs writing continues to be shortchanged” (p. 396). Evidence suggests that students were not receiving effective writing instruction, and as a result, write less and have meager results (Hillocks, 2011). The core instructional approach of Frazier ISD needed to generate adaptations to ensure that students received appropriate, adequate, and effective instruction to achieve academic performance in writing. The results of a survey completed in 2005, indicated that 20% of elementary teachers did not make adaptations for students struggling with writing (Fink-Chorzempa et al., 2005). This figure is unacceptable if students are going to be successful in their writing ventures. Implementing proper writing skills are important for all aspects of academia. Kreuter (2013) wrote:

Empirical research overwhelmingly shows that we learn and synthesize new information and connections during the actual act of writing... Too often though we are taught, wrongly, that writing is only a physical act, the mere transcription of ideas already hatched and thought through. Such a mental model could not possibly be further from

the cognitive truth. And this mistaken mental model can be damaging to our scholarly productivity. (p. 1)

To provide students with the skills needed to perform and excel in writing, new and innovative instructional practices are needed to guide and direct writing initiatives.

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues

A teacher can have an immediate and an everlasting impact on student achievement if they are sincerely invested in student learning. According to Tucker and Stronge (2005), “If we were particularly fortunate, we had numerous exceptional teachers who made school an exciting and interesting place. Those teachers possessed a passion for the subjects that they taught and genuine care for the students with whom they worked” (p. 1). However, having effective instruction in the classroom is not easy and it requires hard work, dedication, and constant learning. Too often teachers neglect incorporating writing in their lessons because they do not understand how to teach writing effectively (Tomkins, 2013). Teachers who strive to provide remarkable instruction must continually adapt, collaborate, promote, and improve in order to provide their students with instruction that is meaningful and purposeful. Effective teachers employ a variety of common activities and strategies in their instructional practices, including having “high expectations for student learning, closely monitoring student progress, highly efficient classroom routines, and maintaining excellent personal interactions with their students” (Barry, 2010, p. 4). Developing competent instructors who possess the skills needed to necessitate valuable instruction, and create environments that will harness the power of knowledge and feed the minds of students is needed to propel writing forward.

According to Danielson (2007), “Highly professional teachers never forget that schools are not institutions run for the convenience of the adults who work in them; instead, the purpose of school is to educate students” (p. 106). It should be the goal of every teacher to provide their

students with every opportunity to be successful. Danielson (2007) added that, “to maximize learning, teachers must know not only their subject and its accompanying pedagogy, but also their students” (p. 46). The focus has to be on the students and their ability to achieve success through effective writing instruction. By incorporating solid, research-based writing instructional practices, with proven results for improvement, students will be afforded the opportunity to participate in engaging writing initiatives that lead to better writing abilities and writing success.

Is Directly Observable

Successful writing had been an issue for several years in Frazier ISD according to TAPR data (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2016). It was a problem that was affecting all three campuses in the district. Assessment results in writing also affected graduation requirements for Frazier ISD high school students. Students were faced with the fear of not graduating high school because of low state assessment scores. In Texas, high school students must pass five end-of-course (EOC) exams in order to graduate; two of which have an extensive writing component. According to Texas Education Agency (TEA) data, many schools, Frazier ISD included, are failing to meet these standards. According to Kuczynski-Brown (2012), “roughly one quarter of eighth and twelfth graders are proficient in writing, according to results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress” (p. 1). This was a severe issue that Frazier ISD was facing. While some adaptations in the district were made, writing achievement had fallen short. Writing scores for the district had been stagnant for the last five years according to TAPR data (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2016). New approaches had been put in place to assist with writing struggles, but the results remained the same. It was not just an issue affecting English classes, but the district as a whole. Hochman and MacDermott (2015) stated that,

“approximately 75% of students in the United States are not at the proficient level in writing” (p. 31). Uncovering and establishing where the gaps existed in instruction, delivery, methods, and assessment was essential. According to Davis (2011), “Teachers who are willing to question their own practice in the face of failure, question the usefulness of their beliefs, and view change as a necessary component of growth are viewed as teachers who care about their teaching” (p. 3). Breaking down the data and collaborating between departments and colleagues to pinpoint difficulties and make the appropriate corrections to address the problems with writing were the goals.

Is Actionable

According to Perry and Carlson (2013), building on acquired and analyzed data, applying solutions to complex problems, and collaborating on decision-making in uncertain circumstances are all facets of being an actionable practitioner of inquiry. The gained knowledge must be utilized to clearly express high expectations for student success. The collaboration aspect of this problem was critical in providing appropriate and effective writing instruction for students. Staff must have high expectations and be willing to work hard in order to achieve them. Danielson (2007) stated:

Embedded in the concept of high expectations for students is a culture of hard work and perseverance. Skilled teachers do not accept sloppy work from students or work that does not represent sincere effort; such practices convey the message that just submitting an assignment is good enough, regardless of its quality. But significant learning requires concentration and intellectual “elbow grease.” (p. 34)

Writing in the district can improve and must improve. Students deserve efforts that provide exceptional instruction and dedication towards academic success. However, improving writing requires extensive professional development, but most importantly, dedication from Frazier ISD staff to develop the skills students need and require to become better writers. It will require hard

work from all involved to propel instruction and student success. Applying the correct and appropriate measures within the instructional process must be met, and the use of the appropriate tools to enhance learning must be utilized so that students can apply knowledge gained. Through these processes and implementations, better writing instruction and superior student learning was the intent.

Writing instruction was taking place at Frazier ISD; however, students continued to produce second-rate results on writing assignments and assessments. Therefore, the research and data gathering process required extensive self-reflection to determine the best plan of action in combatting the inadequacy of writing. Studies provided examples of solid instructional practices and theories that support superb writing ventures. It was imperative for Frazier ISD to adopt and implement proven strategies and approaches that influence and promote better writing. Some examples of proven writing strategies are: teaching the process, writing for purpose, goal setting, teaching fluent grammar and sentence structure, writing frequently, and engaging writers frequently (Gillespie & Graham, 2010; Andrews, Torgerson, Low, & McGuinn, 2009; Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009). By incorporating proven writing instruction, Frazier ISD teachers could provide students with the skills needed to increase performance on writing assignments and assessments.

Connects to Broader Strategy and Improvement

Frazier ISD was invested in the future and success of their students. Additionally, it was the district's responsibility to provide instruction that empowered students to perform in current and future learning endeavors. The mission statement for Frazier ISD (2016) stated, "Frazier ISD, in partnership with parents and community, will teach a rigorous and engaging curriculum, in a safe and orderly environment, preparing our students for success in the 21st century" (p. 2).

The district's mission statement should guide and direct the focus of instruction, while laying the foundation for successful learning opportunities. As Davis, Ruhe, Lee, and Rajadhyaksha (2007) stated, "An effective mission statement will explain the purpose of the organization, its direction, and the ends to which it will function" (p. 101). The Frazier ISD mission statement had approval of the District Educational Improvement Committee (DEIC) and the Frazier ISD Board of Trustees; however, more should be provided to students to prepare them for future success. According to TAPR and local writing assessment data, students were not prepared to tackle the needed aspects for twenty-first century success. The Frazier ISD District Improvement Plan specifically targeted improvement of writing skills. Goals, objectives, and strategies addressed the low performing area of writing across the district. This area of improvement unfortunately had been needed for some time; however, improvements were limited according to state and local data. This issue affected the entire district and it was time to relinquish the mediocrity that had been commonplace for several years. The district sought to provide students with every opportunity for academic success. The district's vision stated, "Igniting Potential-Motivated to Succeed," which focused on the need for successful learning. Therefore, the aim of this study was to provide the students of Frazier ISD with the tools needed to obtain academic success in writing and provided the teachers with the instructional strategies to ignite learning and writing success.

Is High Leverage

The goal was to improve the writing skills of Frazier ISD students and to improve district accountability. The lack of writing achievement was viewed using a variety of strategies and perspectives. Heaton and Swidler (2012) stressed the notion of obtaining new perspectives and valuing the complexity of a problem; learning to focus on clients to acquire insight; and reaching

new clarity on problems. Through standardized testing data, student and staff interviews, student and staff surveys, and staff input and reflections, a collaborative decision could be made on the needs and progression of a writing improvement endeavor. As Badiali, Zembai-Saul, and Stoicovy (2012) stated, “Our entire community is focused on assessing and improving our impact on learners” (p. 154). Responsibility must be taken for student learning and success. As a learning community, sincere ownership of the problem must be taken where educators are fully invested in the education and future of the district’s students. The National Writing Project and Nagin (2006) stressed the importance of meeting the writing needs of students so that they are better prepared for life in the twenty-first century.

The struggles Frazier ISD faced with writing led to low accountability scores. Accountability scores for the district had been lower than state and regional averages from 2012 to 2016. The accountability ratings placed the district at risk of receiving an “improvement required” rating, which in Texas, necessitates considerable involvement with the TEA. This involvement from the state is expensive, time consuming, and can require staff reassignments, dismissals, and even school closures if improvements are not met (Texas Education Code §39.102, 2015). It was a serious aspect of an assessment driven educational system that needed focus from the district.

Having the ability to successfully acquire knowledge and apply it is a lifelong skill. The goal should not be to develop students or learners who can regurgitate information, but to develop knowledge consumers who can think critically, apply knowledge, and problem solve in an ever-changing world. A component in this process is the development of valuable writing skills. Acquiring solid writing skills provides opportunities in other facets of academia and can assist with increasing the chance of success later in life (Tompkins, 2013). These skills are

necessary regardless of future endeavors. Markowitz and Mahlios (2012) stated that “teachers should practice toward the goal of making their students better persons who are more knowledgeable and more virtuous and more fully human in search of the greater moral order” (p. 220). This problem of practice was about providing lasting knowledge and educational success in writing. Teaching students the curriculum was not enough. Students needed learning opportunities that encouraged and motivated them to succeed. Students need skills that can be utilized in the classroom and multiple facets of life.

Research Questions

This problem of practice looked at the various aspects of writing difficulties that students and staff were experiencing by addressing the following questions:

- What instructional practices do Frazier ISD teachers utilize to teach writing?
- What aspects of writing do Frazier ISD students struggle to understand?
- To what extent does the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test impact writing success at Frazier ISD?
- How do teachers and students describe the learning process associated with writing at Frazier ISD?

This problem of practice identified student writing issues that when addressed, should lead to improved writing achievement. Students stand to benefit and have the ability to perform on writing assessments and possess a life-long skill. Furthermore, state assessment improvements should increase district accountability.

Overview of Methodology

A mixed methods design was used in gathering information on the struggles that existed with writing at Frazier ISD. Creswell (2015) stated it is important to “conduct a mixed methods

study when one type of research...is not enough to address the research problem or answer the research questions. More data are needed to extend, elaborate on, or explain the...database.” (p. 537). The administration investigated the strengths and weaknesses of teachers in their delivery of instruction and in their ideas on improving writing. Furthermore, students’ concerns, struggles, and successes with writing endeavors were explored. As Denzin and Lincoln (2011) stated:

Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible.... They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self.... This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

Qualitative inquiry allowed immersion in the specific problems that were affecting Frazier ISD students, teachers, and the district with regards to writing. Information from these groups were collected through interviews which allowed participants to tell their story about writing. Quantitative data were collected using surveys completed by students and staff and then analyzed. This information was used to identify and establish trends and/or differences that existed between these groups (Creswell, 2015). By accumulating and disaggregating multiple facets of data, a plan could be created by stakeholders to provide a better and more productive learning experience for students.

Positionality

Researcher’s Role

I grew up in an influential suburban community which emphasized the importance of education. Since then; however, I spent eighteen professional years in a rural educational setting as a teacher and coach, high school assistant principal, high school principal, and superintendent. I am currently a superintendent in a rural Texas community. Over the last several years, I

noticed and identified that a problem with writing existed within the districts where I worked. I watched students agonize with writing assessments, and unfortunately, saw students unable to graduate because of writing struggles on state tests. Therefore, I am fully invested in making improvements toward the success of Frazier ISD students, teachers, and the district with regards to writing. As a district leader, it is important to interact and collaborate with all stakeholders on a constant and ongoing basis in regards to instruction, data disaggregation, and student success. Professional development is key in bridging the gaps that exist in the instructional process for teachers and administrators. It is also important to have ongoing contact with students and staff to keep them informed of the development and the progress of the study.

Assumptions

With problems and new ideas comes change. Change unfortunately is often met with resistance and hesitancy. Change requires hard work, and hard work is not always welcomed. However, change must happen if improvement is going to take place. As Harris and Chapman (2004) stated:

We undoubtedly need to know much more about improving schools in difficult circumstances and particularly how such schools sustain improvement over time. We need to know what particular combinations of external support and internal development are optimum for generating positive change and development. (p. 428)

It was an assumption that the staff and students would dive into change efforts and put forth the required work to improve the district's writing needs. It was believed that a lack in writing frequency, quality feedback, and teacher preparedness were key areas contributing to writing struggles. Another assumption suggested that standardized testing was taking focus away from quality writing instruction and practice. Writing is not tested in all grades; therefore, an assumption exists that writing was not being stressed at all grade levels. Because of my position as superintendent, I am ultimately responsible for the academic success or failure associated with

the district. I had direct knowledge of the struggles that existed in the district. Therefore, it was important for me to be unbiased during the collection of data to fully investigate the problem that existed. It was an assumption that all involved in the research process would answer survey and interview questions with integrity and honesty so that gaps could be identified for remedy. The assumption also existed that all stakeholders were willing to participate in meaningful and ongoing changes needed to fill the gaps in writing instruction and district accountability.

Definition of Key Terms

The following is a list of key terms used throughout this problem of practice:

- *District Educational Improvement Committee (DEIC)*; committee responsible for setting goals for district improvement.
- *Data Management for Assessment and Curriculum (DMAC)*; software program for data disaggregation in Texas.
- *End of Course (EOC)*; state assessment for high school students.
- *State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR)*; state assessment tests administered in Texas.
- *Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR)*; accountability reports for Texas districts.
- *Texas Education Agency (TEA)*; state agency responsible for overseeing and monitoring all aspects of public education in Texas.
- *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)*; state mandated curriculum standards.
- *Texas Enterprise Information System (TxEIS)*; district information software for all students and staff.
- *Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)*; writing in classes outside of traditional English classrooms.

Organization of the Dissertation

The following chapters include a literature review, methodology, results, and summary of the study. Chapter two explores the literature to discover and examine ways to improve writing instruction and writing skills of students. There was an abundance of literature on writing improvements. The key was to address specific areas that relate to Frazier ISD and to compare strategies and practices that were being used in the classroom. Therefore, it was important to be immersed in the literature to decide which specific concepts could assist with the district's writing struggles.

Chapter three discusses the methodology that was used for the collection of data. A mixed methods approach was used to uncover the gaps that existed with instructional practices. Surveys, interviews, and assessment data were used to analyze Frazier ISD's writing situation. The data assisted in developing a plan to provide teachers with effective instructional practices, students with quality writing initiatives, and improved district accountability.

Chapter four stresses the results of the study, and the research questions were answered and examined. Data from interviews and surveys were utilized to display, describe, and present the findings of the study.

Chapter five provides a summary of the entire study. All aspects of the study will be described, and the implications of the study will be expressed. The importance of the research will also be examined, as well as any suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify instructional practices that influence and promote writing that is meaningful and leads to higher academic achievement. There is a trend that is affecting classroom practice and student achievement with regards to writing. Writing is an essential, lifelong skill; unfortunately, students struggle to obtain the necessary tools needed for writing success (Graham, Early, & Wilcox, 2014). While models suggest ways to improve the teaching and practice of writing, struggles still exist in schools (National Commission on Writing, 2003). Concern regarding difficulties with writing were addressed in the literature. Instructional practices needed for writing success were also well documented. However, students continue to struggle with mastering the skills needed for writing achievement. Fisher and Frey (2013) stated that, “in fact, there is evidence that student writing achievement has been stagnant for years” (p. 96). To combat this phenomenon, the literature was explored to solidify the aspects of effective writing instruction that were associated with writing success and achievement. Research and studies were investigated to recognize established measures that significantly impact student success and achievement with regards to writing. In search of meaningful information on writing instruction and achievement, several electronic databases, books, dissertations, and journals were employed to obtain relevant and pertinent research material including, EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Within the search criteria, the following information was considered:

- The struggles students and teachers have with writing;
- The importance of, and the structure of meaningful and useful feedback;
- The importance of writing frequency across the curriculum; and,

- Practices associated with effective writing instruction.

The intent of the literature review was to examine and decipher the research and theories associated with effective writing instruction and writing achievement.

Review of the Literature

The following sections signify the areas that were reviewed and that played an important factor in addressing and enhancing writing achievement. Furthermore, the drive of this problem of practice was to identify proven measures associated with writing so that student achievement could progress. The literature review investigated the difficulties students face with writing, the use of meaningful feedback, writing frequency across the curriculum, and the instructor's ability and preparedness to effectively teach writing. It was important to explore, identify, and clarify for writing performance and writing achievement

Writing Difficulties

Effective writing is crucial for academic success. According to the National Commission on Writing (2003), students need appropriate writing skills to experience academic achievement. Unfortunately, students continue to struggle with writing and are in need of writing assistance. Writing is a complicated undertaking that requires knowledge, time, and the coordination of several intellectual skills (Myhill & Fisher, 2010). Studies, dissertations, and research flood the literature with problems that exist with writing and writing instruction. The Department for Education Research Team (2012) stated, "Overall, the evidence indicates that although there has been an improvement in pupils' achievement in writing, it is the subject where pupils perform less...compared to reading, mathematics and science" (p. 7). Mackenzie, Scull, and Munsie (2013) added that "while reading and mathematics have been prioritized in programs designed to lift standards, writing has been neglected and remains a lower priority than reading..." (para. 3).

The lack of writing instruction, proficiency, and achievement is disturbing and needs to be monitored and addressed for student success. Alber-Morgan, Hessler, and Konrad (2007) stated that, “recent data suggest that many students in U.S. schools fail to meet even the most basic writing standards” (p. 107). This problem spans across all grade levels and academic abilities. Even students who experience academic success struggle with writing (Jeffery & Wilcox, 2014). According to Applebee and Langer (2013), quality writing instruction has been neglected and overlooked which contributed to the writing crisis. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) declared that students are not writing appropriately to meet the demands of academia. Statistics also confirm that only 24% of seniors were at or above satisfactory levels of writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Graham and Perin (2007b) added that a critical state exists with the efficiency of writing skills. This trend is alarming schools prepare to send students into post-secondary education and the workforce.

Feedback

The literature aims to determine the types of feedback that impact writing instruction. Demaree (2007) emphasized that quality, meaningful feedback is an instructional tool that should be used frequently. Feedback provides a lasting impact for advancement and achievement if utilized and incorporated effectively. It allows the teacher to communicate the desired result, and presents a learning opportunity for the student to address and correct gaps in their writing. Doumont (2002) added that ultimately, the goal of feedback is to recognize the problems that exist in a body of work and identify how to address them. A quality response provides enrichment and enhancement if the intent of the feedback is improvement. Furthermore, Doumont (2002) stated, “Feedback is central to learning. Practice makes perfect, they say, but practice without feedback never leads to improvement” (p. 39).

Feedback is common, but if it is going to provide beneficial improvement it must be effective and inspire learning. At times, providing feedback can be a daunting, delicate, and time consuming effort, and if administered incorrectly, can lead to adverse effects instead of desired ones (DeVos Binder, 1993). Some feedback can be extremely disturbing for students and can alter the learning experience (Doumont, 2002). Teachers should recognize the importance of feedback and use it to guide and motivate. Doumont (2002) expressed:

Yet motivation is a prerequisite for learning: Students must believe that acquiring writing skills is not only useful, but also possible. In this sense, they will be encouraged by feedback they perceive as constructive and, conversely, discouraged by feedback they perceive as overly critical. (p. 39)

Therefore, teachers should possess the ability to determine which type of feedback is beneficial for student success. Several studies identified and examined their effectiveness in influencing writing improvement with regards to feedback. The results of a study conducted by Defazio, Jones, Tennant, and Hook (2010) indicated that through an extensive review and feedback process, students made significant improvements in their efforts. This study also revealed that “this process contributed to and reflected an increase in writing skills and learning outcomes...” (Defazio et al., 2010, p. 41). As the literature reflects, the concentrations of feedback includes teacher written comments and conferences, peer evaluation, and combinations of each.

Written Comments

Written comments by the teacher represents a common form of feedback given to students. Teachers are quick to look over students’ work and make suggestions for improvement. However, written comments can be misunderstood and troublesome if not viewed as useful. A writing experiment on feedback was conducted at Ohio State University to determine if writing “improved based solely on feedback given in the form of written comments on students’ papers” (Demaree, 2007, p. 81). Students were placed into groups and received

feedback based on their grouping. The initial feedback was limited; however, some students received additional feedback that was thorough and precise. The results of the study indicated that students who received additional feedback and utilized the feedback, made significant improvements in their writing. The study concluded that “provided students reflect on the feedback provided... that written feedback does impact student writing” (Demaree, 2007, p. 84).

Providing constructive feedback and expressing positivity to students promotes the learning experience. This type of feedback can motivate students, and research has shown that motivation can have a substantial impact on academic achievement (Brophy, 2010). Positive influences can impact and promote future writing initiatives, while bad experiences with feedback can linger and have an adverse effect on the writer (DeVos Binder, 1993). Furthermore, knowing the individual students and building relationships with them allows teachers to determine what forms and frequency of feedback are needed for progress. Students who are encouraged by their teachers and receive positive feedback are more likely to participate in the learning process and are motivated to strive for academic success (Stornes, Bru, & Idsoe, 2008). Therefore, teachers who have the capability to build and foster relationships with their students have an advantage in reaching the learning potentials of their students. Klem and Connell (2004) added that, “studies show students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, and more satisfaction with school. These students also are more engaged academically” (p. 262). With positive attitudes and feedback, teachers lay the foundation for learning by promoting high expectations and improving levels of achievement.

Students take feedback and interpret it in different ways, and for some, written feedback can overpower and dissuade future efforts (Land & Evans, 1987). It is important to understand

which types of feedback can impact and assist students trying to master the writing process. According to Quible (1997), written comments are influenced by the “tone, specificity, and purpose of comments... (p. 111). When incorporating tone, teachers need to focus on positive remarks so that students feel energized about their efforts and utilize feedback for beneficial purposes (Hayes & Daiker, 1984). Feedback should stimulate the student to grow as a writer and be used for writing improvement. If students only receive red marks concerning their work, their motivation to progress and move forward declines. Quible (1997) stated that, “putting only negative comments on their papers has a detrimental impact on students’ attitudes about writing, which may thwart their desire to expend the effort necessary to improve their writing skills” (p. 111).

If students are going to make gains from written feedback, then the feedback should be specific and address the learning objective. Additionally, feedback should lead to corrections and adjustments in student work. However, students are hesitant to utilize written feedback on their assignments unless further revisions are required (Winter, Neal, & Warner, 1996). Teachers have a tendency to mark every error that exists in the body of the written document, especially when it comes to grammatical issues, which lacks in specific and purposeful advice. Truscott (1996; 1999; 2007) emphasized that grammar corrections do not play a significant role in the function of writing feedback. This type of support can produce negativity in solving writing difficulties and does not foster a learning environment of motivation. This process can also overwhelm students and lead to a decline in future interests. Lynch and Klemans (1978) stated that, “students find comments explaining why things were wrong in their work as well as notes of encouragement to be more useful than comments about spelling and grammar...” (p.

112). Therefore, if the feedback provides an informed purpose, it is not necessary to degrade a students' written work for progress to take place.

Writing Conferences

Another beneficial form of feedback is holding conferences with students to discuss their work. These conferences can be in a small group, or a one-to-one meeting with the teacher and student. According to Duke (1975), "Centering the conference around the student's participation, then, is a useful way of reinforcing the writer's role in the writing process" (p. 46). The advantages to offering group conferences is that students tend to feel more comfortable, provide additional insight and input, and often can relate to problems that other students are experiencing (Quible, 1997). It is important in these sessions to set goals and expectations, otherwise it can become a social event. Duke (1975) emphasized:

The values, then, of the non-directive approach in the writing conference are that (1) it is an effective means for reducing teacher-centered talk and avoiding traditional over-direction; (2) it encourages students to become more responsive to new ideas about the writing process; (3) it provides essential acceptance, approval, and reassurance that help to build the confidence of the student writer; (4) it offers a live, responsive audience; and (5) it encourages students to accept responsibility for the writing process. (p. 46)

As students write, the teacher can move around the classroom to assist with problems they are having with their work. Therefore, problems can be addressed in these sessions and students must use their time wisely and effectively so learning outcomes take place.

The conference technique of feedback can contribute greatly to writing performance when used in conjunction with written feedback (Quible, 1997). A study conducted by Bitchener, Young and Cameron (2005) found "that direct oral feedback in combination with direct written feedback" (p. 202) had a substantial influence on the improvement of writing accuracy. Writing conferences also lead to better class discussions, and with time, can lead to more writing refinement (Duke, 1975). The goal of any type of feedback is to improve the

effectiveness of the task. The conference allows the teacher and student to discuss the aspects of writing improvement that addresses specific needs. By providing quality feedback through conferences, students are allowed the opportunity to participate in the learning experience and gain knowledge through the process. Duke (1975) concluded that resistance may take effect with uncertainties about writing efficiencies, “but the student-centered conference holds more promise than most other ideas for the improvement of student attitudes toward writing and the individualizing of the development of writing skills” (p. 47).

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback can benefit the student and teacher. This type of feedback expands communication opportunities between students in common terms. Topping (2003) reflected on research that demonstrated that students view peer feedback as more informative and clear because their classmates are in touch with the surroundings. Therefore, this type of feedback allows students to critique and make suggestions and to formulate a polished product. According to Keh (1990), a major advantage of peer feedback is that:

Students felt peer feedback was useful in gaining a conscious awareness that they were writing for more than just the teacher. That affected how and what they wrote. Now students write with a greater goal than just writing down as much as possible to cover the topic. They write with a more specific focus because they know that their peers will also be reading their paper. (p. 296)

Peer feedback can also be beneficial for the teacher as time restraints limit the amount of teacher feedback provided for each student.

While a teacher’s knowledge and background may be more advanced and thorough, much energy is split between multiple pupils which divides quality time and feedback (Sadler, 1998). It could take weeks for a teacher to provide feedback on an assignment or learning objective if the teacher is the sole provider of feedback (Gielen, Tops, Dochy, Onghena, &

Smeets, 2010). Peer feedback also allows for more personal time with the teacher. Cho and Schunn (2007) reported that peer review can facilitate student progress and assist teachers by reducing workloads and extra grading. Gahn (1989) explained that teachers neglect writing initiatives because of the extensive grading requirements; therefore, this type of feedback benefits both teacher and student. If students are providing meaningful feedback to their peers, then teachers are available to address specific questions of individual students (Gielen et al., 2010). Within this process, the teacher and students work together to familiarize themselves with learning the sophistications of feedback and providing timely, useful responses.

There have been studies focused on the advantages and disadvantages of peer feedback. If teachers instruct students how to give appropriate peer feedback, then it can become as effective as any feedback administered (Sadler, 1998). A study conducted by Karegianes, Pascarella, and Pflaum (1980) indicated that tenth grade students showed an improvement in writing when receiving peer feedback as compared to teacher feedback. A separate study conducted by Yang, Badger, and Yu (2006) contradicted peer feedback citing that students distrusted the feedback received. Gielen et al., (2010); however, emphasized:

Students consider teachers to be more “professional”, “experienced” and “trustworthy” than their peers and incorporate more teacher feedback in their essay revisions. However, most teacher-influenced revisions happen at surface level, whereas peer feedback results in a higher percentage of meaning-changing revision and more initiative towards self-correction. (p. 147)

Therefore, there are significant aspects of peer feedback that can propel students to becoming better writers and learners. Gielen et al., (2010) identified functions of peer feedback that cannot be satisfied by teachers alone, which are:

stimulating motivation by enhancing a sense of audience; raising awareness of own problems through reading peers’ writings, leading to self-correction; encouraging collaborative learning and fostering ownership of their own text, which in the end makes them less reliant on the teacher and more confident in themselves as writers. (p. 147)

By incorporating peer feedback, students take more control of their learning which can provide opportunities for an in-depth understanding of the material.

The concept of peer feedback can alleviate some of the teacher's burden and incorporate and instill learning initiatives for students. Gielen et al. (2010) concluded that peer feedback can take the place of teacher feedback without the loss of substantial efficiency. Similarly, Cho and Schunn (2007) determined that peer feedback and teacher feedback were the same. Therefore, peer feedback can be a useful and deliberate form of instruction, if monitored and performed correctly. If partnered with teacher feedback, peer feedback can provide endless opportunities for students to progress in their writing initiatives.

Meaningful feedback is a necessary aspect of successful student writing. If students are going to have opportunities for increased success in writing, then feedback must be present and afforded on a regular basis. Results from research conducted by Villa and Calvo (2011) determined that feedback by peers and teachers provided substantial assistance with writing efforts. Feedback provided opportunities for students to polish their written assignments and gain valuable insight into writing techniques and procedures. However, if the feedback is going to be effective, students must take advantage of it and put it to use. Therefore, regardless of the type of feedback preferred or administered, students need it frequently in order to experience writing success.

Writing Across the Curriculum

Writing provides students with an opportunity to gain valuable knowledge and it allows students to focus on the intricacies of vital information. Unfortunately, students are not writing with the frequency or intensity that is needed for successful achievement. Successful schools have reported that frequent writing is not stressed on a daily basis (Santangelo & Olinghouse,

2009). If students are going to improve in writing skills, then writing must become commonplace. According to Fisher and Frey (2013), “Writing is something that students should do routinely” (p. 96). As Graham and Harris (2016) stated, “When students write more frequently, there is a 12 percentile-point jump in writing quality” (p. 360). It is imperative for educators to incorporate more writing into their lessons if students are going to become more efficient writers. According to Graham and Perin (2007b), students experience stronger learning potential when writing about new concepts. Writing becomes an engaging process that solidifies new learning and extends new materials and thoughts (Langer, 1986). Similarly, Graham and Perin (2007b) emphasized that writing in content areas provides meaningful writing practice, coupled with valuable learning opportunities.

It is important for students to learn writing skills and strategies in all content areas. A study conducted by Defazio et al. (2010) emphasized:

Whatever the reasons may be, the bottom line is that the majority of students do not possess the skills necessary to effectively communicate in a written format that will enable them to become successful upon graduation. There is a significant need for students at all levels not only to be good written communicators, but also to understand the importance of good writing skills. (p. 34)

In doing so, students will have a deeper understanding of concepts being taught and the ability to reach higher levels of knowledge. Writing should be concentrated across all subjects to promote student success. Especially at the secondary level, writing has become less important in areas other than English instruction because of high-stakes assessments (Applebee & Langer, 2013). According to the National Commission on Writing (2003), there is a need for more writing at the secondary level, and also a need to train teachers how to effectively instruct students in writing. To address the lack of writing frequency, writing across the curriculum has been introduced to combat the needed addition of more writing in all subject areas. Writing across the curriculum

combines and promotes writing in all areas to facilitate overall learning and writing skills. The National Commission on Writing (2003) emphasized:

We strongly endorse writing across the curriculum. The concept of doubling writing time is feasible because of the near-total neglect of writing outside English departments. In history, foreign languages, mathematics, home economics, science, physical education, art, and social science, all students can be encouraged to write more-and to write more effectively. (p. 28)

The concept of writing across the curriculum allows teachers and students to understand expectations in all classes. Unfortunately, writing is not taking place in all content areas and teachers are combatting problems with time, students' attitudes, and students' lack of writing knowledge (Bakewell, 2008). A meta-analysis conducted by Robert Bangert-Drowns in 2004 focused on the concept of writing across the curriculum (WAC):

WAC seeks three things: to increase the frequency of student writing, to integrate and elaborate writing strategies throughout the different content areas, and to promote the instrumental use of writing as a tool for other academic ends.... Seen in this way, WAC is more than just writing instruction, more than just making students write more, more than trying to get students to write better. It is the strategic integration of carefully designed writing tasks in any content area to serve the ends of learning, authentic communication, personal engagement, and reflective authorship. (as cited in Brewster & Klump, 2004, p. 7)

Writing across all content areas allows students to focus on their writing skills, and develop competency in other subjects. As Merten (2015) stated about English Language Arts (ELA), "Consistent practice using writing skills in ELA and other content areas enables students to make the connection between writing well and providing well-written evidence of their understanding" (p. 18). Poor writing is not a problem that exists in the English classroom, it is a problem that exists among all disciplines. Flateby (2005) reiterated that English departments are not at fault for low writing achievement, nor should they be the only ones acknowledging and responding to the problem. Having the ability to write in all content areas will strengthen writing skills and help to facilitate and stimulate learning opportunities for students.

Students should learn the process of writing in all disciplines. Writing is key in learning new concepts, linking those concepts to construct, and generating new knowledge for successful learning experiences. Flateby (2005) additionally stated that students are going to be reluctant to participate in additional writing activities. Therefore, it is imperative to demonstrate and stress the importance of having good writing skills. Writing across the curriculum is a proven strategy that involves and improves writing efficiency, and learning.

Math for example, is a class where writing can be beneficial and create learning opportunities. Having a student write in a mathematics class should be an expectation for higher thinking and learning skills. Research indicated that secondary math teachers have positive outlooks on incorporating writing instruction into their daily math lessons (Quinn & Wilson, 1997); however, many schools, teachers, and students are not utilizing the writing process with purpose, intent, or frequency. Results from a 2008 study on writing in high school mathematics classrooms indicated that writing was seldom used. Bakewell (2008) stated:

While research supports writing as a tool to facilitate learning, diversify instruction, and provide assessment, the results of this study indicate that it is infrequently used in the high school mathematics classroom.... The amount of writing varies among teachers; however, the majority of students write less than once or twice a month in their mathematics courses. (p. 12)

Being able to explain and write about the process of getting to the correct answer will allow students to reach the highest levels of critical thinking. According to Steele (2005), writing can facilitate an advanced way of reasoning and understanding in a mathematics classroom, “This opportunity to explain their thinking in writing helped them develop conceptual knowledge.... This conceptual knowledge and sense making cannot be generated by procedures learned by rote” (p. 152). Writing in a mathematics class will enhance the student’s knowledge of the mathematics concept, and it will also help the student’s writing skills. Being able to solve a

mathematics problem is only the beginning of a deeper understanding of the concept. According to mathematics researchers and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, writing can substantially impact student learning and success (Mastroianni, 2013). Within this concept of writing in a mathematics classroom, researchers also supported the notion for student growth and involvement (Mastroianni, 2013). This type of instruction is needed and allows students to use writing skills taught in the English classroom and form a bridge between curricular objectives.

Another example of writing across the curriculum is incorporating writing initiatives in science classrooms. Writing lab reports rather than simply listing the procedures of an experiment can help develop necessary and relevant knowledge. According to Metz (2012), having the ability to write lab reports and explain experiments is crucial in the learning process of science, and provides writing experience as well. The National Research Council (2011) published *A Framework for K-12 Science Education* which supports and promotes the incorporation and implementation of writing into the daily routine of science instruction.

Research conducted by Hand, Wallace, and Yang (2004) emphasized the following three areas of understanding for writing across the curriculum: “(a) the potential cognitive mechanisms through which writing might contribute to learning; (b) the relationship between writing and conceptual understanding; and (c) the relationship between explicit writing instruction and student performance” (p. 133). By integrating these cross curricular writing aspects, students are exposed to many writing opportunities that provide meaningful and deliberate instruction.

The purpose of writing across the curriculum is to make connections between subject areas and to increase writing efficiency. There are suggestions that writing in all subject areas directly correlates to greater academic success. In a research survey of teachers conducted by Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich (2013), “Nine in ten...describe formal writing assignments as

an ‘essential’ part of the learning process, and 91% say that ‘writing effectively’ is an ‘essential’ skill students need for future success” (p. 6). Studies also show that significant results in all of these areas contribute to, and are associated with writing across the curriculum initiatives. A study conducted by Lilyanne Van Allen (1992), concluded the following:

Schoolwide writing across the curriculum efforts do appear to produce significant improvements in student writing ability. Over a five-year period, the five WAC schools increased the percentage of their passing composition scores.... Teachers in all five WAC schools said that students improved in fluency and organization and wrote for more purposes and audiences. (as cited in Brewster & Klump, 2004, pp. 10-11)

Incorporating writing to learn activities in all content areas, students begin the process of turning what was once a chore into a learning opportunity. A second study was conducted from a sociocultural perspective, which similarly focused on the implementation of writing into the curricular design. The study, according to Kohnen (2013), began with reluctance and negativity, and ended with excitement and significant impact. The study aimed to incorporate different aspects of translation into the writing component of science assignments. In turn, students made significant gains, in their writing capabilities, and also in their science fluency. McDermott and Hand (2010) wrote:

Not only is the translation itself useful for communicating to the audience, it leads to the author’s emerging awareness of their own conceptual understanding, that is, they are able to construct richer understandings of the concept through the writing both in terms of everyday language and the official science language. (p. 536)

The process of translation provides students with an opportunity to gain knowledge and depth of understanding through writing in all classes.

Instruction that is designed to fit the needs of students, and incorporates more writing into daily lessons is an effective way to monitor and assess student learning and efficiency. Stein, Dixon, and Isaacson (1994) stated that “many writing disabilities may derive from too little time allocated to writing instruction or from writing instruction inadequately designed around the

learning needs of many students” (p. 392). By reviewing and researching successful programs that incorporate writing across the curriculum programs, similarities can be replicated to bridge the gaps. For students to improve their writing efficiency and overall learning, research asserts that writing across the curriculum is an effective and successful school initiative to incorporate.

Teacher Preparedness

With the challenges that students are facing with writing, studies indicate that writing is not being stressed in the classroom. Applebee and Langer (2013) noted that teachers must take the initiative to recognize and acknowledge their own weaknesses to better instruct students with writing. Many teachers struggle with teaching writing because they do not understand the mechanics and intricacies of good writing strategies and skills. Wagner (2014) added that writing instruction must shift to address the needs of current students. For this to happen, teachers must be willing to accept responsibility for their lack of involvement and concentrate on professional development to fill their gaps in instruction. Students and teachers need to understand the importance of the process and how to incorporate writing into daily activities. According to Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009), “Teachers who have not participated in formal professional development may have little or no impact on improving their students’ writing” (p. 8). Teachers may feel like they are alone in trying to incorporate additional writing into their lessons. Brewster and Klump (2004) stated that “high-quality professional development that addresses writing issues in the context of teachers’ content areas is indispensable” (p. 24). Providing activities and lessons that students can relate to allows opportunities for students to participate in the learning process. The writing process can be messy and teachers need the ability to make changes and adapt (Graham & Harris, 2013). If the writing suggestion is too difficult, or if students are unaware of the expectations for the lesson, learning could be hindered.

Writing activities that are poorly planned or ask students to perform beyond their capabilities, could have a negative impact on the desired outcome (Brewster & Klump, 2004). With the appropriate professional development strategy in place, teachers can address and begin the implementation of quality writing instruction in their classes.

It is also important to establish the criteria and knowledge level that teachers possess in dealing with writing in their classrooms (Brewster & Klump, 2004). Teachers can provide the spark and excitement needed to provide quality instruction. As Graham and Harris (2013) wrote:

Writing is hard work and learning to write is even harder. Students are less likely to put forth their best efforts when writing or learning to write if they view the classroom as an unfriendly, chaotic, high-risk, or punitive place.... This makes it especially important to develop a classroom writing environment that is interesting, pleasant, and nonthreatening, where the teacher supports students and students support each other. (pp. 12-13)

Therefore, teachers need to take ownership and devote time and energy to this process if it is going to succeed. Time will be needed for planning, assessing, teaching, and evaluating the effectiveness of the program (Brewster & Klump, 2004). Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009) stated, “Research suggests that highly effective writing teachers optimize instruction by devoting significant time and effort to planning and preparation, maintaining a brisk pace and focus during instruction, balancing explicit teaching with extended opportunities for composing, and differentiating instruction” (p. 6).

Good writing instruction requires time, and time is an issue that presents obstacles for teachers in their instruction and planning. Applebee and Langer (2009) added that teachers find little time to devote to the instruction of quality writing. Therefore, teachers need assistance in addressing the difficulties that they are facing to better serve their students. Graham and Harris (2016) stressed, “Good writing is not a gift. It is forged by desire, practice, and assistance from others. You can play a central role in this development by teaching writing effectively” (p. 359).

By using and incorporating proven instructional strategies, along with quality professional development, teachers can use writing as a tool to fuel inquiry and critical thinking into all content areas.

Social Media/Technology

Technology is a major component of education and daily lives. Within the realm of technology, social media is a popular avenue for communication and entertainment. However, distinct differences exist with academic writing and social media text. The literature supports both sides of the argument that texting and social media are hurting academic and formal writing. Studies indicate that technology assists with proper writing techniques, and hinders it. De Jonge and Kemp (2012) studied adolescents and young adults who were frequent users of social media and texting, and concluded that reading assessments of these students were adversely affected by the constant use of texting. However, another study by Coventry University was conducted to determine if texting had negative effects on English grammar. The studied involved 243 participants, and concluded that texting did not have negative effects on proper writing (Lum, 2014). Lum (2014) also added:

As long as people are aware that different modes of communication require different ways of writing, the violations of standard English in texting may well not be a reduction of writing skill but instead a part of a writer's repertoire.

Therefore, an argument could be made to support both sides. Obviously, further research is needed to determine if significant effects exist with formal writing and the use of social media and texting.

Conceptual Framework

Effective writing instruction is not being addressed appropriately in Frazier ISD's educational setting. Inadequate writing skills are plaguing students. Because of this, writing and

assessment scores were insufficient and undesirable. Substantial research was conducted on writing effectively; however, there are still significant issues and problems that exist with incorporating proven writing strategies. Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009) stated, “Despite the importance of writing, assessment data indicates that we are not yet highly effective at helping students gain the critical knowledge and skills required for competent narrative, expository, and persuasive prose” (p. 1). Writing is a problem, and a needed skill that students have not been able to master in the Frazier ISD. Because of this, there was a necessity to study the theories, research, and data to gain insight into why students continually struggle with writing. This problem was real and increasingly frightening as students faced assessment and accountability requirements, but more importantly, encountered the reality of real world situations. According to Graham and Perin (2007b), students are struggling with basic writing skills, and teachers are struggling to assist them with their writing needs. The assumption is that a lack of feedback, teacher preparedness, and a lack of writing frequency are affecting writing achievement and accountability. The goal of this problem of practice was to foster a learning environment that promoted and supported achievement in writing, and created promising outcomes for students, teachers, and district.

By utilizing an extensive literature review, experiential knowledge, methodology, and applying previous research and theory, a plan was employed to attack the problem associated with insufficient writing achievement. Based on the constructivist theory, learning should capture the application of knowledge, acquire by doing, and problem solve (Dennick, 2012).

Incorporating constructivist theory and principles into practice, according to Dennick (2012):

implies that the learner is at the heart of learning. If effective learning involves personal construction, then learners must take responsibility for this fundamental process. This is essentially the most important ‘metacognitive’ concept that learners need to accept, hence

they should abandon a passive, ‘spoon-feeding’ attitude and adopt a more collaborative approach to learning with their teachers. (p. 620)

Within the constructivist principles exists the experiential learning theory where Kolb (1984) related experiences with knowledge. He understood the importance of learning by experience and the value of feedback. According to Yardley, Teunissen, and Dornan (2012), “In its most simple form, experiential learning is constructing knowledge and meaning from real-life experience” (p. 161). By incorporating these theories into writing across the curriculum practices, students can focus on writing about personal experiences and utilize the experiences to generate new knowledge. As Dennick (2012) stated, “Kolb sees learning as an ever changing process rather than content acquisition and storage” (p. 621). Within this learning environment, students construct and benefit from knowledge through the process of writing across the curriculum and then apply the knowledge that has been gained.

The genre theory provided insight into effective writing opportunities. According to Ahlsén and Lundh (2007), “The proponents of this theory often claim that genre-writing is the most efficient and modern way of teaching writing, since it creates awareness of both culture and ways of writing” (p. 9). This theory provides opportunities for students to reflect and focus on their writing. It also provides individuals the opportunity to write with purpose. Too often students struggle with writing assignments that do not have purpose and meaning to the writer. The genre theory, according to Hyland (2004), offers students “a way of seeing how different texts are created in distinct and recognizable ways in terms of their purpose, audience and message” (p. 12). Writing across the curriculum provides multiple opportunities for students to express themselves, and develop cognitive abilities that can assist them in school and in the professional setting. Deane and O’Neill (2011) stated that:

Discipline-specific writing instruction is underpinned by genre theory, by social constructivist theory, and by academic literacies. These theoretical models have in common that they regard academic writing as social practice which reflects the norms, values, and epistemological understandings of specific discourse communities, and as the core activity through which academic disciplines construct and debate knowledge. Based on these theories, there has been a growing recognition that academic writing cannot be learned in separation from disciplinary knowledge. As a result, various types of discipline-specific writing pedagogies emerged, such as Writing across the Curriculum... (p. 66)

By incorporating proven theory and practice into a writing across the curriculum implementation, the assumption was that progress towards writing efficiency and achievement would be assessable.

Several aspects affect the learning environment and outcome of student achievement and writing success. Often, teachers do not understand the contributing factors that hinder student success (Nielson, 2012). It was important to recognize and analyze the concepts that are affecting writing achievement. The assumption was that a lack in the frequency of writing, a lack of cooperation between subject areas, a lack of teacher preparedness, and a lack of feedback contributed to the unsettled nature hindering writing instruction. The recognition and analyzation of these concepts and strategies were necessitous in constructing a solution to combat Frazier ISD's writing difficulties. More practice, more feedback, and better instruction was needed to confront the district's writing struggles. Research by Ericsson (2008) concluded that considerable progresses is attainable "when individuals were 1) given a task with a well-defined goal, 2) motivated to improve, 3) provided with feedback, and 4) provided with ample opportunities for repetition and gradual refinements of their performance" (p. 991). This type of intentional practice; unfortunately, was absent in the Frazier ISD. Ericsson (2008) again stressed the importance of experience in the pursuit of expertise. Therefore, the district was in need of a

learning environment that was meaningful, favorable, and advantageous for student learning in regards to writing.

Another assumption was that students were losing opportunities to write because of assessment and accountability requirements. Villalva (2006) and Abedi (2004) theorized that writing instruction lost focus due to mandated state assessments. Students in Texas take state writing assessments in the fourth and seventh grades before enrolling in high school. Therefore, an assumption exists that writing is emphasized in the fourth and seventh grades, then neglected until high school. Based on data from the last four years for the Frazier ISD, writing scores were well below acceptable measures which contributed to concerns needing addressed.

With all of the research, strategies, and models that are available to schools and instructors, students continue to struggle with writing. Writing effectively is a necessitous skill that allows students to succeed academically, where obstructing gaps must be addressed to move forward with successful instruction. The purpose of this problem of practice was to recognize and then alleviate a stagnant level of mediocrity that existed regarding writing. Writing instruction will not improve unless gaps are identified and appropriate strategies are put into place. According to Troia and Graham (2003), “A critical element in enhancing the writing development of students who struggle with writing is to identify and address obstacles that impede their success in learning to write” (p. 82).

It was also an assumption that students would be reluctant to write more frequently in all classes. Therefore, students need to be inspired and actively engaged throughout the writing process. They need time to gather their thoughts and ideas and to write about material that they can relate to. Graham and Harris (2016) presented a simple solution to writing, “Devote time to the teaching of writing and use this time wisely. This includes using teaching practices with a

proven track record for success” (p. 360). If students are unfamiliar with, or lack the knowledge needed to write about a certain aspect, then they are more likely to shy away from the writing opportunity. Jago (2014) stated, “A more effective approach is to provide students with a range of information they can draw from as they compose” (p. 17). Giving students the opportunity to write about material that they are familiar with allows them to concentrate and focus on the given task. This is an important aspect because it draws the attention of the writer. It intrigues the writer to become engaged in the process, which can produce more creative and substantial products.

If writing is going to improve, then students need the opportunity to write frequently in all areas. For students to achieve success in their writing initiatives, Jago (2014) recommended, “giving them something to write about, frequent opportunities to write, and thoughtful feedback” (p. 17). It is unacceptable to expect students to become effective writers if they are only practicing sparingly. Unfortunately, frequency of writing was difficult to measure. Studies indicated that more frequent writing contributed to writing improvement (Bridge & Hiebert, 1985), but failed to determine the required amount of frequency needed for improvement to take place. Interestingly, a study conducted in 1948 by Lokke and Wykoff at Purdue University concentrated on writing frequency. Results of the research concluded that “groups which did twice as much writing had fewer failures and showed the most improvement” (Arnold & Burton, 1963). Students need continual engagement and opportunities to write regularly in order to succeed at writing. This opportunity is important because it awards time to process information and solidifies the direction of the writing activity. However, writing is not being required in classes outside of the English classrooms. If schools are going to have high expectations for

their students in writing, then writing has to be an important and expected action across the curriculum (Jago, 2014).

Another aspect to improve student writing was to provide continuous and meaningful feedback. As with any area of concentration, feedback is necessary if progress is the desired goal. According to Jago (2014), “For students to improve as writers, they need feedback on what they’ve done well and what they need to do to improve” (p. 20). Feedback provides students with the opportunity to gain insight and move forward in their thinking process and writing abilities. Feedback is important because it solidifies the good aspects of writing and also addresses the areas that need improvement. Students need the opportunity to receive, reflect and learn from feedback if their writing is to improve. However, the feedback must be continuous and meaningful if students are going to react and accept it.

The necessity of this study was to provide appropriate instruction to create beneficial and meaningful learning environments where students succeed in writing. According to Santangelo and Olinghouse (2009), “Writing is one of the most powerful tools we have for learning and for demonstrating what we know” (p. 1). Writing is a skill used in all aspects of life. It provides meaningful, enriching opportunities to access and retain knowledge. Additionally, it provides students an edge in the real world. The desired state was to eliminate the woes of writing instruction and to provide students with the knowledge and skills needed for success in academia and inherit a lifelong skill.

Summary

Writing is a necessary element for success in the world of education and beyond. Having the ability to write and perform in this aspect is paramount in achieving fundamental and advanced requirements in academia and in the professional realm. Unfortunately writing

efficiently and effectively is not at the forefront of educational endeavors. Graham and Perrin (2007b) stressed:

Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. Yet every year in the United States large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers.... Because the definition of literacy includes both reading and writing skills, poor writing proficiency should be recognized as an intrinsic part of this national literacy crisis. (p. 3)

However, if students are going to be expected to perform on state and federal mandated assessments and write with purpose in the professional setting, the educational institution must address the lack of writing frequency and how teachers respond to students' writing. According to Applebee and Langer (2009), data supports and solidifies the notion that writing frequency should be doubled and writing across the curriculum should be emphasized in all learning environments. Fisher and Frey (2013) concluded that “It isn’t fair to expect that students can get by with an occasional extended writing task and little in the way of instruction and practice” (p. 100). By providing meaningful and useful feedback, solid writing instruction, and incorporating a writing across the curriculum program, writing efficiency and achievement have the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

Chapter three encompasses the methods used to formulate a sound research design to address the problem of practice surrounding effective writing instruction and writing achievement. A mixed methods approach was utilized to gather information and data that were affecting writing in the Frazier ISD. By incorporating a mixed methods research approach, appropriate and pertinent data were analyzed and reviewed to assist with the implementation and solution phases of the research. Information gathered from interviews with teachers and students, and surveys administered to teachers and students, lead to a solid understanding of what

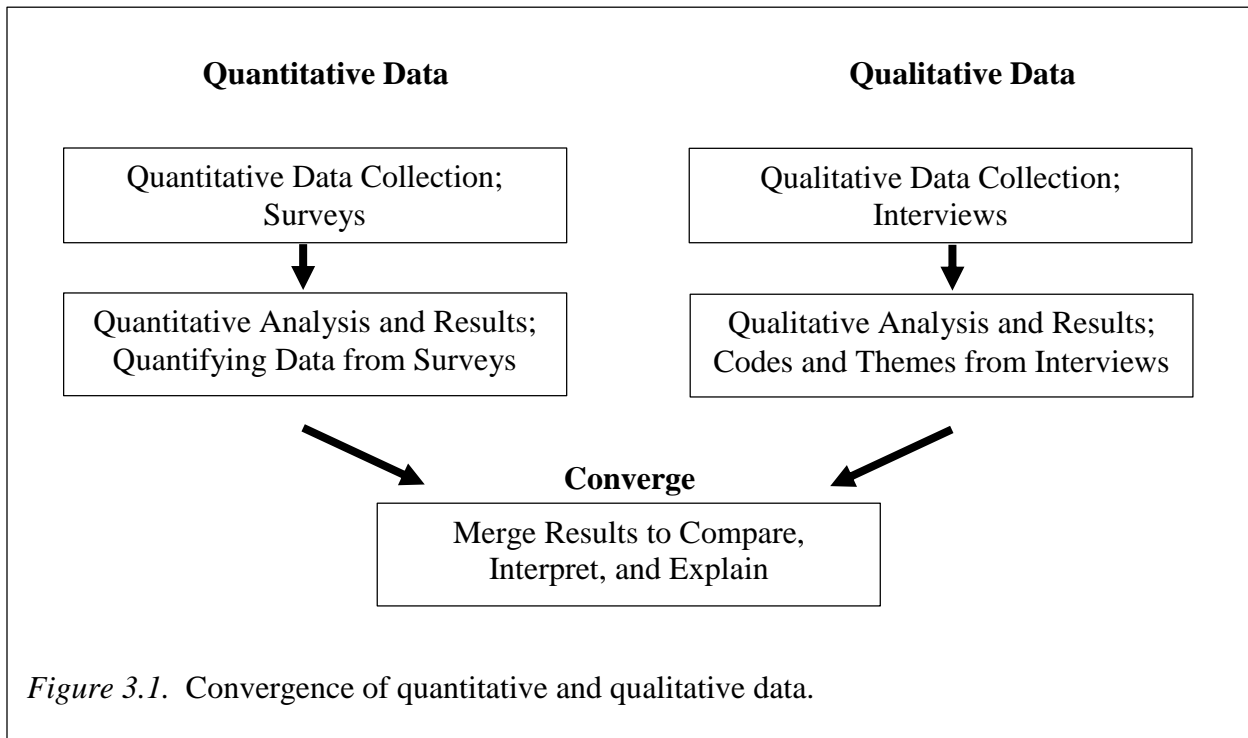
elements were involved in the lack of writing achievement. By analyzing assessment data and writing samples, a clear definition of improvement was solidified.

CHAPTER THREE – INQUIRY METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify instructional practices that influence and promote writing that is meaningful and leads to higher academic achievement. Writing can be difficult for students and teachers. Saddler, Moran, Graham and Harris (2004) stated, “Good writing is not only hard work, it is an extremely complex and challenging mental task” (p. 3). Solid writing instruction should add to the writing development of students and help lessen the difficulties that students possess with writing (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005). This research aimed to identify and fill the gaps that hinder successful writing and academic achievement.

This study used a mixed methods Triangulation Design with convergence model principles to analyze qualitative and quantitative data. Figure 3.1 illustrates the components and concepts of the design (Creswell, 2015):



The mixed methods Triangulation Design generates more data, allowing for greater understanding of both data sets (Creswell, 2015). According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007):

In this model, the researcher collects and analyzes quantitative data and qualitative data separately on the same phenomenon and then the different results are converged...during the interpretation. Researchers use this model when they want to compare results or to validate, confirm, or corroborate quantitative results with qualitative findings. (pp. 64-65)

This design allowed the best aspects of both qualitative and quantitative data to be gathered (Creswell, 2015), and allowed for the collection and analyzation of both data simultaneously (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The findings from the qualitative inquiry and quantitative analysis gave insight into writing problems students and staff were combatting. Utilizing both types of data provided insight and depth in answering the research questions. The research questions for the study asked:

- What instructional practices do Frazier ISD teachers utilize to teach writing?
- What aspects of writing do Frazier ISD students struggle to understand?
- To what extent does the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test impact writing success at Frazier ISD?
- How do teachers and students describe the learning process associated with writing at Frazier ISD?

Rationale

Writing success had been deficient for the students of Frazier ISD. Students were not performing at or above state or regional averages on state assessment writing tests according to Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) data. This study was designed to identify and construct a plan to combat the lack of writing success Frazier ISD students were experiencing. Writing is a life-long skill that can provide substantive benefits in academia and the real world

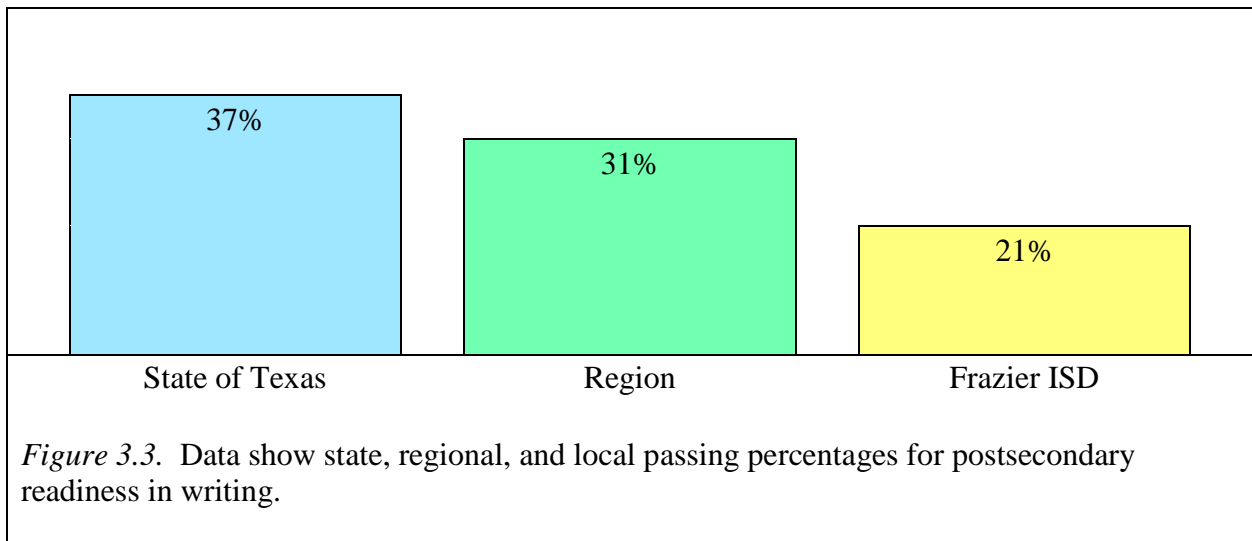
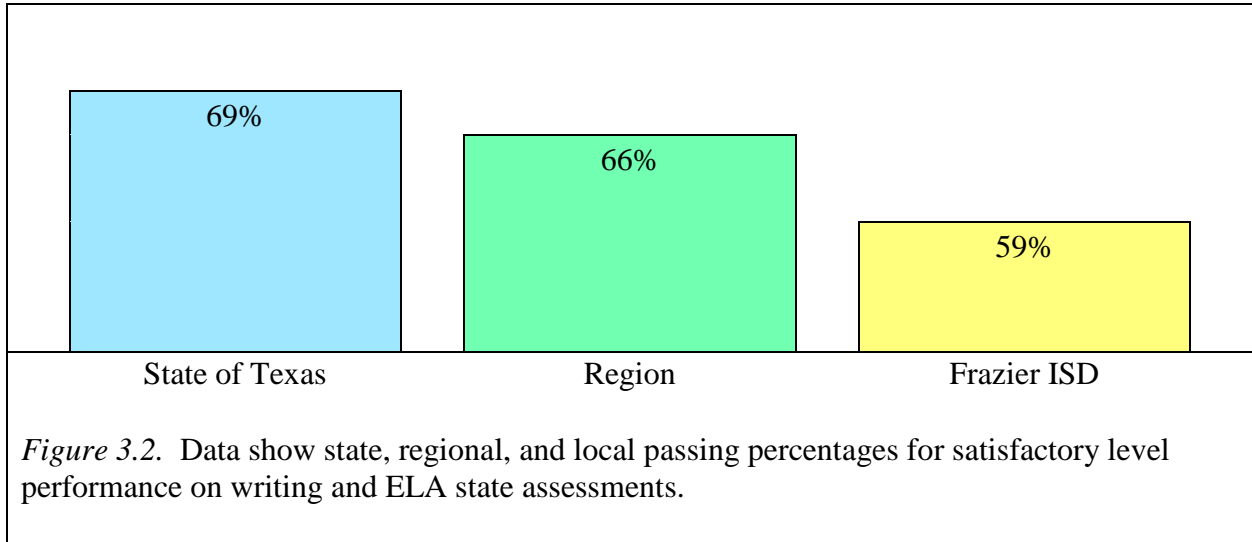
(Alber-Morgan, Hessler, & Konrad, 2007); however, students are not prepared with appropriate and effective measures to experience writing success (Wilcox & Jeffery, 2014).

The methodology of this research involved a mixed methods approach. The mixed methods design provided the opportunity to better understand the research problem, questions, and data. As Creswell (2015) stated, “The basic assumption is that the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provides better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself” (p. 537). This approach allowed strengths of both data sets to be utilized (Creswell, 2015) and provided a “very powerful mix” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 42) of information. A qualitative approach determined specific concerns that teachers and students experience with writing. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the problems teachers and students faced with writing instruction and writing success. The quantitative component clarified and complemented the qualitative findings. Survey results from staff and students were quantified to determine specific aspects of writing instruction and achievement that needed attention. Both data sets were compared and analyzed to address writing concerns. Based upon constructivist principles, the study incorporated theories that reflect appropriate writing instructional practices. Jones and Brader-Araje (2002) stated that, “For many teachers, the focus on constructing meaning in the teaching-learning process resonates with prior beliefs because constructivist-based instruction firmly places educational priorities on students' learning” (p. 1). Therefore, the intent of the study was to incorporate an instructional plan that placed an emphasis on writing instruction and success.

Problem Setting/Context

The problem of practice existed due to consistent low performances on state assessments in writing and English at Frazier ISD. Compared to state and regional averages, Frazier ISD

students scored lower on the STAAR writing and English Language Arts (ELA) test according to TAPR data from 2012 to 2016. Data from TAPR reports also indicated that Frazier ISD students were well below state and regional averages in writing and postsecondary readiness standards. The data in Figures 3.2 and 3.3 represent combined STAAR statistics for writing and ELA assessments from 2012 to 2016:



The purpose of the study was to improve writing across the district and prepare Frazier ISD students for postsecondary success. A writing program designed to meet the needs of the

district's students was nonexistent. According to Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson (2004), "to engage students in writing activities about content is to engage students in learning that content" (p. 30). This problem of practice reflected findings from qualitative inquiry and quantitative analysis to help improve writing achievement.

Demographics

The research was conducted in a rural, central Texas district with approximately 600 students. The district had three campuses, with grades pre-kindergarten through fourth grade on the elementary campus, grades fifth through eighth grade on the middle school campus, and grades ninth through twelfth grade on the high school campus. The district's facilities were constructed in the 1960's and were in need of renovation and/or new construction. The facilities were representative of a community that once thrived, and then became run-down and empty buildings and businesses. Most Frazier residents commute to work in other cities. Frazier had a population of 1,573 residents with an ethnicity background of 19% African American, 12% Hispanic, and 69% White (USA City Facts, 2015). The poverty rate for Frazier was 18%, and the median household income was \$32,228 (USA City Facts, 2015). The percentage of residents with a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate was 78%; however, only 10% of the population had a college degree (USA City Facts, 2015). According to TAPR data from 2015 to 2016, district demographics reported that 78% of the student population was economically disadvantaged, and the ethnicity background of the student population was 26% African American, 26% Hispanic, 48% White and 2% two or more races (Texas Education Agency, 2015-2016). The student population was indicative of a poverty stricken district that struggles to meet the accountability measures set forth by Texas. Students at Frazier ISD struggle with poverty on a daily basis. According to Jensen (2009), "Children raised

in poverty rarely choose to behave differently, but they are faced daily with overwhelming challenges that affluent children never have to confront, and their brains have adapted to suboptimal conditions in ways that undermine good school performance” (p. 14).

State Assessment

Standardized testing in Texas in 2012 changed to the STAAR assessment. The new STAAR assessment incorporated more rigorous questions. “The rigor of items has been increased by assessing skills at a greater depth and level of cognitive complexity” (Texas Education Agency, 2012, p. 1). The STAAR includes writing assessments for the fourth and seventh grades, and an English I and English II assessment with an extensive writing component. Passing the English I and English II assessments are mandatory for high school graduation, and students at the Frazier ISD were struggling to meet and/or exceed those requirements. According to data in DMAC from 2013 to 2016, there were over thirty high school students who had failed one or both of the English I and/or English II assessments. Testing results have a tremendous impact on teachers, students, and the district. Furthermore, there are factors that affect district accountability, teacher evaluations, and student success. Therefore, the assumption was that writing was an emphasis during those testing years, but disregarded in others. As Au (2011) stated:

When we look at the research on how high-stakes testing is affecting US classroom practices, it becomes quite clear that such testing is promoting the standardization of teaching that both disempowers and deskills teachers. For instance, due to the pressures exerted through policies associated with high-stakes testing, teachers are teaching to the tests with increasing regularity, consistency, and intensity. (p. 30)

The goal of this study was to promote and instill the teaching of writing consistently throughout the district. As the Frazier ISD curriculum dictates, writing is supposed to be taught at all grade levels according to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The TEKS clearly

address writing curriculum in all grade levels; however, local and state assessment scores for Frazier ISD indicated a problem with writing.

Personnel

Based on local personnel and TAPR records, Frazier ISD experienced low teacher and administrative retention since 2011. According to TAPR data from 2014 to 2016, the district had a teacher turnover rate of 31% and struggled with keeping quality teachers and other staff members (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2016). According to local personnel data, there was turnover within the English department and with English teachers. According to local auditing records, the economic stature of the district struggled from 2009 to 2014. Financial security and operations were not in accordance with policy, and the district sustained a significant financial loss totaling more than \$800,000. These economic difficulties resulted in pay for teachers below state average, making it difficult to attract and retain quality instructors. According to Hansen, Lien, Cavalluzzo, and Wenger (2004), “Evidence suggests that compensation affects teacher retention. In general, several studies have concluded that higher teacher pay increases the likelihood that a person will continue to teach, while higher opportunities outside teaching cause people to leave the teaching profession” (p. 7). Since 2013, district and campus administration changes occurred with a new superintendent, along with new principals at the elementary, middle, and high school campuses. Hughes (2012) stressed that schools that place an emphasis on student success, student motivation, and have high academic achievement scores, have higher retention rates. Therefore, inconsistency in instructional and administrative personnel could have been an underlying problem that was affecting instruction and writing emphasis in the district.

Research Sample and Data Sources

The study's research sample consisted of students and teaching staff who had district insight into writing instruction and writing achievement. As Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) stated, "In quantitative research, the intent of sampling individuals is to choose individuals that are representative of a population so that the results can be generalized to a population" (p. 112). Creswell (2015) added, "A general rule of thumb is to select as large a sample as possible from the population" (p. 145). The study's district was small with 45 teachers and 600 students.

Student Sample

The study used a convenience sampling method, where student participants took an anonymous and confidential survey. This sampling method allowed access to all 280 students in grades sixth through twelfth. By utilizing a convenience sample, Creswell (2015) stated, "the researcher cannot say with confidence that the individuals are representative of the population. However, the sample can provide useful information for answering questions..." (p. 144). By involving seven different grade levels, the sample aimed to be indicative of the entire student population. The survey was conducted using a Google Forms format. Students were not required to login to their Google account to complete the survey to ensure anonymity, and were given two weeks to finish the survey. It was important to gather student information to determine perceptions and concerns in the writing process. Analysis of the data was used to determine the struggles students face with writing instruction, achievement, and assessment.

Eight student interviews were conducted using a stratified random sample. Two students were selected each from the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade based on class rank. Students were ordered accordingly to their grade point average (GPA) and then divided into the top one-half and the bottom one-half of their respective grade. On a 5.0 scale, GPA's 3.56 and

higher were considered the top one-half, and GPA's below 3.56 were considered the bottom one-half. For example, one student was randomly selected from the top half of the ninth grade, and one student was randomly selected from the bottom half of the ninth grade to participate in the interview. An identical process took place for the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade. The students were divided to determine if differences existed in their thought process with regards to writing. If all divided groups had similar thoughts, focus pointed to instructional or other specific practices. The student interviews were conducted in a comfortable setting on the high school campus. Students had the option of when and where on campus they preferred the interview to take place. The purpose of the study and the intent of the interview process was explained thoroughly to help limit any anxiety that students experienced. Throughout the study, all interview documentation was securely stored. After completion of the study, all documentation collected during the interview process will be properly disposed of in the permissible time frame.

Teacher Sample

There were two professional teaching groups selected for an interview. The first group was selected using a criterion sampling strategy. Criterion sampling was utilized to provide participant information that is content powerful (Patton, 2002). Each English teacher in grades sixth through eleventh, and both fourth grade teachers were invited to participate in the interview process. English teachers and fourth grade teachers were selected because they have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). This group was comprised of seven teachers who had an understanding of what aspects were hindering the writing process and what instructional strategies were needed for improvement. Three teachers were selected from a second group of teaching professionals by using a simple random sample

strategy. This technique was used to provide equal opportunities for the remaining 37 teachers to be selected, and evenly distributed any biases they may have had (Creswell, 2015). The teacher interviews took place in a location of their choice, adding to the comfort level of the process. Again, the purpose of the study and the intent of the interview was stressed to lessen any teacher anxiety because of the interviewer's leadership position.

The professional teaching staff was divided into two groups for survey participation. Each teacher was given the option to participate in an anonymous Google survey with regards to writing. The first teacher group was selected using a criterion sample method comprised of English and fourth grade teachers that were selected for an interview. The remaining professional teaching staff in grades kindergarten through twelfth were included in the second sampling pool. This sample was compiled using a purposeful sample method and included 37 remaining participants. The two groups took the same survey; however, results were kept separate for analysis and comparison.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected using a mixed methods approach. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007), the convergence model, based on the Triangulation Design, was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data with equal emphasis. The data were used to interpret and explain the writing difficulties that were affecting the district. Before data were collected, the institutional review board (IRB), district, and parental approval were acquired. IRB approval was necessary to "protect the rights of individuals participating in the research" (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007, p. 114). Participants signed an informed consent before any involvement in the study. All participants in the study were guaranteed confidentiality and had the opportunity to opt out of participation at any time.

Qualitative data were collected utilizing interviews. Interviews were conducted with students and professional teaching staff. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions which provided an opportunity for further insight, follow-up questions, and discussion during the collection process (see Appendix B for interview protocol). This format allowed the participant to travel their own path and explore the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 2013). The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for evaluation and used for future reference. The interview process was selected to provide students and teachers an opportunity to discuss their thoughts and ideas on writing. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), “This means that interviewers try to understand the perspectives, experiences, thoughts, feelings, and/or ideas of those interviewed, not evaluating or judging these, rather exploring, learning about, and seeking to understand them” (p. 148). The interviews took place in a comfortable setting that was familiar to the staff and students.

Additionally, surveys were used in the study. A Likert scale survey was utilized to gather data that presented insight into writing practices and possible deficiencies (see Appendices C and D for surveys). The surveys were administered through Google Forms. Fifteen questions consisted of a five point Likert scale. This survey format provided opportunities to collect significant amounts of data in a shortened timeframe, guaranteed anonymity, and allowed for the results to be quickly quantified (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Answer options consisted of *strongly agree (SA)*, *agree (A)*, *neutral (N)*, *disagree (D)*, and *strongly disagree (SD)*. Using a point system, the following responses constituted the following data, an *SA* = 5 points, *A* = 4 points, *N* = 3 points, *D* = 2 points, *SD* = 1 point. All data gathered were compiled in an Excel document and quantified to analyze and interpret for writing issues. The district’s data results were analyzed to identify writing concerns at Frazier ISD. By combining the results from the

interviews and surveys; writing practices, concerns, strengths, and deficiencies were identified to design a strategy to meet the specific writing needs of the district's students.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was used to make sense of vast amounts of information. Qualitative analysis involved transcription, coding, and determining themes (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007), and quantitative analysis merged with qualitative findings to address the writing issues of the district. As Creswell (2015) stated, "Mixed methods research is not simply collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative information. It goes beyond this to include the combining, integrating, or 'mixing' of the two data sets" (p. 553).

Using a mixed methods design provided advantages to exploring the research questions. Through surveys and interviews, data were collected and analyzed. "There are several strategies by which qualitative data collected using the designs described can be quantitized to create a single comprehensive dataset" (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib, and Rupert, 2007, p. 22). Therefore, the qualitative data gathered from the surveys were quantified using frequencies and percents of results. "The qualitative data provide a deep understanding of survey responses, and statistical analysis can provide detailed assessment of patterns of responses" (Driscoll et al., p. 26). A statistical analysis was developed utilizing a *t*-test to determine if significant differences existed between students and teachers with regards to writing characteristics.

Qualitative data, such as interviews, were conducted with teachers and students. As Patton (2002) stated, "the major way in which...to understand the perceptions, feelings, and knowledge of people is through in-depth, intensive interviewing" (p. 21). The use of open-ended questions throughout the interview process allowed the participants to tell their story. The

interviewer listened intently and gathered information to assemble the data for analysis.

According to Patton (2002):

By contrast, the qualitative findings are longer, more detailed, and variable in content; analysis is difficult because responses are neither systematic nor standardized. Yet, the open-ended responses permit one to understand the world as seen by the respondents. The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection... (p. 21)

An open coding system of analysis was used to identify distinct concepts and central themes in the data. The analysis used an inductive approach, which allowed themes to emerge from the data gathered through the interview process (Thomas, 2006). The open coding system provided awareness of common words and important phrases being used by the participant. Open coding also allowed for breaking down, analyzing, comparing, labeling, and categorizing data in order to assemble and form categories of thoughts and themes (Moghaddam, 2006).

These methods of data analysis were used to answer the research questions. Qualitative and quantitative data played important roles individually and collaboratively for a mixed methods approach. Data analysis helped uncover concerns, strengths, weaknesses, and gaps that existed with writing at Frazier ISD. These solid analysis techniques provided data to strengthen, develop, and incorporate a plan to address the specific writing needs of the students, staff, and district.

Trustworthiness

This study attempted to address writing issues with quantitative data and qualitative inquiry. Both data sources were used and analyzed to address the phenomenon in a convergence design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). It was assumed that the sample population participating in the survey and interview process was indicative of the entire population. The sampling techniques utilized provided this option. It was assumed that participants involved in the study

accurately, appropriately, and honestly answered survey and interview questions. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stressed that it is ethical and imperative to conduct responsive research, incorporating the participants' experiences, context, and feedback. Adequate and detailed information was provided on the research study to all participants. All participants and documentation were kept confidential to protect everyone involved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

The use of open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their true beliefs about writing in the district. Utilizing open-ended questions assisted with providing information that was not controlled by any biases held by the researcher (Johnson & Turner, 2003).

Comprising a member check component to the study assisted in eliminating biases in the research process. All participants were allowed to review their interview transcription for validity, correctness, and suggestions. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), member checks can assist with validation and help with the understanding and explanation of the data. Member checks were incorporated to provide validity and accuracy of the information collected.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) stated:

To ensure that the researcher's own biases do not influence how participants' perspectives are portrayed and to determine the accuracy of the findings, make use of "member checks," which entails sending the transcribed interviews or summaries of the researcher's conclusions to participants for review. (p. 163)

Support from member checks assisted with looking at data in different ways and helped with processing the information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Limitations and Delimitations

There were weaknesses that existed within the study. The specific problem addressed was chosen because it greatly affected the academic performance of students within the district. Students were not writing at appropriate levels based on TAPR data and assessment scores. The research questions clearly stated the intent of identifying the major obstacles impeding writing

and how to improve writing. Specific sampling measures were chosen to replicate the district population and individuals that were invested in the research and outcome of the study.

Although the sampling strategy was solid, the study was limited because of a small number of participants. This study could be of significance to rural, low socioeconomic districts in Texas, which are struggling with similar aspects involving writing. Interview questions were selected that were simple, yet open-ended for additional response and thoughts. This approach allowed the participant to travel their own path through the interview process, and provided detailed, rich data. A survey with closed-ended Likert questions was included to achieve a higher completion rate.

The researcher's position as superintendent could have presented issues with participant responses. Some participants might have answered questions based on what they thought they should have said instead of what they believed. This situation could have occurred during the collection of data because of the researcher's position (Creswell, 2015). To address this issue, participants contributing survey responses were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, and could have withdrawn from participation at any time. Creswell (2013) highlighted the value of confidentiality and its importance to the study. The intent of the qualitative approach was to interview, transcribe, and code the data without assistance. This allowed confidentiality of the participants involved and data immersion for the researcher (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The position of superintendent also posed biased opportunities in the qualitative collection piece. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) stressed that biases may be problematic to the study and should be openly discussed. Ravitch and Carl (2016) added, "When we as researchers, acknowledge our biases and prejudices, we must not only acknowledge but also actively monitor our subjectivities and how these influence our research" (p. 369). The researcher had direct

knowledge of the district's academic state and the struggles that existed. Therefore, it was imperative to maintain an unbiased approach to uncover the obstacles that were affecting writing within the district.

Summary

The problem of practice encompassed a mixed methods design aimed to improve writing in the district. By utilizing quantitative and qualitative data, obstacles affecting writing in the district were identified. Students and professional teaching staff participated in research involving surveys and interviews aimed to uncover the restraints that were affecting writing success. The research questions aimed to uncover the causes of writing difficulties and address ways for writing improvement.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify instructional practices that influence and promote writing that is meaningful and leads to higher academic achievement. Chapter four provides an overview of the study and shares the results of the data collected through a mixed methods approach using quantitative and qualitative data.

Review of Study

The goal of this study was to improve the writing at Frazier ISD. Student results and writing achievement have been at a meager constant, and improvements are needed. Students and teachers participated in the study because they were directly involved in the phenomenon being researched. They had direct knowledge and insight that helped answer the research questions:

- What instructional practices do Frazier ISD teachers utilize to teach writing?
- What aspects of writing do Frazier ISD students struggle to understand?
- To what extent does the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test impact writing success at Frazier ISD?
- How do teachers and students describe the learning process associated with writing at Frazier ISD?

Summary of Research Design

The study used a mixed methods Triangulation Design. This method allowed aspects of qualitative and quantitative data to merge and provided knowledge and depth in answering the research questions. Data were collected through interviews and surveys with teachers and students. While the interview questions were open ended, the survey responses used a five point

Likert scale. The data were combined to address issues students and teachers were experiencing with writing at Frazier ISD.

Background Information

Frazier ISD is a rural, central Texas district with approximately 600 students. District reports for 2015 to 2016 indicated that 78% of the student population was economically disadvantaged. Demographics for the student population were 26% African American, 26% Hispanic, 48% White and 2% two or more races (Texas Education Agency, 2015-2016). According to local personnel records, teachers in the district were at different levels of experience and educational backgrounds. There were 44 teachers employed in the district at the time of the study. Of those 44 teachers, seven had direct involvement with teaching English and/or writing as their primary subject. Teacher turnover was problematic for the district in recent years. Pay for teachers in the district was approximately \$8,800 less than the state average (Texas Education Agency, 2012-2016), and could be an underlying factor for this turnover rate.

Students

Student data were collected through interviews and a survey. Surveys were distributed through student Google accounts using Google Forms, and the results were collected in Google Sheets and converted to an Excel document where the results were used for analysis. Involvement in the survey was optional, anonymous, and confidential. Table 4.1 breaks down student survey participation by grade.

Table 4.1

Student Survey Participants

	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
Total Students	38	52	55	43	45	52	38
Participants	15	20	22	3	7	2	6
Percentage of Participants	40%	39%	40%	7%	16%	4%	16%

There were 323 students enrolled in grades sixth through twelfth at the time of the study. The percentage of all students involved in the survey was 23%.

Eight high school students were selected to participate in an interview. Two students from the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades were involved in the qualitative piece of the study. Each student was randomly selected and given the option to participate in the confidential interview. The students were selected based on their GPA and then divided into the top one-half and the bottom one-half of their respective grade. On a 5.0 scale, GPA's 3.56 and higher were considered the top one-half, and GPA's below 3.56 were considered the bottom one-half. Proper IRB approval and protocol were in place before interviews were convened. Table 4.2 provides information on the participants involved in the interview process.

Table 4.2

Student Interview Participants

	Grade	Gender	GPA	Ethnicity	Years Enrolled in District
Student A	12	Female	3.66	White	11
Student B	12	Female	3.51	African American	8
Student C	11	Female	3.64	White	6
Student D	11	Male	3.48	African American	6
Student E	10	Female	3.78	Hispanic	5
Student F	10	Male	3.55	White	11
Student G	9	Male	3.88	African American	10
Student H	9	Male	3.36	Hispanic	2

All participants were between the ages of 14 and 18, and all had been assessed with STAAR writing measurements. Of the eight students interviewed, four of them had to retest to pass their English EOC exam(s). One of these students was in the top half of their class, and took the English I and English II exam three times each before passing.

Teachers

Teacher data were collected through a survey and interviews. Again, IRB approval, protocol, and consent were in place before survey and interview invitations were administered. Teacher survey data were collected through a Google Form. All teachers were invited to participate in the optional, anonymous, and confidential survey. Teachers were divided into two groups to provide comparison. One group was comprised of seven participants who taught

English and/or writing. The second group involved all remaining teachers. All seven teachers who taught English and/or writing participated in the survey. Of the remaining 37 teachers, 25 agreed to partake in the survey. Teacher involvement in the survey had a 61.4% participation rate. Of the 44 total teachers, 27 participated. Table 4.3 provides information on the teacher survey participants.

Table 4.3

Teacher Survey Participants

	ELA/Writing Teachers	Non ELA Teachers	All Teachers
Participants	7	20	27
Total Number of Teachers	7	37	44
Percentage of Participants	100%	54%	61%

Ten teachers were selected for an in-depth interview. All seven teachers who taught ELA and/or writing were invited to participate, and all agreed. The three non-ELA teachers interviewed were randomly selected from the remaining 37 teachers. Teachers involved in the interview had different levels of experience and education. Table 4.4 provides information on the teacher interview participants.

Table 4.4

Teacher Interview Participants

	Years of Teaching	Years in the District	Gender	Graduate Degree
Teacher A	11	8	Female	
Teacher B	6	1	Female	Masters
Teacher C	8	6	Female	
Teacher D	4	4	Female	
Teacher E	2	1	Female	
Teacher F	1	1	Female	
Teacher G	25	20	Female	
Teacher H	14	1	Female	Masters
Teacher I	9	1	Female	Masters
Teacher J	4	2	Female	

The mean age for all Frazier ISD teachers was 40.4 years old. This was similar to the mean age of teachers interviewed which was 41.7 years old. According to local personnel service records, the average number of years teaching for all Frazier ISD teachers was 10.2 years, while the average number of years in the Frazier ISD was 6.5 years.

Findings

Data were collected and analyzed by means of surveys and interviews. The following section provides the results and findings of the data collected. Four research questions guided the study to determine what practices were involved in effective writing. The four research questions concentrated on the following:

- Writing instruction practices;
- Struggles with writing;
- STAAR impact on writing success; and,
- Learning process.

Writing Instruction Practices

Students and teachers were asked to provide information on instruction used to teach writing. To affirm the instructional practices Frazier ISD teachers utilize to teach writing, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted using survey results to determine whether there was a difference in how students and teachers perceive writing instruction practices. An F-test was used to determine if the variances of the two populations were equal. The results indicated the variance of the two populations were equal, and a non-directional *t*-test assuming equal variance was used. The *t*-test indicated there was no significant difference in perceptions, $t(105) = 1.98, p = .51$. The results indicated that teachers had a higher perception of writing instruction ($M = 3.59, SD = 1.32$) than did students ($M = 3.46, SD = .74$). Additionally, a Cohen's *d* effect size was used to measure the magnitude of mean differences. The effect size for this analysis was small ($d = 0.12$).

Responses to teacher interviews prompted a theme of inconsistency in the instruction techniques used in their classrooms. Of the ten teachers interviewed, eight different instructional practices were mentioned. Table 4.5 indicates instructional techniques and/or combinations of techniques used by Frazier ISD teachers.

Table 4.5

Teacher Instructional Methods Used for Writing

Method	ELA/Writing Teachers %	Non ELA Teachers %	All Teachers %
Modeling	29	0	20
Restate and Revise	43	0	30
The Tree	14	0	10
Paragraph Structure	29	0	20
Short Answers	100	33	80
Bell ringers	57	33	50
Feedback	71	33	80
Write Daily	100	0	50

The major techniques incorporated in writing instruction involved short answer responses, daily writing, and providing feedback. Teachers indicated that they used short answer questions to check for understanding of the lesson. Teacher F said that she used short answer responses on a daily basis. Teacher G stated, “We write about different scenarios to figure out problems...” Unfortunately, both Teachers F and G also indicated that their short answer responses were only graded for content and flow. An aspect that may influence the instruction process is standardized testing. While Teacher J stated that she tries to incorporate writing into daily lessons, it is mostly geared towards STAAR preparation. She shared, “The writing instruction I provide now is geared more towards STAAR. If I teach them how to write for this test, it doesn’t relate to real world writing.”

While teacher interviews indicated a strong use of daily writing in classrooms, survey data showed different results. English teachers and non-ELA teachers had a similar mean with regards to the following survey question, *writing is important for student academic success*. English teachers had a mean of 4.71 and non-ELA teachers had a mean of 4.60. However, when

asked, *if students write on a daily basis in my class*, results were significantly different between the two teaching groups. To determine this, a non-directional *t*-test was used. The results of the *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference in perceptions, $t(29) = 2.05, p \sim 0$. The results indicated that ELA teachers had a higher daily writing habit ($M = 4.71, SD = .27$) than non-ELA teachers ($M = 2.91, SD = 1.27$).

Student interview responses indicated that writing was more common in their ELA classes compared to their non-ELA classes. Table 4.6 provides information on student perceptions of writing instruction used in their classes.

Table 4.6
High School Student Perceptions of the Use of Writing Instruction

Method	Students With GPA \geq 3.56 %	Students With GPA $<$ 3.56 %	All Students %
Essays	75	25	50
Short Answers	50	25	38
Notes	75	50	63
Feedback	100	75	88
Daily Writing in ELA	75	75	75
Daily Writing in Non-ELA	0	0	0
Test Prep	75	100	88

Student H said, “We write on a daily basis in our English class.” Student E added that they write, “a lot...at least one to two times a week in English.” And Student A noted, “we write between two and three times per week in our English class.” Comments were different when asked about writing outside of the English classroom. Student H stated, “we only copy notes and write sparingly in other classes.... But these teachers only grade for content.” Student A added, “We copy notes, but we don’t write paper or responses.” Student G responded with “we mostly

write notes and stuff. We don't really write essays, and we don't really write at all." Finally, Student C stated:

We used to write every Wednesday in every class. It was annoying. I even had to write in math class. But it probably helped me out. You have to write in everyday life no matter what. Now we write once every 2 weeks in other classes.

Survey responses also indicated that writing is used more in ELA classes compared to non-ELA classes. On a scale of 1 to 5 with five being the highest, the student mean was 3.99 when asked if writing occurred in their ELA classroom, compared to a 3.07 mean when asked about writing outside of the ELA classroom.

Feedback was stressed as an important factor in writing success for Frazier ISD students. Teacher A stated, "I don't think that writing can improve without good feedback." The most common forms of feedback given by teachers were comments on the paper, one-on-one conversations, and peer feedback. Teacher J felt that feedback was beneficial to students and stated:

I give them comments and try to discover their strengths and weaknesses.... This helps encourage them.... The feedback I give is one-on-one. I want to talk to them personally and find out where I can help them. I feel they open up to me when it is like this. The kids respond very well, and they like that I am asking questions and that I care. I like the motivation it gives the kids.

As Teacher H stated, a combination of peer and one-on-one feedback is the best approach:

I meet with them. The more you praise them, the more they are going to write. You will get their true thoughts. I use peer feedback, pair and share, and write to each other. It is a great thing. They are going to pick up more from their peers than from me probably. They care about their peer's opinion. This centers around collaboration.

Data from the surveys revealed a strong use of feedback with means of 3.53 for teachers and 3.85 for students. Teachers indicated that feedback was highly beneficial and needed for writing improvement; however, a theme of time constraints evolved when trying to deliver meaningful feedback. Teacher E stated, "Immediate feedback is needed instead of waiting on me for a week

or so to finish it.” Teacher D added, “Feedback can be time consuming.... I feel like I have to spend time on re-teaching instead of refining simple stuff.” Teacher G affirmed, “I give feedback when I have time. It’s very difficult to find time to read everything. Quite a few assignments are graded for completion only.” Finally, Teacher B affirmed, “I don’t have enough time to give great feedback. I want to visit one-on-one with my kids, but time...hinders this practice.”

While teachers indicated feedback was needed and given, student interviews showed inconsistent feedback within their classes. Student perceptions of feedback prompted a theme of craving feedback in their classes. Student C responded to a question with regards to feedback with, “I feel like she doesn’t even look at it. I don’t get much from her.” Student H stated, “I wish she would go into more detail about how to correct it...instead of just writing in a colored pen. Peer feedback didn’t really work for me because some kids don’t care or don’t know what they’re doing.” Student E made the following comment on feedback:

I would learn better if she would sit there with me and tell me what’s wrong and show me. When you just write stuff, I don’t know how to fix it. She circles a word, and I don’t know if that means take it off or fix it. The teachers in my other classes give me feedback but they don’t really check for specifics, they’re just checking for the body.

Another comment in regards to feedback by Student A stated, “The feedback helps a bit, but it could be better if it was done more often.” Student D indicated that comments like, “way to go, and great job,” were common responses from teachers.

Writing Struggles

Students and teachers were asked to provide information on struggles that exist with writing. To determine whether a difference in perceptions existed with students and teachers regarding students’ struggles with writing, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted. The survey results indicated the variance of the two populations were not equal, and a non-directional

t-test assuming unequal variance was used. The *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference in perceptions, $t(73) = 1.99, p \sim 0$. The results concluded that students had a higher perception of writing ease ($M = 3.16, SD = 1.25$) than teachers ($M = 1.81, SD = 1.0$). Additionally, a Cohen's *d* effect size ($d = 1.19$) was calculated and indicated a large effect size.

Interviews with students and teachers provided insight to problems that exist with writing at Frazier ISD. Students were asked, *what aspects of writing are difficult for you*, and teachers were asked, *what struggles do you see with students and their writing?* Table 4.7 provides information on student perceptions of writing struggles.

Table 4.7
High School Students Perceptions of Writing Struggles

Issues	Students With GPA \geq 3.56 %	Students With GPA $<$ 3.56 %	All Students %
Technology	0	0	0
Punctuation	25	25	25
Grammar	25	75	50
Basic Structure	0	25	13
Elaboration	25	0	13
Starting	25	75	50
Difficult	25	100	63
Thought Process	25	25	25
Not Prepared	25	25	25

Students of both groups had similar perceptions of writing struggles with exceptions of grammar, getting starting, and overall writing difficulty. Table 4.8 indicates teacher perceptions of writing struggles.

Table 4.8

Teacher Perceptions of Student Writing Struggles

Issues	ELA/Writing Teachers %	Non ELA Teachers %	All Teachers %
Technology	86	100	90
Laziness	29	33	30
Punctuation	43	0	30
Grammar	71	33	60
Basic Structure	86	100	90
Vocabulary	29	0	20
Spelling	57	33	50
Elaboration	43	0	30
Expectations	71	33	60
Hate to Write	43	33	40

Teachers were adamant during their interviews in describing student struggles with writing. A common theme that emerged from the interviews was that technology, social media in general, was causing major academic writing issues. Nine out of the ten teachers interviewed stressed their displeasure with social media regarding student writing. Teacher F stated, “Some of the kids write like they text.... About 30% write like this all the time. They’re lazy and they don’t care.” Teacher A commented:

They write like they talk. They speak digitally. It enables them to create their own vocabulary. Text speech is so broken. I can’t tell a student to write like they speak, because they’re not use to it. Slang is so different and slang vocabulary is so different.

Additionally, Teacher D stated:

But writing is hard for them because they don’t have to do it anymore. They don’t have to write to communicate. They can text, but they use their texting lingo in their writing. They’re not confident in their writing because they don’t write much, they just text.

Teacher H also expressed, “texting is killing writing. What they use in their writing will blow your mind, it’s killing us!”

Ironically, students had different viewpoints on technology and social media slang. Student F stated, “I use slang while texting, but I don’t use it in my writing.” Student B commented, “My texting is nice and clean. I write stuff correctly.” Student D also added, “I really don’t see slang in my writing.” On the other hand, Student H stated:

With texting, there’s a different way with grammar. It doesn’t really affect my writing, but I see others use ‘u’ for you. I think it can be a problem because we’re not really using all of our knowledge. We’re being lazy.

Student A said, “If I’m focused, my text writing does not creep into my classroom writing. If I’m not focused, it sometimes slips in there.”

Grammar and basic sentence structure were struggles that emerged from both teachers and students. As Teacher I stated, “Who said that English was supposed to be easy?” Teacher F added, “Spelling is OK, but the wording with complete sentences and proper grammar hurts students the most.” Teacher A pointed out that “Grammar is always tough, it’s very complex.” Several teachers also commented on the fact that students are behind their grade level with regards to English grammar and writing ability. Teacher D stated, “They don’t have the stuff that they should know to write correctly at this grade level,” while Teacher B said, “There is a link that is missing between elementary and high school.” “It is challenging. Fifth and sixth graders struggle with forming complete sentences. They don’t know how to make sentences that are understandable” (Teacher C). Students also commented on the struggles that they face with grammar and basic structure. Student F stated, “I struggle with sentence structure,” and Student C said, “I don’t understand all the grammar stuff. I don’t know where all of the punctuation and stuff are supposed to go.” Student D commented, “Nothing is really hard. Grammar is kind of hard, but not really.” Oddly, Student D scored a three on the English II EOC exam which is considered very limited and basic (see Appendix E). When asked *what part of writing is hard*

for you, Student B said, “I don’t know. I don’t really have any difficulties with it.” Again, Student B struggled with the writing component of the English II EOC exam and scored a two on the composition (see Appendix F). A score of two is considered very limited.

Another struggle according to teachers was that expectations for writing were missing. Students are expected to write in classes where writing is assessed at the state level, but may not have the same expectations in other grades and/or classes. This absence of writing constituted a theme of understanding the importance of writing for overall academic success. According to Teacher H:

Students don’t see writing every day. I would struggle too if I were taught writing in the fourth grade and didn’t see it again until the seventh grade. I’ve lost the knowledge and skills gained, and now have a huge gap to fill. The difference between fourth and seventh grade is huge.

Teachers were concerned about the lack of writing expected in the classroom. Teacher D commented:

I’m sure that writing was not stressed in the fifth and sixth grade, and now all of the sudden, here it is, we better get to writing. We should always be focused on writing as we are with math and reading. Writing needs to be consistent every year. It’s not fair to measure growth from fourth to seventh grade. Teachers in non-tested grades should be focusing on writing, even though it’s not tested. Teachers push and prioritize areas that are tested.

Teacher C added, “I don’t think writing is being stressed in the earlier grades, except for the fourth and seventh grades because those are the grades that writing is tested in. We try to make up for the lapse in writing.” Teacher J made the comment, “I want my students to enjoy writing, but they hate it because they know it’s just for a test. They’re pounded so hard that it takes the fun out of it.”

The dislike of writing was also mentioned by teachers and students as a struggle. Teacher D made the comment, “Students hate it. I’d have to come up with something big to get

them to write. They would dig their heels in. They hate writing, hate it!” Other teachers commented that students find writing boring and a waste of time. Teacher A stated, “Kids put their feet in the dirt to avoid writing, they can’t stand it.” According to Teacher E, writing is hard for kids and they dislike it because they’re not good at it. She stated, “Kids would be frustrated and stress about it a lot if asked to write daily. They stress over writing. It’s hard to get their thoughts on paper. They want quick simple answers.”

Students were concerned about writing and felt that additional writing would be a struggle for them. According to Student F, “I would feel stressed having to write in all classes. It stresses me out to have to write about stuff.” Student E stated, “More writing would be boring. I wouldn’t know what to write about, but it would probably make my writing better.” Another comment by Student A stressed that the drastic change would be “overwhelming.” However, Student G stated, “I feel like others struggle with writing because they’re lazy and they don’t want to put forth the effort...” From a teacher’s perspective, some felt like writing was limited in all classes, even though most agreed that writing should be used in all classes. Survey results to the question, *writing should be limited to English classrooms only*, had a small mean on 1.88 on a scale of 1 to 5 with five being the highest. However, Teacher J felt like there would be reluctance from teachers outside of the English classroom with regards to writing. She stated the following about teacher reluctance to incorporate writing:

Yes, I’m sure there would be. We went to school to be teachers. An adult who claims to be a teacher should not take away from student growth. Some teachers feel they’re entitled to teach whatever they want to teach. I’m here to teach children. But some teachers have a bad attitude about writing, and this rubs off on our students. The kids sense the bad attitude towards writing.

Others teachers felt like subject specific areas would struggle because they would be losing time with their designated subject. Teacher E said, “teachers feel that their students might fall behind

in their subject.”

STAAR Impact on Writing Success

Students and teachers were asked to provide information on the impact of the STAAR test and how it relates to test preparation, instruction, and writing. An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether a difference in perceptions existed with students and teachers regarding the STAAR test. An F-test was used, and indicated the variance of the two populations were not equal, and a non-directional *t*-test assuming unequal variance was utilized. The *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference in perceptions, $t(40) = 2.02, p \sim 0$. The results concluded that students ($M = 4.05, SD = .82$) had a higher perception of writing instruction geared towards STAAR preparation than teachers ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.47$).

Student survey data indicated a mean of 2.89 in regards to STAAR test worries, and interview responses pointed to STAAR concerns, especially from lower GPA students. Table 4.9 indicates the percentage of the main responses that students provided in regards to the STAAR test.

Table 4.9
Student Perceptions of STAAR

Issues	Students With GPA ≥ 3.56 %	Students With GPA < 3.56 %	All Students %
Challenging	25	100	63
Anxiety	50	100	75
Difficult Writing Prompt	25	75	50
Not Prepared	50	50	50
Teach the Test	75	100	88

The writing portion of the STAAR provided obstacles for the majority of the students interviewed. Student F made the following comment in regards to the STAAR, “I felt very

prepared for the test and feel like I did exceptionally well...but the essay was very challenging.” Student H added, “The writing part was tough.... The writing part was the hardest part for me.” Student A also noted, “Having to write out the essay was the most difficult part.” However, in comparing top and bottom half students, Student G commented, “The writing part was the easiest.... But I feel like we regurgitate information just getting ready for a test.” Students mentioned that the test was challenging, and some hinted that they became anxious before the test began. Student C said the STAAR test did not have an impact on making her a better writer, she stated:

I don’t think the STAAR test made me a better writer, it just told me if I passed or failed. You don’t get results on how to make things better. It didn’t tell me what I needed to work on.

Student B stressed, “the test was not that hard, but I wouldn’t want to take it again.” Another common theme that crept into the interviews related around test preparation. Students had the notion that writing in their classes was centered around the STAAR. As Student E stated, “we wrote for the test.”

Teachers had an entirely different perception and outlook of the STAAR and its relation to writing success. Table 4.10 represents issues that teachers perceive with the STAAR test.

Table 4.10

Teacher Perceptions of STAAR

Issues	ELA/Writing Teachers %	Non ELA Teachers %	All Teachers %
Stressful	57	100	70
Not Fair	43	0	30
Horrible	57	0	40
Anxiety	43	33	40
Not Applicable	43	33	40
Teach the Test	43	100	60

While there were similar responses to students, the adamant response from teachers in regards to the test were staggering. Teachers were disgusted with the STAAR, and felt that the test hindered instruction and writing success. They mentioned on several occasions that writing success had no correlation with performance on the STAAR. Teacher E shared, “The test does not make them better writers.” Teacher I said, “I may cover each TEK and standard and the students still struggle. That’s not fair to them or me.” Teacher D shared, “one test, on one day, doesn’t and shouldn’t determine if you’re a good writer.” Teacher A had strong feelings about the STAAR test and stated the following:

I can’t stand the test; I call it the death STAAR. Prompts are not fair to kids because they can’t relate.... Kids freak out, get physically ill, won’t show up, and have test anxiety because of the stress put on this test.... I am so against how the STAAR has evolved and how it has beat down the kids. The test has hindered our success with writing. It has undone everything we intended it to do. We teach them how to beat the test instead of how to write appropriately.... I want the test to be gone. We beat the creativity out of our kids. The test sends the wrong message. It’s not fair to the kids. They’re not successful because the mold does not fit the kid. Teachers will focus on the STAAR tests in their grades, and the kids are getting screwed because of it. The district is graded on it. You have to make a decision; do you want good test scores or great students?

Teacher J also had strong feelings regarding the STAAR test, she noted:

I feel it’s taking away from the education that our students really need. If we’re going to just focus on a test, then we’re not teaching. They need to know real world stuff. Who cares about the test. Everything is test related. It’s frustrating. This is not teaching, it’s brainwashing and commercialized to create the best STAAR grades. They’re taking education out of education. The STAAR diminishes what writing should be. We’re killing our authors and the fun of writing. If I’m teaching the required TEKS, I shouldn’t have to worry about the STAAR. This one test does not represent my students on that one day. To put that on a child is ridiculous.

A common theme of disgust reared as the responses concerning STAAR continued. Teacher D also stated, “I feel like it’s a bunch of stress on the kids. I won’t even mention the word STAAR in my class.” Teacher C commented, “I watch kids cry their hearts out because they fail this test.... It’s stupid.... I think that the test is a joke.”

Although teachers indicated through survey responses that writing was not STAAR centered, data from interviews showed otherwise. When asked if *writing is practiced for the STAAR test only*, ELA and non-ELA teachers had a low average mean of 2.59. However, teachers responded differently in their interviews. Teacher B said:

Teachers work hard to prepare their students. If I didn't have to focus on STAAR, we would be doing other things. The STAAR would not be my motivation if my students were not taking the test. We would concentrate on real-life writing instead of tested writing.

Teacher E went on to say, "Instruction is geared towards the test, because we need kids to pass..." This concern was also evident from other teachers. Teacher G said:

I think we teach to the test. I don't like it...it gives the kids something to worry about and the teachers something to teach towards.... It reflects on me if my kids don't do well, so I'm going to do everything I can to get them ready to write.

Finally, Teacher C added, "I've been preparing them for the test.... The test is such a big deal and I don't want to let anyone down."

Learning Process

Students and teachers were asked to provide information regarding writing and the learning process associated with writing. When asked the survey question, *writing is important for student academic success*, teachers had a mean of 4.63 and students had a mean of 4.22 on a scale of 1 to 5. While both means were similar, a *t*-test assuming unequal variance indicated that a significant difference existed between all teachers' and students' perception of the importance of writing and academic success, $t(83) = 1.99, p \sim 0$. Another *t*-test was conducted to determine if a difference existed between ELA teachers and non-ELA teachers' perception of the importance of writing and academic success. The *t*-test assuming equal variance indicated there was no significant difference in perceptions, $t(30) = 2.04, p = .64$. The results also indicated that ELA teachers had a slightly higher perception ($M = 4.71, SD = .76$) than did non-ELA teachers

($M = 4.6$, $SD = .5$) on the importance of writing and academic success. However, data indicated students ($M = 3.07$) and teachers ($M = 2.97$) are not writing on a daily basis to improve the learning process of quality writing. Table 4.11 points to areas of learning and concerns according to teachers.

Table 4.11
Teacher Perceptions of the Learning Process

	ELA/Writing Teachers %	Non ELA Teachers %	All Teachers %
Content Grading	0	67	20
Feedback	100	100	100
Writing and Learning	29	67	40
Collaborative Effort	71	67	80
Revision	29	0	20
More Writing Needed	100	67	90
Content vs Test Prep	0	67	20

Information from the survey and interviews point to writing as a key to learning. As Teacher I stated about writing and learning for students:

You write to learn, know, and think. The more they're asked to write, the more the information is absorbed in their brain. It allows them to truly understand. See it, hear it, do it. Explaining it out means that they have it.... You don't really know what you know until you write something down.

Students also agreed with the notion of writing helping them with all areas of learning and academic success. Table 4.12 provides information on how students perceive learning and writing success.

Table 4.12

Student Perceptions of the Learning Process

	Students With GPA \geq 3.56 %	Students With GPA $<$ 3.56 %	All Students %
Write it Down	50	75	63
Feedback	100	75	88
Daily Practice	50	25	38
Content Grading	75	50	63
Building Writing Skills	50	0	25
Test Skills	25	75	50
Class Content/Test Prep	75	50	63

Student G commented, “if I read something, I don’t always remember it. But if I read it and write it down, then I learn it.” Student H added, “writing stuff down helps me retain the knowledge.” Students also commented that writing was helpful to them outside of their English classrooms. Student D said, “Writing in math class helps me to remember the formulas.” Unfortunately, the data does not indicate that writing was taking place in classes outside of English on a consistent basis. When it did, information gathered showed where much of the written assignments were graded for content only. This prompted a theme of contradiction in the way teachers think and perform. Data results revealed writing is needed for academic success, yet teachers inadequately help students with the proper techniques and skills needed for writing success and learning opportunities. Teacher F stated, “I assign short essays and bell ringers, but I don’t check for punctuation and stuff, I only check for flow and content.” Teacher G said, “I try to correct stuff, but I’m not an English teacher, so I don’t spend much time fixing grammar and punctuation.” Student H also agreed that some teachers only grade written work for content.

Feedback was stressed as a key component to the learning process. Teachers overwhelmingly stressed the importance of feedback for learning success as survey and

interview responses indicated. Again, Teacher A stated, “I don’t think that writing can improve without feedback.” A statistical test was run to determine if a difference existed between ELA and non-ELA teachers with relation to the question, *if I provided quality feedback to my students on their writing assignments, their writing would improve*. The *t*-test indicated there was not a significant difference in perceptions, $t(30) = 2.04, p = .17$. While both groups of teachers believe in the importance and necessity of quality feedback, a gap existed with providing it. Students indicated feedback was lacking in quality, especially in classes other than English. As Student E stated, “The teachers in my other classes give me feedback, but they don’t really check for specifics, they’re just checking for content.” Student C added, “We need more feedback. We need to know what we’re doing wrong.”

The development of writing skills was an area teachers stressed as important for the learning process to experience success. Teachers felt that writing success was lacking due to fundamental skills being absent in some grades. According to teachers, for learning to improve, students need more practice and more opportunities to write. Teacher A said, “If you don’t use it, you lose it.” Teacher J added, “The lower grades have to write more. There is a gap with our kids right now. We’re having to address previous grade level TEKS.” Teacher B noted, “Start in the early grades with a strong foundation. They have either lost what they have learned, or never taught.” Teacher C stated, “They need practice, just like shooting free throws.... They’re not going to get better if they don’t practice, writing is no different.” Even students agree that more writing is needed for learning and writing success. Student A said, “it would help writing because it would give us more practice. It would also help us understand the content better.”

Summary

The mixed methods design allowed for interviews and surveys to provide vast amounts of data. The data were analyzed to determine writing characteristics that existed with teachers and students. Qualitative data provided detailed information that was complimented by quantitative data, and delivered solid results of writing issues at Frazier ISD. Several issues need attention within the District, and Chapter five discusses the interpretation of the data, and recommendations for future success within the District and education.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify instructional practices that influence and promote writing that is meaningful and leads to higher academic achievement. A mixed methods study was conducted in a rural Texas school district, and included students in grades sixth through twelfth, and district teachers. Data were collected through interviews and surveys, then analyzed and considered for recommendations towards greater writing practice and academic accomplishment. Writing provides academic opportunities for learner success. As Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, and Wilkinson (2004) stated, “Writing can prompt and support the use of cognitive learning strategies” (p. 32). It is more than a chore for students to exercise, it is an opportunity to broaden their educational horizons, and create a lifelong skill. Murray and Moore (2006) added, “Your writing can be a companion to your learning rather than an imposing enemy that constantly needs either to be agonizingly wrestled or artfully avoided” (p. 5). However, according to local assessment data, students and teachers in the Frazier ISD experienced a lapse in academic success, especially with regards to writing. Writing is hard. It is hard for students and it is hard for teachers. As Murray and Moore (2006) stated, “writing is not a single, homogenous, linear achievement towards which you strive and at which you one day arrive” (p. 5). Writing success is hard work, but a worthwhile journey that can lead students and teachers to academic success.

Chapter five will decipher the data collected, and provide an understanding of the district’s writing struggles, instructional practices, learning process, and the influence of standardized assessment on writing instruction. These items combined with information from

the literature review were used to make solid recommendations for academic and instructional improvements, and suggested implications for future research.

Findings

Research Question One: What instructional practices do Frazier ISD teachers utilize to teach writing?

Students and teachers shared their thoughts on the instructional practice of writing in the classroom, and responses were scattered. Survey and interview results depicted an inconsistent approach to writing instruction. ELA and non-ELA teachers were utilizing different instructional techniques across grade levels and curriculum. The delivery of the lessons were not aligned, lessons were not progressing from previous instruction, nor was writing instruction differentiated for students. This is similar to the findings from a survey conducted by Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, and MacArthur (2003) that revealed few teachers make adaptations for struggling writers. Both groups of teachers in this study were quick to point out the importance of incorporating writing into daily instruction; however, data revealed the practice was not happening with fidelity and consistency. This may be because teachers do not know how to incorporate writing into their lessons, or choose not to. According to Ozier (2011):

the residual effects of the ways teachers were taught in school powerfully overwhelm our desire to teach differently. Since institutional fences are the hardest to cross, ultimately the practice we place in our classrooms become the cross-section of what we know and want to produce. (p. 100)

While English teachers were at least incorporating writing into their daily lessons, non-ELA teachers struggled with providing students opportunities to write other than routine note taking. Students were quick to note that little writing took place in classes outside of their English classroom.

A common instructional practice used by teachers was feedback. Teachers strongly supported the use of feedback as an instructional tool, but stressed that time restraints hindered their ability to provide quality feedback on all assignments. Students echoed this notion by indicating feedback was given by teachers, but seldom was it useful. They insisted that feedback entailed mostly one word phrases or small suggestions. Students also indicated that feedback was not timely, and stressed their desire to receive more meaningful feedback from their teachers.

Research Question Two: What aspects of writing do Frazier ISD students struggle to understand?

Students and teachers faced struggles with writing and writing instruction. An interesting difference that emerged from the data were that students viewed writing as easier than teachers. Students felt like their writing abilities were better than presented, while teachers felt that students struggled greatly with their academic writing. There was a clear notion of dislike that students expel in their interviews. They do not enjoy writing. For some, this notion focused on difficulty, for others, pure laziness. An ironic comment that several students made centered around academic improvement. The majority of them felt that writing could improve their academic success, yet they still had reservations about more frequent writing opportunities. Specific struggles that students faced with writing were: grammar, getting started, basic structure, and plain difficulty. Such struggles are significant because as Dunn and Finley (2010) stated, “Even with a good idea and plan, a student’s lack of knowledge about proper sentence structure and syntax can hinder the creation of fluid and elaborate text” (p. 33). The concept of lacking basic writing structure stood out in the interviews. There was however, a difference in

perceptions between higher level academic students and lower level students. There was not a dominate struggle that stood out for the higher level students compared to their counterparts.

Student struggles mentioned by teachers included: basic structure, grammar, expectations, and technology. The technology aspect reoccurred throughout the interview process with all teachers but one. Teachers stressed the use of technology, especially cell phones, had deteriorated a students' ability to construct coherent writing. They continually emphasized that students write like they talk, and incorporated text lingo into their academic writing. These comments resonate with prior studies. For example, a West Texas teacher commented that students text relentlessly, and have issues with their academic writing (Callaway, 2017). Students in this study however, believed their academic writing and texting were two separate entities and did not merge to create writing difficulties.

Expectations for writing were also discussed in detail by English teachers. They believed writing was not stressed in classrooms outside of English. They also believed when writing was incorporated into lessons, that proper structure, grammar, and techniques were not expected of students. Teachers felt that only content specific phrases were expected for assignment completion. English teachers also believed that writing initiatives were being discarded in classrooms where writing assessments did not exist. For example, in the elementary school, writing is only tested in the fourth grade. Teachers suspected a lapse in writing instruction existed because of the STAAR test and the grasp that it dictates on instruction.

Research Question Three: To what extent does the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test impact writing success at Frazier ISD?

The STAAR test has a significant influence on education in Texas. It also had a strong influence and impact on the writing success of students at the Frazier ISD. The data collection

process signaled that the STAAR test had little to no impact on writing success for Frazier ISD students. Frazier ISD teachers stressed levels of concern in regards to the STAAR test, and adamantly agreed that the test had minimal impact on student writing success. However, teachers stated the STAAR test had an immediate and detrimental impact on writing instruction. They claimed the test was an artificial form of writing and had no impact on real life writing implications. These claims resonate with a study conducted by Dutro, Selland, and Bien (2013) indicating, “a clear disconnect, if not total contradiction, between classroom writing practices and high-stakes tests” (p. 132). Frazier ISD teachers stressed the STAAR test took away from creative and meaningful instruction to accommodate for prompt driven writing instruction. This type of instruction limits teachers and students to artificial practices, and does not provide for long-term writing success. As research by Davis and Willson (2015) revealed:

Our findings solidify our concern that test preparation is becoming so deeply ingrained in the fabric of educational practice that it often goes unnoticed. Our participants described a learning culture in which teaching to the test extends much deeper than the narrowing of curricular objectives and prioritization of the assessed curriculum. Instead of instructional practices bending to align with a test, we see the test being allowed to enlarge and encircle all aspects of instructional practice. (p. 374)

It became apparent that a disconnect existed between genuine instruction and instruction geared towards test preparation. In the world of high-stakes standardized assessment, writing instruction styles tend to lean towards test preparation. Literacy research conducted by Kesler (2013) revealed teachers compromised their instruction practices to accommodate test preparation. Frazier ISD students indicated instruction in many of their classes was geared towards test preparation. Especially in grades where writing is not tested, this type of practice lends itself to creating gaps and absences of much needed instruction and practice. It was made clear by students and teachers that the STAAR assessment had no positive impact on their writing success.

Research Question Four: How do teachers and students describe the learning process associated with writing at Frazier ISD?

The learning process was addressed with students and teachers. Both groups through conversations and survey responses, overwhelmingly agreed that writing was a necessitous aspect of academic success and learning. Unfortunately, the data revealed that writing was lacking in most classrooms. Students did not indicate writing as a priority in classes outside of their English classrooms. Interestingly, teachers outside of the English classroom agreed on the importance of writing and how it relates to learning in their content areas. The emphasis for students to perform academically in specific classrooms often overshadows the use and practice of writing (Ozier, 2011).

Teachers also pointed to feedback as an important priority for student learning. All teachers interviewed agreed that feedback was needed if learning was to take place. Students also concurred on the importance of receiving feedback as a needed aspect of their learning success, but were quick to note that quality feedback was missing and needed. Teachers reiterated this notion, explaining that providing good, quality feedback was difficult and time consuming.

As with learning any type of material or content, practice is imperative. Teachers were adamant that more writing was needed for students to experience learning and writing success. As Ericsson (2008) stated, “With increasing experience, the student becomes more able to generate the same outcomes faster and more efficiently. After extensive experience, individuals become experts and are able to respond rapidly and intuitively” (p.988). As with previous notions, data indicated writing practice was taking place predominantly in English classrooms

only. The need to focus on content specific, STAAR tested areas eclipsed the need for writing practice or writing to learn.

Summary of Findings

Instruction, learning, and STAAR assessment should be connected and intertwined for student academic success. Academic writing should be included in this equation for students; however, there was an ever present obstacle that continuously surfaced during this study that pointed to STAAR assessment impact and its negative influence on writing success at Frazier ISD. According to the teachers and students involved in the study, the STAAR test negatively impacted writing instruction and student learning.

It became an overwhelming theme during the data collection and analysis process that STAAR assessment was driving instruction in the classrooms, and teachers and students knew it. Assumptions of assessment driven instruction taking place in the district existed, but the magnitude of its presence was uncovered during the study. Writing instruction was practiced for STAAR assessment in an artificial environment, and writing was practiced sparingly. Through conversations with teachers and students, it became apparent that writing took a back seat to other content areas because it was tested on the STAAR assessment(s) less frequently. In lower grades, writing is tested in the fourth and seventh grades only, while reading and math are tested in the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. Therefore, a strong foundation for writing was missing because of instructional and learning lapses. Students were not expected to concentrate on writing during those non-assessment years. According to teachers, this multi-year gap in writing instruction was presenting obstacles for student writing success and progress. This instructional practice according to Applebee and Langer (2013), “has disastrous implications for student learning” (p. 178). Students stressed about the STAAR test, and

teachers degraded the STAAR test repetitively for the negative effect it had on instruction and learning. Research conducted by Smith (1991) provided evidence that standardized testing produced negative outcomes and impacts for students and teachers. Ironically, twenty years later, we are still experiencing the negative effects of testing and assessment priority. Those effects unfortunately have consistently provided meager writing outcomes and results for Frazier ISD students.

Pressure did not exist from administration and the school board to utilize assessment driven instruction. But the sincere implications of student failure on the STAAR test(s) existed and obsessed the reality of repercussions of student failure. This is a grim reality of state and federal requirements that are tied to accountability and assessment, and it is restricting Frazier ISD teachers to assessment driven instruction instead of genuine student learning.

Unfortunately, student learning and student success suffer the most from this process.

Frazier ISD students struggled with basic writing fundamentals, grammar, spelling, and overall writing difficulty. These struggles may be linked to capricious and sparse writing instruction that existed in the district. According to ELA teachers, non-ELA teachers, and students, writing instruction and writing opportunities had minimal direction and guidance. Teachers provided information that pointed to inconsistent writing instruction that stretched across all grade levels. As Teacher J hesitantly stated, “we’re not equipped, nor properly prepared to implement effective writing instruction into our lessons.” This practice led to ill-prepared students, and teachers who were uncomfortable providing quality and effective writing instruction.

Schools and districts are being inundated with assessments and accountability, and effective writing instruction is one of the casualties (Applebee & Langer, 2013). Nichols and

Berliner (2007) noted that high-stakes testing and policies can lead to lower academic opportunities for students that need it the most. The intent of the STAAR assessment was to increase the rigor of instruction and outcomes for students. However, it has diminished Frazier ISD students' opportunity for academic success. Unfortunately, the district cannot be rid of the STAAR assessment and its accountability requirements. Therefore, through this research study, the aim was to determine the best path for Frazier ISD students and teachers to experience academic and writing success.

Recommendations

This study and literature review provided insight into recommendations for writing improvements at the Frazier ISD. The district is in need of writing improvements, and must involve all stakeholders. Administrators, board members, teachers, and students will have to be involved if progress is going to happen.

Teachers and administrators must be committed to learning. This includes student learning as well as professional learning. As Hagger, Burn, Mutton, and Brindley (2008) stated, "teachers need not only to acquire the knowledge, skills, and understandings that will enable them...as competent classroom practitioners, but also to learn how to evaluate critically and improve their own practice so that they can go on learning" (p. 160). Teachers and administrators must be committed to on-going professional development that incorporates writing into daily lessons and practices. The academic writing battle cannot be fought by English teachers alone. The results are not favorable for student learning, writing, nor district accountability if this structure continues. Professional development for all involved must be on-going. Teachers cannot be expected to grasp the importance of writing in all disciplines with a one-day workshop. Training must be continual, shared, and progressive towards a common goal

of better writing and academic success. But if all involved in the process are forced into professional development, then outcomes could falter. It will be necessary to involve the teachers and administrators in conversations about what best suits the needs of our students. As Dahlberg and Philippot (2008) stressed, “Top-down mandates related to professional development practices do have value in helping to steer a faculty towards educational improvement; however, we argue that teachers’ perceived needs are critical in establishing a more collaborative, meaningful, and democratic agenda” (p. 22).

Teachers and administrators will need professional development based on the importance of writing in academia, assistance with providing meaningful feedback, and address an integrated written approach. Feedback is critical for successful learning, and we are not doing a good job at providing it. Quality, meaningful feedback, is a key component that is missing from our instructional network and practice. It is an integral component if writing success is to be accomplished. Hattie and Timperley (2007) stressed:

Feedback has no effect in a vacuum; to be powerful in its effect, there must be a learning context to which feedback is addressed. It is but part of the teaching process and is that which happens second—after a student has responded to initial instruction—when information is provided regarding some aspect(s) of the student’s task performance. It is most powerful when it addresses faulty interpretations, not a total lack of understanding. (p. 82)

For feedback to benefit student learning, it must be used in a context that students can relate to and build on, so that similar mistakes are forgotten and progress is achieved. In a meta-analysis comprising more than 200 million students, feedback was determined to be one of the most influential factors for student growth and success (Hattie, 2009). Having an integrated approach for incorporating writing practice and quality feedback will be important so teachers are not continuously overwhelmed by writing assignments and grading. Time management can impact the way one teaches, and how one assists students with their needs (Heyck-Merlin, 2012). By

combining these components, teachers have a better arsenal for attacking lackluster writing, and helping students succeed in their writing attempts.

Teachers and administrators will need assistance incorporating common writing instruction across the district. Within this framework must also exist the expectation for writing success. Students need common instruction and direction, combined with high expectations, so they can progress in their writing journey. Calkins and Ehrenworth (2016) wrote:

schools are finding that when students participate in a culture that values writing, are given explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient writing, and work toward crystal-clear goals and receive feedback on their progress, their writing skills increase dramatically. (p. 8)

Writing across the curriculum initiatives have proven effective if utilized appropriately and accordingly. This concept of students writing in all disciplines has provided helpful instruction and delivered student success for many years. But initiating a program like this without detailed insight and thorough examination could lead to the dreaded “something new” scenario that teachers and students experience. As with professional development, teachers need an ever present voice in an initiative of this magnitude. Teachers must have the ability build on instruction and utilize writing as a successful learning tool for any and all classes. As Calkins and Ehrenworth (2016) stated:

When a school tackles the goal of improving writing instruction across the school, one important step is for teachers across grade levels to agree on a progression of skill development and corresponding units so instruction at one grade builds on instruction in the prior grade, with units of study fitting tongue and groove together. No one would consider teaching students to multiply fractions before teaching them place value, addition, and multiplication of whole numbers. In the same way, a thoughtful writing curriculum supports a progression of writing skill development. (p. 12)

The importance of writing in all disciplines and the successful outcomes that have been proven with these concepts should enlighten teachers. If student writing success is the goal of Frazier

ISD, then common instruction that incorporates writing with high expectations needs to be commonplace in the district and in all classrooms.

The district must take focus away from the STAAR test and put focus on instruction. Teachers have modified writing and writing instruction across the disciplines to focus on assessed material (Applebee & Langer, 2013). This practice has to end immediately. The Frazier ISD board, administrators, teachers, students, and community need to be aware that quality instruction will be the norm and the expectation, and the bureaucratic aspects and convolutions of state mandated testing will not be the focus. Many districts, including Frazier ISD, have taken an assessment driven instruction approach to no avail. All that has been accomplished since the STAAR's inception is mediocrity. Writing across the district has been atrocious, and this practice has direct correlation to STAAR driven instruction. Our district must concentrate on the quality curriculum that is in place, and teach it with passion, fidelity, consistency, and professionalism.

To experience success, successful instructional programs, theories, and practices need to be emulated. Frazier ISD must adhere to the guiding principles of these theories and instructional practices, and make adaptations when necessary to fit the needs of our students. This will not be a quick fix initiative. It will be important to take small steps and progress as we go. Pain will be involved, uncertainty will be involved, and more than likely, resistance will be involved by some. Change can make teachers cringe, but this will not be a journey they take by themselves. It will require involvement by all if this initiative is to improve academic writing success. Policy and procedure changes will be needed to reflect expectations for academic success and achievement. If mediocrity is accepted, then mediocrity is what will be received. We must strive for better results and work towards improved writing for students.

A system wide approach will address the needs of writing in Frazier ISD.

Administrators, teachers, and students must commit to improving academic performance and outcomes for student success. Teachers are at the core of success for students. Their efficacy for students must be ever present for success to thrive in Frazier ISD. A phase-in, multi-year plan will address writing needs and provide direction for the district. As a district, the plan will incorporate proven instructional strategies to implement and adhere to. The students of Frazier ISD deserve opportunities for academic success. By incorporating a system wide approach, all involved will be dedicated to improving the academic culture at Frazier ISD.

Future Research

The findings from this study point to future research with regards to standardized assessment and academic writing success. It is my opinion that high-stakes standardized assessment is ruining successful student initiatives. Steinberg (2008) stated, “If...emotions around success and failure are intense in the ‘low-stakes’ context of classroom assessment, they are considerably more fraught in the ‘high-stakes’ context of standardized assessment accountability” (p. 53). Research is needed that focuses on rural, low socioeconomic districts in Texas, and the correlation that exists between STAAR assessment and academic writing success. Does the world of high-stakes STAAR testing have a positive or negative impact on student writing success? Are educational institutions preparing students for academic success, or STAAR assessment success? Is the goal of educational institutions to produce critical thinkers and knowledge learners, or produce students who can excel on standardized assessments? It would be interesting and beneficial to see if connections or gaps exist between high-stakes standardized assessments, assessment driven instruction, and successful student writing and learning.

Conclusion

As an educational leader, student success is at the forefront of my philosophy and initiative. Students and student success are the drive and reason to fight the educational conundrum that policy and mandate dictates. It is a daily grind with tiresome aspects that stress faculty, staff, and students. However, the grind is what makes it great. The challenge of educating our students and staff is what drives the fuel for success. Successful academic writing is a key component that is missing from our daily educational routine, and is needed to provide our students with the opportunities to experience success in the classroom and in life. I thank all involved in the study who provided solid information and enlightened me to pursue alternative solutions to the way we teach kids. Our students deserve our best every day, and through solid improvements, we can achieve greatness in our academic journey. I will fight the fight, continue to strive for academic success for my students, support my staff and teachers, and enjoy the ride.

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Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

February 6, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO: Jason Adams
Ed Bengtson

FROM: Ro Windwalker
IRB Coordinator

RE: New Protocol Approval

IRB Protocol #: 16-12-347

Protocol Title: Writing for Keeps - Instruction and Achievement

Review Type: EXEMPT EXPEDITED FULL IRB

Approved Project Period: Start Date: 02/06/2017 Expiration Date: 01/19/2018

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (<https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php>). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 403 participants. If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questions for ELA and 4th Grade Teachers

1. Tell me about writing in your class.
 - a. In your opinion, how often should writing be utilized in class?
 - b. What tools/resources are needed to effectively teach writing?
 - c. What instructional strategies do you use to help students with their writing?
 - i. Why do you use these strategies?
 - ii. Do these strategies work? Explain.
 - d. How can feedback be used for instructive purposes?
 - i. Are certain feedback strategies more beneficial and why?
 - ii. How often do you provide feedback to your students on their writing?
2. What struggles do you see with student writing?
 - a. In which classes should writing be used?
 - i. Could this be beneficial to students? Explain.
 - ii. What are some struggles that teachers might face with a writing component in all subject areas?
 - iii. What are some struggles that students might face with a writing component in all subject areas?
 - b. How can student writing be improved?
 - c. How can writing instruction be improved?
3. Tell me your thoughts about the STAAR test.
 - a. What impact does the STAAR test have on writing success? Explain.
4. How well do you write, or feel about teaching writing?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to add that would benefit this study?

Interview Questions for non-ELA Teachers

1. Tell me how writing is used in your class.
 - a. How often do you incorporate writing into your lessons?
 - b. What purpose/benefit does writing provide for your students?
 - c. How can feedback be used for instructive purposes?
 - i. Are certain feedback strategies more beneficial and why?
 - ii. How often do you provide feedback to your students on their writing?
2. What struggles do you see with students and their writing?
 - a. What are some struggles that teachers might face with a writing component in all subject areas?
 - b. How well do you write or feel about teaching writing?
 - c. What are some struggles that students might face with a writing component in all subject areas?
3. Tell me your thoughts about the STAAR test.
 - a. What impact does the STAAR test have on writing success? Explain.
4. Is there anything else that you would like to add that would benefit this study?

Interview Questions for High School Students

1. Tell me about the English STAAR test.
 - a. Is the test(s) difficult? Explain.
 - b. Did/do you feel prepared for the test? Explain.
 - i. How important is the STAAR test? Explain.
 - ii. Is the STAAR test more important than learning class material? Explain.
2. Talk to me about writing at school.
 - a. Do you feel prepared to write effectively? Explain.
 - b. How often do you write in your English class?
 - c. Are you ever asked to write in classes outside of your English classes?
 - i. If so, how often?
 - ii. Does writing about a topic help you understand it better? Explain.
 - d. What aspects of writing are difficult for you?
 - e. How would you feel if you were asked to write more in all classes?
 - f. Do you receive feedback from your teachers on writing assignments?
 - i. What type of strategies do teachers use for feedback?
 - ii. What strategies provide you with better information?
 - iii. What did the feedback tell you?
3. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me in regards to writing and how you feel about writing?

Appendix C: Student Survey

1. I am assigned to write essays in my English classes.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
2. I am asked to write short answer responses in my English classes.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
3. I struggle with creating ideas to write about.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
4. My English teachers teach me how to write better.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
5. My math, science, and social studies teachers help me with my writing.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
6. I receive feedback from my teachers on my writing assignments.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

7. If I received quality feedback on my writing assignments, my writing would improve.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
8. I enjoy writing and I am good at it.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
9. Writing is easy for me.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
10. Writing requires a lot of time for me.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
11. I am asked to write in all of my classes, not just English.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
12. Writing helps me to be successful in school.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

13. I am asked to write so that I can pass the ELA/writing STAAR test.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

14. I am prepared to pass the ELA/writing STAAR test.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. I worry about the ELA/writing STAAR test.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Appendix D: Teaching Staff Survey

1. I ask students to write essays during class.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
2. I frequently ask students to write short answers during class.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
3. When I ask students to write, I grade only for content.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
4. Writing should be limited to English classrooms only.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
5. I provide feedback to students on their writing assignments.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
6. If I provided quality feedback to my students on their writing assignments, their writing could improve.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

7. I have adequate time to assist students with their writing.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
8. I possess the resources and knowledge needed to teach writing effectively to students.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
9. I feel confident in teaching the writing process to students.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
10. It is difficult to teach writing.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
11. It is difficult to assess proper writing techniques.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
12. Writing is difficult for students.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

13. Writing is important for student academic success.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
14. Writing is practiced for the ELA/writing STAAR test only.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree
15. Students are prepared to pass the ELA/writing STAAR test.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

Appendix E: Student Writing Sample

STATE OF TEXAS ASSESSMENTS OF ACADEMIC READINESS
SPRING 2016
ENGLISH II - WRITTEN COMPOSITION

Written Composition Score: 3

3 = Between Very Limited and Basic

Maturity is not dependent on a person's age because age is just a number. Maturity is based on respect & how you act around others. Maturity is a major role throughout life. So therefore maturity can come quick or later on in life.

There are many young adults that are very mature. Age is not conflict in this situation. Maturity is the state of being fully developed. Maturity is well known to be dependent through many things. In my opinion maturity is shown through who you hang out with & how you were raised by your parents.

Maturity is mainly taught through your parents with manners & respect to elders & others. Maturity is also brought up through school with helping others or just the simple fact of being respectful. Maturity is a major key, it could take you far in life as to getting a job or being someone's role model. That's why I believe maturity is not dependent on a person's age.

Appendix F: Student Writing Sample

STATE OF TEXAS ASSESSMENTS OF ACADEMIC READINESS
SPRING 2016
ENGLISH II - WRITTEN COMPOSITION

Written Composition Score: 2

2 = Very Limited

Age does not define maturity, most young people mature before elderly, but age is not a factor. Some humans mature at a very late stage in their life, others mature at a young age or the middle stage in their life. Being immature does not make you a bad person, some people's character affects their maturity level. However, some can have celebrated 10 more birthdays and the elder could still be more immature. Therefore it is not necessary to have lived a certain number of years to be considered mature, but maturity can be defined in many different ways, there isn't just one definition of maturity, most people get confused by the word maturity because it is many ways to understand, so most people have a different meaning of the word. Most people have a understanding that maturity defines if your brain is fully developed or not, humans can spend a whole life trying to find maturity, some people have it some don't. Under any circumstances should any human be judged by their maturity level.