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Student Perceptions in Conferencing: A Phenomenographic Exploration of Student
Perceptions on Teacher-Student Writing Conferences

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Education
Degree
Kennesaw State University

By

Jacqueline Johnson

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Fall 2022

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Abstract

This phenomenographic research explores how students perceive one-on-one (teacher-student) writing conferences. At least twice a year, I sit with my 9th-grade English students to discuss their writing. Together, we go over their last writing assignment. I coach them to make their writing better while pointing out positive elements of their writing. I check for understanding by having the students verbally repeat a summary of their conference. While I feel connected to the students and their writing by conferring, I have rarely considered what *they* thought about the conference. After our conference, do they feel like they truly learned something? I want to know their thoughts about how to make conferring about writing better for them. The research explores 9th-grade student perceptions of writing conferences in a rural Georgia high school. I used my own students for this research, which included 22 participants. My participants completed surveys after one writing conference. Participants answered a list of questions, both open-ended and closed-ended questions, about their conferring experience. By studying these participant surveys, I determined how students perceived teacher-student writing conferences. I interviewed five participants to seek further clarification of the overall survey answers.

Questions I answered included:

1. What are students' overall perceptions about writing conferences?
2. What elements (if any) of writing conferences do students find useful?
3. According to students, what can teachers do to make writing conferences more useful for students?

Keywords: writing conferences, student perception, teacher to student conferences, conferring

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my committee.

Dr. Crovitz, you are the reason I am here. You have guided me through three programs at KSU, helping me obtain and maintain a career that I love. You have singlehandedly changed my life. Because you took a chance on me, you led me into a career with purpose, you motivated me to keep pursuing my education, and you pulled me out of generational poverty. You have impacted my life and my family's life greatly because of the opportunities you have given me. Thank you for saying, "Yes" to placing me into the educational program. I am forever grateful and loyal to you.

Dr. Gaines, thank you for being so thorough in this process. You have taught me more about educational research during this journey than all the research classes I have taken. I am appreciative of your expertise.

Dr. Vasquez, you have been a light through this research. Your smiles and words of encouragement through this stressful time gave me hope. Thank you for your valuable suggestions and kindness.

Dr. Iván Jorrín-Abellán, you were not even on my committee, but you might as well have been since I bombarded you with questions. You were instrumental in my methodology piece. Thank you for having me as your student even when I was no longer in your class.

Dr. Myles Johnson, this process was better with you by my side. We both achieved our dreams. I'm glad for friends like you.

Dr. Rachael Bourne, when I hear the words positive peer pressure, I think about you. The day after we received our Specialists, you told me we were signing up for the

Ed.D program together. I didn't even have the chance to say, "No." You didn't give me a choice, and I'm glad I followed you. Thank you for being a great leader and friend. If you could make all my other life decisions, that would be great.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and students.

Thank you to my mom and dad who sacrificed so much to give me an easy life. You both taught me to respect people and admire teachers, which shaped me into the person I am with the career I love.

Thank you to Justin and Jessica. You both believe in me and have given me the time and space to complete this work. I love you both very much.

Thank you to my students who give me purpose. You all are the reason for my work.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine a one-on-one writing conference between a high school student and an English teacher. The teacher gives feedback to the student about a piece of writing the student has completed while they both refer to a writing rubric. The student nods, seeming to understand all the written comments, corrections, and jargon. At the end of the writing conference, the student seems aware of his writing strengths and weaknesses. The student has no questions and when asked, says that the conference was beneficial. Even though in this scenario the teacher may have a positive perception about the value of the writing conference, we must ask this question: what is the perception of the student about the writing conference? Perceptions can be vastly different, and without including students in this aspect, the teacher is potentially missing a valuable perspective. A teacher can use a student's perception as feedback to improve instruction. Looking at student perceptions also gives students a chance to voice their opinion and become a part of their own learning.

Educators must take note of how the student is perceiving the conference to enhance writing conferences; however, it can be difficult to sense a student's experience (Bottomley et al., 1997). Is the student feeling empowered about his writing? Does the student understand the feedback from the writing conference? What exactly are the thoughts of the student during and after a writing conference with a teacher? Teachers simply assuming that the conference was beneficial is no guarantee that it was. Even if teachers ask students about the conference, responses may not be accurate (Taggart & Laughlin, 2017). Students are not always upfront when responding to a teacher; students

are not trying to be deceptive necessarily, but the dynamics of power and lack of confidence may simply make it easier to provide a simple expected answer (Taggart & Laughlin, 2017). Consalvo and Maloch (2015) note that students will sometimes agree with the teacher during a writing conference just to appease the teacher or have the teacher move on to another student. Sometimes students are not always open to sharing their learning experiences. It is not helpful to assume student experiences; teachers must ask about their experiences (Lee, 2008).

Background

A review of the literature indicates that there is a lack of research investigating student perceptions of writing conferences (Fritz, 2019). I propose to conduct research to explore student perceptions of writing conferences and their efficacy.

Problem Statement

A review of my own research indicates that there is a lack of research investigating student perceptions of writing conferences. There is information on how to conduct writing conferences and the effectiveness of writing conferences, but I do not see an abundance of research about the student's point of view on writing conferences. Without insight into students' perceptions of writing conferences, we may not truly know how effective or ineffective writing conferences are. Because there is a lack of documentation and analysis of student insight about writing conferences, I propose to conduct research to capture student perception on teacher-student writing conferences.

Purpose of the Study

I defined the research problem for my study. However, the problem stems from previous findings. There is an abundance of research about writing conferences and what

makes them effective, but those are mostly based on teachers' accounts or student achievement data (Anderson, 2000; Bell, 2002; Flynn & King, 1993). However, less is known about students' perceptions of their experiences in writing conferences.

Seeking students' perception is important because students need positive experiences with writing. Research suggests that students who have a positive experience with writing improve their writing skills and attitudes (Martinez, 2001). These students have a higher self-efficacy, which is "an individual's judgments of his or her capabilities to perform given actions" (Schunk, 1991, p. 207). Students who have positive experiences in school and high self-efficacy in school are more likely to face challenges and have higher motivation in academics (Bandura, 1993).

Studies also indicate that positive emotions around school activities can equate to several desirable outcomes for students. Students who have positive emotions at school have higher self-perceptions, sociability, and mental health (Al-Yasin, 2001). In contrast, negative emotions related to school lead to student disengagement and withdrawal (Finn, 1989; Hallinan, 2008). It is imperative that students have the chance to tell teachers what they think about instruction, so teachers can ensure a positive learning environment, which leads to student success.

Student input regarding curriculum choices has also been found to be connected to student success; therefore, students need a voice in school. Student voice refers to when students give their opinion on classroom instruction (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). However, the reality is that most educators do not give students a chance to discuss the curriculum (Downey, 2014). If students are able to express their experiences with the curriculum, students could be part of their own learning experience (Kane &

Chimwayange, 2013). Students could have a stake in their own learning and teachers could then amend the curriculum to best fit student needs. After all, learning in school is primarily for students; the basis of school is to help *students* learn. If what teachers do is create lessons for student learning, is it not time that teachers involve students' perceptions? It is reasonable that considering the perceptions of the students themselves would help ensure that learning is happening. Student perspectives on, feedback about, and choices concerning what they're learning are often missing. Making learning more engaging and worthwhile is what teachers strive for, and student voice may be the missing link for that to occur. The goal of this study is to seek out these perspectives for their possible usefulness in making writing conferences more efficient.

Therefore, a greater understanding of students' perceptions of writing conferences could support teachers in curating writing conference experiences to better support more effective writing conferences.

Research Question

My research question is:

RQ1 — *How do 9th-grade students perceive their experiences in writing conferences?*

The following are the areas of interest or topics on which the study will be focused to respond to the previous research question:

- Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
- Elements of writing conferences students do not find useful
- Aspects identified by students that could make writing conferences more useful

Background and Role of Researcher

Growing up in the 1990s led me to my first love: talk shows. Oprah, Ricki Lake, and Jenny Jones were my favorites to watch after a long day of school. I enjoyed learning about other people and their experiences. Different people from different paths appeared on my screen as the inquisitive talk show hosts discussed a variety of topics. This is where I learned that listening and observing others provided me with essential information for life. I soon realized that I could learn from others' experiences.

Learning is my passion but learning through others is golden. Even though I am a secondary English teacher, I learn more from my interactions with students than they realize. From my students, I have learned who I am teaching, why I am teaching, and how I am teaching. Sometimes, I need to adjust these approaches to fit my students' needs or grow as an educator.

My desire to learn through others pours into my role as an interpretive researcher. I identify with interpretivism because I believe people learn through experience. Individual thoughts and lives matter to me. My paradigm will interact and shape my relationship to my research because I will mostly observe and listen. Since I think people's experiences are valid truths, I will collect data that will show me how students interpret writing conferences. I am not simply looking for hard facts and numbers. I will seek student experience as their interpretation of learning. I know that "subjectivity operates during the entire research process" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Therefore, I hope that if I document exactly what my subjects say, I can objectively record their truths.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

There are three main theoretical foundations that guide this research: social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978), learning by doing theory (Dewey, 1938), and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1993). All three play a role in writing conferences and the interpretive framework of social science. A conceptual framework is an argument of why the study is important (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Therefore, these three frameworks will help me explain why my research is influential for English classrooms.

Writing Conferences and Social Constructivism

Social constructivist theory shapes my research because there is a focus on learning collaboration. Generally, constructivism is a learning theory which holds a philosophical and scientific position that declares that people gain knowledge through experience and reflection (Mascolo & Fischer, 2005). Learners use previous knowledge as a base and build on that base when they learn new concepts. Learners consider information and, based on their own experiences, construct an understanding. As part of constructivism, Piaget (1972) believed that learning was connected to the learning environment. Piaget observed that children gain knowledge not through memorization, but through experiences and social interactions (Leonard, 2002). Through cognitive constructivism, Piaget indicated that people take their own knowledge and adapt it with new experiences in order to make new knowledge. Learners construct knowledge through daily experiences. Piaget posited that learning is constructed through experience, reflection, and meaning as learners engage with content and concepts.

Specifically, social constructivism states that knowledge is constructed through interaction with other people. A vital component of social constructivist theory is the interactive nature of learning. Vygotsky (1978) indicated that learning occurred when students were part of a learning community. He noted that:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and, later on, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (p. 57)

Social constructivism explains that people learn because of social interaction; knowledge is constructive through active engagement in shared experiences. Learning is not an observational process, but rather the result of interaction. Social constructivist learning is about the process of learning through a social setting as much as it is about the learning itself. The path to learning is just as important as the knowledge gained from learning.

The process of being in a social learning setting is key to learning. For example, students are able to ask questions and reflect when they are with another person. In a group or social setting, learning is an active process rather than a passive process. Instead of being passive recipients, students can become actively engaged in their learning (Leonard, 2002).

The social constructivist theory aligns with writing conferences because conferences are settings where learners could co-construct new knowledge. Teacher-

student writing conferences are environments that cultivate learning through social interaction. Instead of grading student writing and giving the paper back with no interaction, teachers may use conferencing as a social setting for learning. Conferences are ideal for social learning because they create an active thinking space: “Constructivist teaching and learning theory advocates a participatory approach in which students actively participate in the learning process” (Fernando & Marikar, 2017, p. 110). In this social conference setting, students can ask questions and think out loud with teachers; students are encouraged to discuss and reflect on their work. Teachers may also give mini lessons to clarify a concept. Teachers could ask clarifying questions, so students could explain their ideas. Thus, there are several social opportunities during conferences.

Effective writing conferences focus on student learning because the conference is about their work. Conferences are built around student success and needs. These conferences can be led by the teacher, but the teacher should allow students to speak (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001). Constructivists believed that “knowledge is not abstract but is linked to the context under study and to the experiences that the participants bring to the context. Learners are encouraged to construct their own understandings and then to validate through social negotiation” (Peggy and Timothy, 2013). Writing conferences require that a teacher interacts with an individual student to lead to improved writing practices and more confident student writers.

Writing Conferences and Learning by Doing

Dewey’s (1938) theory called learning by doing is where learners make sense of their experiences by exploring the world. Learners should be socially engaged, and classrooms should allow ample opportunities for students to participate (Dewey,

1983). He believed that school should have a social environment because students learn best in social settings (Flinders & Thornton, 2013).

Dewey's belief of social-centered classrooms revolves around children problem-solving and seeking answers as a community. Schiro (2013) references how Dewey's view of classrooms is much like student-centered classrooms because students are seen as individuals. Students construct their own knowledge through personal meaning, instead of teachers simply imposing the knowledge (Schiro, 2013). Like in writing conferences, students can solve problems with another person by interaction. Schiro (2013) writes, "Children's capacity to grow, their motivation to learn, and their ability to make meaning occur because of their innate capabilities and exploratory inclinations and impulses." There is a process of discovery when it comes to writing conferences. Harris (1995) explains, "Talking with students as they write or prepare to write indicates that we view writing as a process of discovery in which we can help the writer learn how to shape a piece of writing as it is taking form" (Teaching 5). Writing conferences are student-centered since students have a chance to socialize about their writing.

Writing conferences are a social activity, where students and teachers explain ideas. Students are participating in the process of writing, instead of being inactive participants. In some classrooms, students do not feel like they are a part of the learning process; only 44% percent of students feel that they have a part in decision-making at school (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Research also indicates that students who have input in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have an input (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016). According to this research, less than half of students discuss their learning. For

students who discuss their learning, they are more likely to be motivated. These numbers show that there are many more students who can potentially increase their motivation by implementing student agency.

Social settings create spaces for student agency. According to Freire (2000), “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students (72).” With dialogue in writing conferences, the dynamic of the teacher as the keeper could be reversed. Friere (2000) writes, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (80). In writing conferences, students can advocate for using a certain word, or they can describe their own thinking process. Students can say something about their work, while teachers give the time to listen. There is more room for student engagement during this type of social interaction. Learning by doing promotes social engagement and academic growth (Dewey, 1938). Writing conferences can do both.

Writing Conferences, Motivation, and Self-Efficacy

Bandura’s (1993) self-efficacy theory refers to an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to perform a task. Bandura (1993) writes that self-efficacy beliefs affect student motivation in many ways: “They determine the goals people set for themselves, how much effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of difficulties, and their resilience to failures” (p. 131). Bandura also (1997) claimed that self-efficacy beliefs predict what someone will do because self-efficacy beliefs influence what students will pursue. If students have confidence in a task, they will be more motivated to pursue that

task. In addition, self-efficacy beliefs help students determine how much effort, how much perseverance, and how much resilience students will have with tasks (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura (1977) states that individuals develop their self-efficacy beliefs by four main sources of influence: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional states. Mastery experience is the most influential and is interpreted as a result of one's previous performance (Bandura, 1977). Students may not have confidence going into a writing task due to receiving a poor grade and negative feedback on a similar writing task in the past. This may discourage them from practicing this type of writing task, and therefore result in poor writing on similar tasks in the future. Kirmizi and Kirmizi (2015) added, "Those who have a reduced or low level of writing self-efficacy do not have sufficient confidence in the writing skill" (p. 58). Therefore, it is essential to have a positive learning environment where students can make mistakes and understand that making mistakes is part of the process. A classroom that practices a skill to mastery will help students understand that there is usually a struggle before mastery.

A vicarious experience is another source of self-efficacy. This is where people observe others completing a task to help build their own self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) posits, "Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities to succeed" (p. 71). During writing conferences, teachers can model a skill for students. Additionally, because models are more meaningful when they are more similar to the student teachers can provide examples from peers for students to look at while teachers instruct about writing (Bandura, 1986).

Social persuasion is when people have an increase in self-efficacy through others' encouragement. Through social persuasion, someone convinces the student that they are capable of mastering the specific task at hand. Teachers can increase student self-efficacy by giving encouraging words to help achieve a goal. Bandura (1997) states that messages from close people (relatives and friends) have a significant effect on one's efficacy in their early years. It is crucial that students hear that they can achieve a difficult task even when they are young. Teachers can give at least one positive piece of feedback in every writing conference to build writing confidence. Positive words are not enough; "[the] significance of the relationship with the other individual is also critical to the potency of this source" (Solomon & Anderman, 2016, p. 274). Therefore, positive relationships can be a focus in writing conferences, which will help inform another self-efficacy belief, emotional states.

Finally, emotional states affect self-efficacy. For example, students could experience emotional stress from writing. Stewart et al. (2015) stated that student writing is affected by anxiety or the fear of failure. Again, it is important to have a positive environment and a safe classroom space. Writing conferences give a safe space for students to experiment with writing: "When learners are new at anything, their first efforts will be approximations and we, as teachers, need to cheer their progress and support their willingness to try something new" (Calkins, Hartman, and White, 2005, p. 78). In addition, writing conferences can become a haven for writers if teachers have a positive attitude and establish a positive relationship with students. Black (1998) noted that writing conferences "can be either or both writing/revisiting the paper and establishing relationships with the teacher that is comfortable for the student" (p. 123).

Students may be comfortable asking the teacher questions over time since the relationship has been built by spending time together in a conference. Therefore, writing conferences can increase academic and emotional support and be seen as “a hybrid kind of conversation that is both curricular and interpersonal” (Consalvo, 2011, p. 28)

Even though students can have low self-efficacy when it comes to writing, self-efficacy can boost with an increase in a skill. There are times when students experience failure, which results in low self-efficacy; however, students start to gain more self-efficacy when they notice achievements in a task (Bandura, 1997). It is important to note that self-efficacy is task-specific (as opposed to being domain-specific or generalized). For example, a student may have high self-efficacy when assigned an expository essay on an influential figure from history but would have low self-efficacy when assigned a persuasive essay on the death penalty. According to Pajares (as cited by Solomon and Anderman, 2016), “Self-efficacy beliefs are dependent upon the task with which they are associated, and as a result, a microanalytic assessment is needed” (p. 274). In other words, according to self-efficacy theory, a student’s experience in a writing conference will not improve their efficacy for writing in general but *may* increase their efficacy for the specific assignment they are working on in the conference. Then, if students feel successful on the assignment itself (i.e., “successful mastery experience”), they may develop higher efficacy beliefs on *similar* assignments in the future. However, “unsuccessful mastery experiences cause efficacy to drop” (Solomon & Anderman, 2016, p. 274). Overall, if teachers can focus on a certain skill for a student to master and the student achieves that skill, perhaps that student will have an increased self-efficacy in various writing skills over time.

Students need self-efficacy beliefs when writing so they are motivated to improve their writing practice. Writing conferences are ideal for increasing self-efficacy. Teachers can help students view writing as attainable in writing conferences because teachers play an important role by giving positive feedback, which could increase student self-efficacy and motivation to write (Bandura, 1993). Teachers can provide a supportive environment, which could encourage students to ask questions and feel more comfortable about writing. Roddin (1999) suggests that teachers should only give a few aspects for students to work on as too many writing suggestions can be overwhelming. Research advises teachers to give realistic goals and have students come back later to see if goals are met, introducing “reinforced learning” (Roddin, 1999, p. 13). This relates to self-efficacy because the tasks should be specific. A supportive environment is also necessary for students to thrive in a process like writing, which students may find difficult. Inherently, writing conferences build teacher-student relationships (Lerner, 2005). However, without proper support, students can lose confidence in their writing abilities and may not want to write at all. With this theory in mind, writing conferences should be a safe space for students to learn about writing without fear of failure.

Writing Conferences and Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework of social science also supports the research. The paradigm of interpretive constructivism will help me look at the experiences of my subjects. With social constructivism, truth occurs with a connection to the world. There may be multiple participant meanings in the student surveys, so I am ready to see that learning is constructed from interpretation and experiences. Ontologically, truth is not objective for the most part; truth is subjective. There are multiple realities depending on

human experience, and I will see that with students as my subjects. Epistemologically, humans interact with the world, which in turn helps develop the truth. I value the individual beliefs of my subjects. Everyone's truth and experience are valid and will be used in my research. I seek out and encourage different perspectives if that is the case.

My goal is to observe and record student experiences about writing conferences. Because I am trying to measure feelings and emotions, the subjective framework fits. Even though I enjoy quantitative research, I still feel that the results will be based on qualitative data, which is more of personal experiences and human interactions. As a researcher, I will also be involved and interact with participants. The research methods will allow me to interact with students and interpret their perceptions (Glesne, 2016). These reasons validate that I am still thinking in the interpretivism (constructivism) forum. I am thinking that my results will be on a case-by-case basis. Will students find writing conferences with me positive or negative? Perhaps their views on writing conferences are neutral. Whatever their perception, my ultimate goal is to listen, record, and improve practice (Glesne, 2016, pg. 24).

Nature of the Study

My phenomenographic research will explore how students perceive one-on-one (teacher-student) writing conferences. The proposed research will explore 9th-grade student perceptions of writing conferences in a rural Georgia high school. I will use my own students for this research, which will include 22 students. I will have three data sources: an anonymous SurveyMonkey survey for 22 students (Appendix A), a semi-structured interview for five students (Appendix B), and a focus group for those same five students (Appendix C).

Limitations

Limitations could include my personal feelings during the research. I, as the participants' teacher, may become frustrated about writing conferences if students do not enjoy the process. It takes time to conduct a writing conference, so for students not to learn or enjoy the process may personally concern me.

Participant harm from the stress of completing the research could unfortunately occur. Students may feel stressed about giving me answers. They may want to appease me since I am their teacher. I want them to tell the truth, but they may feel that the truth could damage our relationship or affect their grade. None of that would be true.

Ultimately, I am accountable to all involved in the research. No matter how frustrating and time-consuming research can be, researchers need to “be grateful – to acknowledge the importance of their time, cooperation, and words, and to acknowledge your dependence upon what they have to offer” (Glesne, 2016, p. 168). I have the responsibility of making the research ethical and safe for participants. I should also have integrity about the results and be transparent about the results.

I want to be an authentic researcher. I know biases are a part of human nature, but I want to be sure to capture the truth of what happens in a writing conference. Even though I am hoping that writing conferences equal positive experiences, I need to be open-minded to other possible outcomes.

IRB permissions are also a part of helping me become accountable and responsible, especially since I am working with students/minors.

Summary

The rest of the paper presents the different elements conforming to the phenomenographic study that I will be implementing. Chapter 1 that precedes this section of the study includes the introduction and rationale. The following items in this chapter include the problem statement, conceptual framework, and research questions. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature concerning writing workshops and student writing perceptions. Chapter 3 explains the methodology, including context, participants, data collection, data analysis, strategies to ensure trustworthiness, and ethics. Chapter 4 presents the data and the analysis of the data relevant to the study. Chapter 5 provides a conclusion and future work.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In order to understand the assumptions inherent in teacher-student writing conferences, it is important to consider the evolution of writing instruction, including how the idea of "best practices" has changed throughout different periods. This literature review also analyzes the roles and expectations of both teachers and students during writing instruction. There is a noticeable progression of teachers leading writing instruction; previously, teachers taught writing as a whole class lesson. Today, more teachers are partnering with students during writing instruction in a more individualized setting. The evolution of writing conferences surfaces more each decade as learning becomes more tailored to each child.

Brief History of Writing Instruction

This section looks at writing trends in education to show the evolution of writing conferences.

Nineteenth-Century Writing

In the nineteenth century, one of the earliest forms of writing in the classroom was penmanship; handwriting was an early emphasis for students (Hillocks, 2005). Copying to learn was also a simple way for students to participate in school without much-needed supplies (Krause, 2000). Writing was introduced as a mechanical process where content was less important than appearance. Students practiced writing in cursive, signing, spelling words, drawing letters, and practicing the art of writing. Teachers would write first on a chalkboard and students were expected to copy (Krause, 2000). Students copied letters repeatedly to perfect the writing form. Texts often focused on patriotism; even grammar books contained patriotic themes (Engl, 2020). However, emphasis on

writing instruction eventually shifted from form to grammar. During this time, conferring with students about writing was unnecessary; thus, what students thought about their learning is irrelevant.

In the 1800s, advances in industrial printing resulted in more widespread use of textbooks in schools. For instance, in 1832, there were 45 spelling, 102 reading, 48 grammar, and five composition textbooks in use (Woods, 1986). Three grammar books were thought to be in general use by a significant number of teachers (*American Annals of Education and Instruction*, 1832). It was convenient for teachers to teach grammar since resources were readily available.

The classroom environment was another reason for focusing on grammar since students were learning in a one-room schoolhouse “where some children were learning the alphabet, and others were preparing for college, or marriage” (Woods, 1986, p. 6). Older students did not have the opportunity to learn more advanced writing when a teacher had to teach several age groups. It was easier to teach grammar to all age groups because grammar assignments were mainly about memorization of the text and the rules. Just learning grammar, however, did not help students with crafting sentences and paragraphs. Editor William B. Fowle wrote in *The Common School Journal*, “Although we studied English Grammar seven years, and received a silver medal for our proficiency, we never wrote a sentence of English at school, and never did any thing which implied a suspicion on our part that grammar had anything to do with writing or conversation” (Lyman, 1922). Memorization was an uncomplicated way to teach learning across different age groups, but assessing grammar through drills and

memorization did not produce fluent writers (Lyman, 1922). Again, the notion of conferences with students does not fit in this concept of education.

In the 1870s, college admissions exams played a prominent role in shifting how writing was taught in schools. In 1873, colleges like Harvard University started requiring written entrance exams. Harvard's written exam was a composition about a literary work; half of the applicants failed (Richardson, 2008). Some students were not able to express their thoughts on paper. The lack of writing skills from these exams propelled a new writing curriculum in classrooms. The previous emphasis on grammar slowly evolved into writing composition. By the mid-19th century, composition--then defined as "the teaching of writing in schools"--was well-established as a school subject (Schultz, 1999, p. 22).

College examinations were announced in advance, which set the curriculum for classrooms (Applebee, 1974). Because of the college criteria, the National Council of Education of the National Education Association called in a Committee of Ten in 1892 to discuss content in secondary schools. The council decided to standardize the high school curriculum to achieve the standards set by the colleges. Writing and literature became a part of the English curriculum, which was to be taught every year for 12 years. Students had 12 separate grades to learn English incrementally, which helped English studies advance.

For almost half a century, the English curriculum did not change exceptionally (Applebee, 1972). There was still a focus on learning English every year that was based mostly on literature and composition. However, some educators did not think the English curriculum targeted all students (Applebee, 1972). The curriculum was built upon the

idea that students were going to college, but not all students attended college. Some teachers saw a disconnect between the narrow English curriculum and the diversity of their students (Applebee, 1972).

Nineteenth-Century Writing: Classroom Writing Interactions

In the Nineteenth Century, students did not partner with teachers to learn about writing; writing was taught to students in a whole-class setting but never individualized. The role of teacher and student was simple. Teachers told students what to learn. Teachers told students what to write. Teachers told students how to think. Education was more of practicing and memorizing, rather than learning together and discussing (Lyman, 1922). This era called for mass teaching instead of personalized learning. Teachers provided templates for practice/memorization and students completed this work non-dialogically. There was little opportunity for student voice at this time; however, the twentieth century opened opportunities for interactive writing.

Twentieth-Century Writing

In 1911, The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) was formed as a protest against an English curriculum geared towards college study. Applebee (1974) posits teachers were changing schools, “from a ‘fitting school’ oriented toward college entrance, into a ‘common school,’ a school for the people, whose chief function would be preparation for life.” NCTE’s focus was (and still is) to provide a community of resources to all English teachers in order to teach their students where they are and for their future. NCTE’s membership grew rapidly; in 1919, this national organization set out to change the English curriculum for all grade levels. There were several committees that represented each grade level, even college courses. Students were learning content that

was formed by teachers who represented that grade level. This meant that teachers from each grade level could plan together to build curriculum (Applebee, 1974). Teachers at every instructional level had representation over the curriculum, where the university once dictated the teaching of English at all levels.

Writing in the 1930s-1950s

English education started to reform to better suit all students, not just college-bound students. Applebee (1974) writes, “The 1920s and 1930s can be seen as a grand experiment in implementing progressive education in the English classroom” (p. ix). In 1935, NCTE developed “An Experience Curriculum in English” to better suit the perspectives of different grade levels. Applebee (1974) noted, “An Experience Curriculum in English was rather intended as a pattern that other groups could take as a starting point in developing a curriculum to fit their own particular circumstances” (p. 120). This curriculum was a progressive way to connect learning and life through writing for different ages from elementary through college students. Units in the courses included Exploring the Social World and Studying Human Nature (Applebee, 1974, p. 119). The curriculum ensured that writers got assistance when writing and students succeeded based on their efforts (Hatfield, 1935, p. 136). Most importantly, writing became more about connecting with personal experience.

Writing in the 1960s

Writing about personal experience gave teachers a product to review, but in the 1960s classrooms saw a new focus on the writing process. In 1972, Donald M. Murray published “Teach Writing as a Process Not Product,” which emphasized that teachers should spend less time correcting students' written products and focus more on the

writing stages (prewriting, writing, and rewriting). Scholars began to study composition, which provided a new curriculum for composing within new practices. The practices included invention, drafting, peer review, reflection, revising and rewriting, and publishing. This process became part of the conception of the classroom as a writing workshop. The writing workshop is not just a process, but it gives the student's choice, interaction, and publication (Dinkins, 2014).

Murray (1972) encouraged teachers to listen and respond to student writing, a feature that is vital to the writing conference.

Writing in the 1970s

In 1974, the National Writing Project (NWP) was created to help teachers learn about writing strategies from one another. This approach was a reaction to the assumptions of previous decades regarding specifically university-based expertise and what *good* writing and writing instruction looked like. The NWP was one of the first networks for writing resources. Writing teachers became partners as they studied new approaches together. The NWP sites collaborated (and still do) with university faculty and K–12 expert teachers. This collaborative work helped teachers with professional development and writing strategies for students. The project also recast teachers as writers with feedback and process mechanisms that emphasized how teachers might take up similar strategies with students. NWP believed that the professional development programs provided opportunities for teachers to understand writing development across every grade level. New approaches with writing in the classroom revolutionized writing instruction because teachers were beginning to research teaching theories and best practices. This research from the project “led to the development of new approaches,

which were in turn shared in workshops and conference sessions, and taken up by many teachers across the country” (Langer & Applebee, 1987, p. 12). Writing in the classroom was more experimental since teachers were collaborating with each other on new ideas. Teachers across the country discovered that discussing writing is a natural and necessary part of the writing process.

Discussing writing with other teachers led to a more inquiry-based approach to writing. If teachers could talk to each other about writing, teachers could talk to their students about writing. Students could write as a way of learning and exploring, like teachers in the NWP. One purpose of the NWP is to write as a community; therefore, writing became more less siloed in the classroom (Kaplan, 2008). Writing started to become a social interaction with students and teachers because of the expansion of the NWP.

Writing in the 1980s and 1990s

During the 1980s and 1990s, theorists and researchers began to pay increasing attention to the contexts of various writing acts. They argued that writing should be targeted to a specific purpose and audience. Prominent among these was the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement. WAC ensured that different content teachers were seen as writing teachers. With a focus on literacy, students were encouraged to show mastery of content in several subjects with writing: “Writing activities can provide varied and effective ways for students to think about and reformulate new learning and to integrate new information with their previous knowledge and experience” (Langer & Applebee, 1987, p. 19). Writing was seen as a thinking process, which is still viewed

similarly today. WAC is continued in many school districts since literacy is a top priority across the nation.

WAC propelled the goal-setting aspect of the writing conference. WAC emphasizes the diverse reasons for which people write, so it becomes even more important that teachers address individual /goals in context rather than treating all writing the same. Goal-setting is an important feature in the writing conference process. When students set goals, students are more inclined to take risks in achieving goals; students are more confident in their writing, helping them overcome challenges (Bandura, 1993). Simply discussing writing at all with a teacher helps students become strategic thinkers (Johnston, 2019).

Twenty-first Century Writing: Classroom Writing Interactions

In the twentieth century, a shift occurred with how students interacted with their writing. The role of teacher and student changed from previous years. Teachers increasingly saw students as individuals, which meant individualized writing practices. A trend emerged: instead of writing being a standard obligation, writing became personalized. Teachers saw writing as a personal experience due to a more diverse classroom. Writing, for the first time, could be tailored and explored. Organizations and educational initiatives like the NCTE, NWP, and WAC encouraged individualized curriculum and changed the norm of passive learning. Writing was becoming more effective because writing was reaching more students.

Simultaneously, however, nationwide testing mandates stifled individualized writing and learning in classrooms across the country.

Twenty-first Century Writing: Initiatives

NCLB

In 2002, writing in the classroom shifted due to the demands of standardized testing with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) leading the way. NCLB focused on reading and math achievement, with no emphasis on writing. Since the policy did not support the teaching of writing, writing was not at the forefront in the English classroom (McCarthy, 2008). However, teachers tried a variety of approaches to writing. In McCarthy's (2008) research, data showed that writing instruction varied. Teachers implemented different techniques: writer's workshop; integrated curriculum, genre-specific instruction; or packaged programs. High-income and low-income schools differed; in McCarthy's (2008) research, teachers in the low-income schools followed packaged programs. Some low-income schools in this study practiced responses for reading on the state tests. These low-income schools were more concerned with teaching to the test to avoid NCLB repercussions. However, not all low-income schools had teachers to teach to the test. In the study, there were teachers who resisted teaching to the test and focused on teaching writing based on professional decisions (McCarthy, 2008).

When compared to lower-income schools, high-income schools were not as affected by NCLB. High-income schools received more materials, student input, and advanced curriculum (Gay, 2007; Kozol, 2005). Affluent schools did not feel the pressure of the NCLB's standardized test evaluations.

NCLB mandates and pressures may have stifled writing conferences and the feedback processes in some lower-income schools. Prepackaged practice materials may

have replaced valuable one-on-one writing instruction (Copenhaver-Johnson, 2007). The focus on the test led some teachers to teach to the test, not the student.

Common Core

Even though all states in the 1990s had educational standards, there was a lack of standardization across the country (“Preparing America’s Students for Success,” n.d.). In 2009, The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Initiative launched to align learning goals in all grade levels with a focus on math and English. These learning goals, or standards, were to “ensure all students, regardless of where they live, are graduating high school prepared for college, career, and life” (“Preparing America’s Students for Success,” n.d.). Forty-one states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) adopted the CCSS and are still using them (“Preparing America’s Students for Success,” n.d.).

In particular, the English CCSS promote critical thinking and analytical skills. For example, students are asked to read a variety of literature and answer challenging problem-solving questions. The standards also promote writing, speaking, and listening as part of the curriculum. These life skills are intended to be used outside of the classroom and in other content areas as well.

New state standards equal new state assessments and a new way of English instruction. Even though the CCSS’s focus is on college-readiness, some teachers feel stifled; English teachers across the country are once again feeling like they have to teach to the test (Troia & Graham, 2016). In one study, teachers were surveyed and voiced that the new writing and language standards were too much to cover in an academic year. Teachers thought the standards omitted key aspects of writing development since the

standards are so specific to only certain genres of writing. The survey also found that the standards may be inappropriate for struggling writers, who are unable to meet the standards in their grade level. Even though teachers in the study found the standards to be a helpful guide, a majority of the teachers believed the assessment was the goal, but the assessment did not provide timely feedback on writing (Troia & Graham, 2016).

Teachers were limited in tailoring reading and writing materials to their students due to using particular textbooks that catered to the standards. New English textbooks focused on texts that were more than likely to appear on the test, like nonfiction texts; The CCSS were “requiring high percentages of informational texts, at the expense of readings in fiction, poetry, or drama” (Zunshine, 2013).

Time is also a factor in teaching the standards. Both parents and teachers stated that now there were “...too many diagnostic tests and too much instructional time lost to mindless test prep” (To test, 2014). Additionally, Au (2013) noted that socioeconomically disadvantaged students had classes like art and physical education eliminated, so students could focus on test preparation.

Current Classroom Writing Interactions

In the 2000s, shifts in pedagogy toward more emphasis on individualized instruction often clashed with state and national mandates. Some teachers felt like they were there to teach to a test, not to students, making grades seem more important than learning (McCarthy, 2008; Troia & Graham, 2016). Classrooms were filled with discussions about tests instead of content. Even though this is still the reality today, a world pandemic halted testing in some areas and focused on online relationships with students.

Initiatives in the 2000s: Technology

Research shows that writing with technology is the new classroom revolution (Li, 2015; Tang, 2019; Wang, 2020). Mediums of writing today include computers and other electronics partnered with writing applications like Google Docs and Microsoft Word. Using these platforms will help students develop electronic skills while students simultaneously practice writing skills (De Bonis & De Bonis, 2011). Computers connected to the internet also open up new avenues for young writers.

Technology changes to whom students are writing. Online writers can write to a broader audience in online forums such as message boards, websites, and blogs. Students are also using social media for education such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Blogs, and ePortfolios, where students have engaged and reflected (Sohoni, 2019). Audiences are not only in the physical classroom, but in society. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (2006) notes, “Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement” (p. 4). Students are learning how to collaborate and network in the classroom and in the community. One study found that students benefited from reaching out to local role models online for a research project, stating that “people who feel more self-efficacious online are likely to reach out to more people and have meaningful interactions with others” (Chew et. al., 2011). Opening up the audience builds authenticity in writing also (Vasquez, 2014).

These authentic purposes may develop social purposes as well, where students are advocating or debating about a real-world topic (Purcell-Gates et al., 2007). One study found that having an online peer to look at work encouraged students to write longer and

more complexly than not having an online audience (Strever & Newman, 2014). Students are learning new skills like “traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom” with a broader network (*Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, 2006, p. 4). Technological outlets decentralize the role of the teacher “as students create and direct their own discourse communities” (Strever & Newman, 2014). Because there is a broader audience online, students may be motivated to write more.

Technology may also help with writing motivation. The National Commission on Writing (2006) states that the “use of blogs and wikis has increasingly provided an expanded motivation to write. All those people who said they hate writing and can’t write and don’t want to write, can write and do want to write” (Scott & Mouza, 2007). Writing online can “promote the understanding of both writing and technology as complex, socially situated, and political tools through which humans act and make meaning” (National Writing Project, 2010). Students have several reasons to write online, whether their reasons are social, political, or academic. Not only do students have a broader audience and more personal reasons to write with digital tools, writing online allows students to receive quicker writing feedback.

In these new environments, instructors can provide quick feedback online while encouraging a collaborative classroom (Enriquez, 2010). Teachers are able to see writing in real-time on several platforms like Google Docs and give feedback through comments or emails. These quick pieces of feedback encourage revision, an area some students may find frustrating. However, revising is easier now; instead of erasing, marking out words, and rewriting an entire paper, paragraphs can easily be rearranged with copy and paste

features (National Writing Project, 2010). Ongoing online revision is not as frustrating for students compared to students who had to write by hand on paper (National Writing Project, 2010). In many schools with one-to-one technology, writing is just a keystroke away for most students.

In 2020, COVID-19 caused a global pandemic, forcing students to learn remotely. Students did not return to classrooms due to state health mandates; several school districts used computers to continue education. Even though, at this time, there is not much data on how the pandemic affected teaching, writing with technology was an already upcoming shift in English classrooms.

Initiatives in the 2000s: Classroom Writing Interactions

Writing with technology is inevitable in current English classrooms; however, research indicates that online interaction is not always a preference for students. Chang et al. (2012) noted that students preferred personalized handwritten feedback because it is more personal and usually is of more quality. Some students even noted that some of the comments from teachers on online platforms looked copied and pasted (Chang, 2019). In one study, all participants felt handwritten feedback indicated feelings of connection (Ellis & Barnes, 2020). One student commented that online feedback “seems a little more cold with text” (Ellis & Barnes, 2020, p. 7). Online environments can be “sterile” (Phirangee, 2016); however, teachers can connect more personally with students in a physical classroom.

A study by Ahn and McEachin (2017) shows that students do academically worse in several academic areas (including writing) in an online setting, and this is particularly true for students with weaker academic backgrounds. Even online, students may

misinterpret feedback (Hodges, 1997). Students may need more content guidance and scaffolding than what is typically given online (Azevedo, 2005). Online learning may not prompt students to engage any further than reading a comment.

Though technology can help students write and receive feedback, computers do not replace face-to-face interaction. Writing conferences may better assist students with timely, meaningful feedback with more of an invitation to converse about writing.

Summary of Brief History of Writing Instruction

During the last 200 years, students and teachers alike have seen writing instruction evolve from merely copying to authoring. This evolution mirrors Moffett's (1981) three definitions for writing instruction: copying, paraphrasing/summarizing, and crafting. These three methods of instruction reflect the writing timeline in English classrooms; early literacy was focused on copying and paraphrasing, while the later years focused on crafting. Despite testing mandates and advancing technology, the evolution of writing also changed the role of the teacher from being the sole instructor to the revision assistant (Calkins, 2014; Graves, 1994). Writing in the classroom slowly evolved from a mechanical act to an engaging act with teachers focusing more on the student than the instruction (Krause, 2000; Vasquez, 2014). What comes out of these new roles of the student being the writer and teacher being the guide is more effective writing instruction (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Hale, 2018).

Students' Attitude about Writing

Writing attitudes are formed before students enroll in kindergarten due to home settings (Cunningham, 2008). It is important to know a student's attitude about writing. How students think about writing may reflect in their work.

High-Level Writing

Students enjoy challenging writing. Writing assignments that are low level are considered boring because they require “minimal thought” (Miller & Meece, 1999). In Miller and Meece’s study, students with more challenging writing assignments improved their writing skills. The students in the challenging classes not only reported that the assignments were more fun, but the students also were highly motivated. The students reported that they felt more creative; thus, enjoying the work.

Motivated students are purposely engaged with writing (Brophy, 1983). When students are engaged in writing, their writing skills increase. Research shows that students found particular teaching strategies more engaging than others. Participating teachers provided many opportunities for student input and choice, linked instructional activities to students' interests, promoted interactions among students of different achievement levels, and gave students multiple opportunities to complete challenging academic tasks” (Miller & Meece, 1999, p. 225). Thus, students who have a choice of writing topics or interaction with others enjoy writing because the writing is more engaging. Students who have more input in their writing are more likely to be motivated to write since it is of interest to them. Miller and Meece’s (1999) research also reported that students who had more open literacy tasks like being responsible for their learning had higher intrinsic motivation. Students who had less exposure to challenging tasks (writing multiple paragraphs over several days with peers) did not think they had the ability to even complete challenging tasks.

In another study, research revealed a trend that students liked writing less as they go through school (Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000). Students did not like

writing as much due to the “tedium, lack of choice, and negative feedback” during the writing process (Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000, p. 15). Student choice may be lacking in writing assignments.

Student Choice and Freewriting

Students are more likely to be interested in writing when they have a choice in writing assignments. Students who do not have a choice in writing often feel restricted and are not motivated to write (Cahir, 1984). One assignment that students enjoy is freewriting. Freewriting is writing that is not formal, relieves the stress of writing (Baxter, 1987). The purpose of freewriting is to get students to write about anything or broad topics. These topics are usually something that connects to students, which students may be familiar with. Teachers may assign topics, like for a journal entry, or students may choose topics for the purpose of simply writing. Students are also more eager to share their writing when they are freewriting (Reynolds, 1982).

Prior Knowledge and Writing Attitudes

Research shows that a student’s prior knowledge about the writing topic links to the student’s writing attitude. Cheskey and Hiebert (1987) conducted a study with sophomores which indicated that students with higher prior knowledge wrote more and of a higher quality. The students who had low prior knowledge had the opposite effect; they wrote less and of poorer quality. The research also revealed that the students who sought support wrote more and had higher quality of writing. Both researchers concluded that teachers should spend more time building on prior knowledge before writing about that topic.

Prior knowledge can link to writing attitudes because those who write more about a topic write in higher quality. Naturally, these students would write more because they know

more. Students who know more about the topic typically enjoy writing about the topic. Students who write with poorer quality typically do not enjoy writing about the topic or do not know much about the topic. These students who do not want to write as much as others or with quality do not have prior knowledge and do not have motivation. These unmotivated students like writing less as they get older usually because of boredom, lack of choice, and negative feedback (Kear, Coffman, McKenna, and Ambrosio, 2000).

One study found that students with prior academic vocabulary helped them with writing and other academic tasks (Wolsey et al., 2012). Students were taught explicit academic vocabulary, which helped them with writing tasks. Wolsey et al. (2012) noted, “Explicit instruction of discipline-specific language makes clear to students how their words shape and share their understanding of concepts, while their understanding of concepts helps them to become increasingly precise with the words and language structures they employ” (p. 723). The prior knowledge helped students believe that they could overcome difficult writing tasks because of the experience with these academic terms previously taught to them.

Writing Errors

Writing errors may lead to poor self-image, which may cause students to dislike writing (Reynolds, 1982). Students know that after writing, teachers mark assignments for writing errors (Haynes, 1978). Knowing that corrections will follow a writing assignment may cause anxiety in some students. Worrying about corrections may inhibit students from performing, and students who have anxiety about writing write fewer words (Heaton & Pray, 1985). To ease the stress of corrections, Reynolds (1982) recommends motivating students by making suggestions instead of marking errors. Research shows that confidence is necessary when writing; writing conferences may be a tool that alleviates anxiety about writing errors

(Thambirajah & Nordin, 2014). In Thambirajah and Nordin's (2014) study, a writing conference contributed to student confidence when the supportive teacher highlighted errors during a conference in a student-centered fashion.

Current Research on Writing Conferences in the ELA Classroom

Teacher-student writing conferences are one-on-one discussions about the student's writing or writing process (Murray, 1985). Tompkins (1990) describes these conferences as feedback sessions: "As students write, teachers often hold short, informal conferences to talk with them about their writing or to help them solve a problem related to their writing" (p. 370). Other researchers have called student-teacher writing conferences one-to-one teaching and writing conversations (Graves, 1983; Anderson, 2000). No matter the name, writing conferences are a part of numerous English classrooms (Cutler & Graham, 2008). In one study, three out of four English teachers conferred with students about writing several times a month (Graham et al., 2003).

There is no single way to conduct a writing conference, but student-teacher writing conferences usually occur while students are writing independently (Anderson, 2000). Teachers can call students individually or in a group to an area to discuss writing and/or teachers can walk around the room, observe, and discuss writing with students as they write (Anderson, 2000; Hawkins 2019). Anderson's (2000) approach is included as part of the writing process and has three parts: listen, gather information, and teach. Hawkins (2019) found four different ways teachers approached writing conferences: conferencing as verbal rehearsal, conferencing as criterion-specific collaboration, conferencing as transcription activity, and conferencing as a find-and-fix correction. Conferencing as verbal rehearsal is discussing ideas about writing, which would usually occur at the beginning of the writing

process (Hawkins, 2019). Conferencing as criterion-specific collaboration is when expectations of the assignment are discussed (Hawkins, 2019). Conferencing as a transcription activity is when students write alongside the teacher, specifically to transcribe sentences word for word (Hawkins, 2019). Conferencing as find-and-fix correction usually occurred when the first draft was done to offer revisions (Hawkins, 2019). No matter how the writing conference is structured, the most vital part is the conversation; the process needs to be “reciprocal, collective, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful” (Alexander, 2006, p. 28).

Even with no universal definition, frequency, or structure, accomplished writing teachers agree that writing conferences are an essential part of the English classroom (Anderson, 2005; Calkins, 2014; Hartman & White, 2005). Some researchers even say that the main difference between teachers who see massive gains in student writing achievement and teachers who do not see massive gains in writing achievement is how and if the teachers confer with students about writing (Calkins, Hartman & White, 2005). Because of the numerous benefits, Calkins (1994) calls conferring, “the heart of our teaching” (p. 189).

Benefits Overview

There are several benefits for students who participate in a writing conference. In traditional writing instruction, the teacher is the keeper of knowledge; however, writing conferences are meant to be a cooperative exchange between the student and teacher (Graves, 1983). The cooperative structure also gives students individual feedback about their writing (Calkins, 1986). Hale (2018) writes, “[the reduction in the] cognitive load [allows] teachers to be more present and genuinely listen to student input.” When teachers are engaged in one-on-one conferences, they are not distributing their attention and cognitive resources between a class full of students. Teachers have more focus on individual students because one-on-one

student interaction is seen as part of the writing process. Writing conferences improve student writing skills, help with student agency, provide student feedback, and support student self-efficacy (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Hale, 2018).

The next sections will discuss student understanding, agency, feedback, and self-efficacy, and how these factors are connected to writing conferences.

Student Understanding

Hale (2018) states that after a writing conference, students become more knowledgeable about their writing. Because of the individual feedback and time with the teacher, the student more than likely discussed the writing with the teacher as a conversation. Writing conferences give students a better understanding of their skills, so they can transfer their skills to other writing assignments (Hale, 2018). When students can tell someone their progress, weaknesses, and strengths that is effective feedback for both the student and the teacher (Jones, 2005). Conferences create a space for deeper understanding, which includes self-perception and engagement (Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta, & Feeney, 2003).

Student Agency

Writing conferences give students agency over their learning. According to the OECD (2018), “Student agency is defined as the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change” (n.p.). Student agency may be a byproduct of writing conferences since the student is an integral part of the writing conference (Hattie, 2012). The Department of Education in Victoria defines agency as, “the level of autonomy and power that a student experiences in the learning environment. Agency gives students the power to direct and take responsibility for their learning, creating independent and self-regulating learners” (p. 11). Self-reported grades and student expectations are components of student agency. Agentive

students are able to monitor progress in academics. Hattie (2012) posits that creating activities for students to reflect and predict their academic progress can reinforce student expectations. Activities like self-assessing, peer editing, and conferencing can support student agency (Hattie, 2012). Student agency means that students strive to be in control of their learning. Relevant values, opinions, beliefs, and perspectives of the students' learning shift from solely the teacher to the student (Hattie, 2012).

Outside of the classroom, students need to be agents of their learning (Schneider, 1996). Schneider (1996) reveals that students need to know their importance in society; they need to practice their decision-making skills in the world. Students need to be able to self-evaluate and reflect on social matters. If classrooms are a tunnel to get into the real world, students need practice in owning their choices, academic or not (Schneider, 1996).

Evaluation and Feedback

Instead of grading work and handing the work to a student, a teacher can evaluate the work with the student in a conference or during whole-class instruction. Elbow (1993) argued that teachers should evaluate student work more often. Evaluating student work allows teachers to “thoughtfully consider a piece of writing in order to make distinctions as to the quality of different features or dimensions” (Elbow, 1993, p. 191). Carney (1996) agreed with not marking student papers when she found that conferencing is a way of encouraging students to retain agency of their writing and that the writer has the ultimate responsibility of revision. In the study, students are encouraged to receive feedback in peer tutoring, but it is up to the student to make changes based on suggestions. Truax (2018) also indicated that students who connected goal setting to writing had an increase in writing motivation. Therefore, goal setting should be a part of the writing process. When students can tell someone how they are

progressing, their weaknesses, and strengths that is effective feedback for both the student and the teacher (Jones, 2005).

Teachers can also use peers to give feedback. Franklin's (2010) research suggests several activities that can assist students in talking about their own writing and responding to other students' writing. Specifically, Franklin (2010) found that when students find a supportive audience in their peers, they are more likely to accept criticism. Similarly, Rowe (2011) found that receiving and providing feedback is important. In fact, she found that giving feedback helped students the most because that is when learning was most active.

Even though peer feedback is helpful, Graner (1987) suggests that teacher-led workshops are more helpful because student feedback may make students feel too pressured. Students claim that providing feedback to the teacher on performance also gives them a better relationship with the teacher (Keddie, 2015). Feedback should be paired with the criteria of the work. Brookharts (2011) writes, "Effective feedback compares work with criteria. Students should know the criteria for good work before they begin an assignment" (p. 34). Teachers should clarify criteria for the students in order for the students to give effective and reflective feedback on an assignment.

Since the literature shows that feedback from peers and teachers is helpful, it is important to explore how both types of feedback may be most effective. Alitto, Malecki, Coyle, and Santuzzi (2016) found that teachers should help students regulate their writing through goal setting in addition to using peer feedback for immediate feedback.

Feedback, when administered effectively, also helps with motivation; Sloan (2015) found that students who gave and received feedback had higher motivation to learn. Students who give feedback to each other can also build relationships while giving constructive

criticism to peers (Saidy & Early, 2016). It is essential that students can self-monitor their learning while being motivated through building relationships. Learning is more meaningful for the student who can give and ask for feedback (Nottingham & Nottingham, 2017).

Effect of Writing Conferences on Self-Efficacy

In the educational realm, self-efficacy can be defined as a student's belief in whether or not the student feels capable of successfully completing a task or product (Bandura 1993). Self-efficacy beliefs are better predictors of students' academic achievement than knowledge, skills, or past accomplishments (Bandura, 1993). What students believe is what students may achieve. The choices students make about writing may reflect their belief in how capable they to succeed in a (real or imagined) writing task. If a student does not feel competent and confident about writing, the student may avoid writing (Pajares & Valiante, 2006). However, if a student feels confident with writing, that student is more motivated and enjoys writing (Pajares & Valiante, 2006). Enjoying writing may lead to repetition, which will help that student perfect writing skills and a more positive attitude about writing (Knudson, 1995). In a 1997 study, Pajares and Valiante found that female students perceived writing as more useful than male students. These female students had higher self-efficacy in writing tasks. Therefore, enjoying writing may connect to attitude.

Conferring with a teacher about writing and receiving praise will support student achievement. When teachers can point out strong writing skills or improvements, students may be more inclined to practice writing skills. If students do not know what they did well, they may not feel confident in a daunting task like academic writing.

Approaches to Writing Conferences

There are several approaches to writing conferences in the classroom. Some teachers require conferences as part of a writing workshop, where some teachers prefer writing conferences at the end of a writing assessment.

Writing Conferences as Part of Writer's Workshop

Writer's Workshop is a model that helps students write in a three-step strategy: a mini-lesson, independent writing time, and share time. Magalas and Ryan (2016) posit that “the writing workshop is one of the most successful and highly encouraged methods of teaching literacy in the classroom, especially in the younger grades” (p. 8).

One component of the writing workshop is conferring during independent practice. Teachers can listen, reteach, coach, and complement individually or in a group (Shubitz & Dorfman, 2019). Fletcher and Portalupi (2001) write, “It puts kids into an active stance, both when they write and when they confer” (p. 49). Teachers should listen to student needs during this time because the writing conference is intended “to celebrate, validate, encourage, nudge, teach, assess, set goals” (Routman, 2005, p. 206).

In their book, *Welcome to the Writing Workshop*, Shubitz & Dorfman (2019) write the goals of a writing conference:

- To meet the needs of each individual student
- To carve out time to get acquainted with each student, find out interests and assess attitudes
- To mentor and model for students so they can become effective at peer conferring
- To increase motivation
- To provide immediate and ongoing feedback

- To provide a small, non-threatening audience to share writing
- To identify a problem that can be worked on together
- To provide opportunities to ask for immediate clarification
- To teach informally: spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, usage, paragraphing, craft moves, and writing strategies
- To evaluate a student's progress
- To teach students how to self-evaluate
- To set short-term and long-term goal (p. 97).

Teacher Domination

The Bay Area Writing Project identified K-12 writing teachers that used conferences regularly. Morse (1994) studied ten of these teachers and saw that teachers were the ones in control of the conferences. The main activity in the conference is that teachers would often point out issues in students' writing. These conferences were not dialogic conversations about writing as teachers often asked students closed-ended questions and told students what they can do better in their writing. There was no opportunity for discussion, just mainly direction.

Similarly, Berry (1981) found that during writing, teachers interacted with students in a closed-question format with the teacher as the primary speaker. Again, the teachers were the keeper of knowledge with no room for student voice.

After observing 32 writing conferences in a third-grade classroom, Daiute et al. (1993) also indicated that the teacher spoke almost four times more than the students in each conference.

More current research shows that teacher-dominated conferences are still occurring. McKeaney (2009) observed three fifth-grade classrooms, where teachers dominantly asked and answered questions in the conference.

Nickel (2001) studied four first-grade writers' conferences with the same teacher. Students enjoyed the conference when the teacher was sincere about their stories. However, when the students felt like the teacher was changing their story, they did not respond well to the writing conference.

Hawkins (2019) posits that teachers should be more aware of how they talk and how much they talk to their students during writing conferences. Conferences where students co-constructed ideas gave students empowerment, as opposed to more traditional conferences where teachers do most of the talking (Hawkins, 2019). The most effective conferences are student-centered, yet research shows that teachers speak an average of almost four times more than students (Daiute et al., 1994). Teachers are usually highly directive, assuming an authoritative role (McKeaney, 2009).

In a study of four first-grade writers' conference interactions with one teacher across time, Nickel (2001) studied four first-grade writers' conferences with the same teacher. Students enjoyed the conference when the teacher was sincere in their stories. However, when the students felt like the teacher was changing their story, they did not respond well to the writing conference.

Teacher as a Guide

In a study by Hawkins (2019), writing conferences where students discussed the writing before the students wrote were well received. Students had a space to discuss their writing without any grading risks. This kind of conference is known as a verbal rehearsal,

where students have a space to discuss writing with teachers before starting the assignment. During the verbal rehearsal, teachers seemed interested in the student's work, asking questions that students could easily answer. Teachers did not criticize the content but instead offered suggestions for their content.

Hawkins (2019) also says that teachers should be more aware of how they talk and how much they talk to their students. Conferences where students co-constructed ideas gave students empowerment, as opposed to more traditional conferences where teachers do most of the talking. Conferences need to be student-centered, but research shows that teachers speak an average of almost four times more than students (Daiute et al., 1994). Teachers are usually highly directive, assuming an authoritative role (McKeaney, 2009).

In his dissertation, Reigstad observes the conference practices of ten professional writer-teachers working with four students each, and he records his subsequent interviews of both students and faculty. He proposes the following three conferencing models: In the teacher-student model, the teacher is the expert and does most of the talking and the work; in the collaborative model - the most common one - the teacher and student work together to solve the writing problems; and in the student-centered model, the student determines the direction of the conference.

In Wolcott's study (1989), she found three patterns in tutor-student writing conferences. Tutors were the experts, providing mini-lessons to students. The conferences were mostly businesslike, where the tutor guided the conference. The main focus for most conferences was about the requirements of the class rather than writing assistance.

Troia (2014) also noted that teacher-student conferences were not effective if teachers held the questions and answers. He compiled a list of best practices for teachers to use during a writing conference:

- Establish a conversational stance to understand students' goals and ideas before discussing textual issues
- Prioritize the most problematic issues to discuss in the context of students' rhetorical goals and perspectives
- Provide frequent and varied opportunities for conferencing about pieces of writing
- Explicitly teach students conferencing routines and ways in which to provide descriptive, constructive feedback if peer conferencing is to be used
- Encourage flash drafting, a technique in which smaller segments of text (e.g., the climax of a story) are drafted, examined through conferencing, and revised to help students feel less invested in a completed draft of the whole paper
- Collaboratively establish concrete goals and next steps for revision
- Give weaker writers more high-quality conference time (p. 34).

Table 1

Models of Writing Conferences

Model	Description
Tutor-student writing conferences	Tutors guide students with writing. Models like this are seen on college campuses.
Conferring before the writing assignment	Teachers and students meet to discuss the writing before the assignment is due. Students are not graded at this time and can make edits after the conference.

Conferring after the writing assignment	Teachers confer with students after the writing assignment. Teachers may review the rubric and grade writing together.
The Writing Process	During the writing process, conferences are a step to check on student understanding of the assignment. Conferences can be held at any part of the process (discovery\investigation, prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing).

Student Perceptions of Writing Conferences

Consalvo and Maloch's (2015) study indicated that there is little research about teacher-student writing conferences, especially in high school settings. However, her research on writing conferences at an urban high school gives some insight into student behavior. The researchers found that some students ignored teachers when asked about writing, some students pretended to understand the feedback, some students changed the subject to avoid writing, some students refused or gave humor as a response, and some students were hostile about conferring.

Bayraktar's (2013) discussed relationships between students' perceptions of writing conferences and student self-efficacy. Her research shows that there is a correlation with students who enjoyed writing conferences as having a higher self-efficacy.

Findings from another study show that students value personal relationships with faculty (Kaufka, 2010). Specifically, students enjoyed the writing conferences because of the relationships students build with teachers.

Gaps in the Research

Much is known about the effects of writing conferences. They give students a better understanding of their writing skills, encourage student agency, provide helpful feedback, and build self-efficacy (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Hale, 2018). Current literature indicates that students appreciate sincerity in writing conferences and prefer when their writing content is not changed (Nickel, 2001). Hawkins (2019) also reported that students thought student-centered conferences were more helpful for their writing skills, but there is a trend in teacher domination (Daiute et al., 1994; Nickel, 2001; McKeaney, 2009; Hawkins, 2019).

What the research fails to show, however, is how students perceive writing conferences. There is a lack of literature that exhibits students' personal views on writing conferences (Consalvo & Maloch, 2015). Because there is little research on student perspectives on student-teacher writing conferences, the need for the study is to fill the gap that the existing literature does not provide. The current literature centrally focuses on teacher views and discourse of student-teacher writing conferences (Anderson, 2000; Hawkins, 2019). However, there is little research on what students think when it comes to writing conferences. My study will give insight into an important part of the student-teacher writing conference that is missing: the student perspective. My study may exhibit areas of improvement or areas of excellence based on student experiences and perceptions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

There is an abundance of research about writing conferences in the classroom. Many of the studies revolve around best practices of writing conferences. However, information about the student perspective about writing conferences is almost non-existent. There is a lack of student voice when it comes to writing conferences. To capture the voices of freshmen students about writing conferences, a phenomenographic qualitative research methodology was conducted.

Research Design and Rationale

First, I chose qualitative research because it helped me understand the views and perceptions of my students. This method offered various ways for me to collect interpretive data in a naturalistic fashion, which I found necessary to capture the diverse experiences of my students. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore participants' lives and hear their voices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative inquiry also gave me a chance to engage with my students in case I wanted to ask further questions in the focus groups or interviews. My research was descriptive, which is why qualitative research best suited my target of capturing student experience with writing conferences. I did not start off with a theory, and I did not test a theory; I analyzed data after the research. Creswell (2014) emphasizes that the researcher seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from participant views. My participants' views were the most important aspect of my research.

I ensured the trustworthiness of my study with triangulation, which involved using “multiple methods of data collection and analysis” (Creswell, 2014, p. 211). My data sources included a survey for 22 students (Appendix A), transcripts of a semi-

structured interview with five students (Appendix B), and transcripts/notes from a focus group for those same five students (Appendix C).

I did not want to include quantitative research or mixed methods because quantitative research usually means more participants. I kept my participant number small in order to capture student experiences in depth.

The phenomenographic, qualitative design of my study was aligned with the goals of this study, as I wanted to understand the experiences my students faced and captured their truths. Naturally, as a teacher, I took their experiences as feedback and will use the findings of this study to improve writing conferences for future students. However, my primary aim was to capture students' experiences, as any changes I make to writing conferences should be based on those findings. My focus is on description.

Phenomenography

Specifically, I conducted phenomenography, a method grounded in educational studies (Marton, 1986). The term phenomenography has a Greek etymological root, which means appearance (phainomenon) and description (graphein) (Kahn, 2014). Starting in the 1970s, phenomenography was developed by educational researcher Marton and his colleagues in Sweden; the researchers wanted to know how students learn and understand content (Marton, 1986). They did so by understanding the student experience of a phenomenon using phenomenography since the research method is based on human perceptions (Akerlind, 2005a). Phenomenography is a qualitative research tradition that investigates how people experience a phenomenon, rather than studying a phenomenon (Marton, 1986). Phenomenography seeks “qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and

various phenomena in the world around them” (Marton, 1986, p. 31). Phenomenography uses a second-order perspective in which participants describe an experience to illustrate understanding; the research becomes an empirical style (Barnard, McCosker, & Gerber, 1999). Phenomenography focuses on second-order experience rather than first order. Second-order perspective is seeking the perception of a participant regarding an experience, whereas first-order perspective is the describing the phenomenon. Åkerlind (2018) states,

“From a second-order perspective, human experience and variation in experience is the core of the investigation; from a first-order perspective, human experience is but the medium for collecting data, and variation in human experience (within the same experimental conditions) is white noise, to be filtered by statistical tests of significance to better determine the reality underlying the noise.” (p. 6)

Phenomenography's ontological assumption is that time and context affect a person's perspective of a phenomenon; time, place, and context can change a person's experience (Akerlind, 2005). Booth (1997) mentions that there are a finite number of ways of experiencing a phenomenon; therefore, the factors of time, space, and context will individually differ even when people experience the same phenomenon. Thus, in education, the same student may experience an event in education differently, even though the event was taught similarly by the same teacher, like in my research (Donche, 2017). Even with that individual experience in mind, a researcher is still able to gather data (interviews) regardless of time, space, and context since one experience can indicate a sample point on the assumed finite number of experiences possible for the phenomenon (Booth, 1997). Akerlind (2005) finds that “Ideally, the outcomes represent the full range

of possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, at this particular point in time, for the population represented by the sample group collectively” (p. 323). Hence, it is possible to gather a consensus about an overall experience even when humans have differing views.

I chose phenomenography for this research because I wanted to make sense of the experiences of my students with teacher-student writing conferences, not writing conferences themselves. I wanted to know the participants’ perspectives instead of relying on my own perspective for gauging writing conferences. According to Marton (1986), “Phenomenography is an empirical research tradition that was designed to answer questions about thinking and learning, especially for educational research.” My aim was to investigate these experiences and to use them as feedback for my future writing conferences. As stated earlier, I would like to improve my writing conferences in the future based on student feedback. Therefore, phenomenography was the best method for understanding the student experience.

My phenomenographic research explored how students perceived one-on-one (teacher-student) writing conferences. The proposed research explored 9th-grade student perceptions of writing conferences in a rural Georgia high school. I used my own students for this research, which included 22 students. I had three data sources: an anonymous Google Form survey for 22 students (Appendix A), a semi-structured interview for five students (Appendix B), and a focus group for those same five students (Appendix C). My students were given a survey after two writing conferences that occurred at the beginning and end of the 2021-2022 school year. Twenty-two students answered a list of questions, both open-ended and closed-ended questions, about their

conferring experiences. By studying these student surveys, I gained insight on how students perceived teacher-student writing conferences. After the surveys, I interviewed five students. Those same five were in a focus group.

Phenomenographic Steps

Because I used phenomenography, I used the phenomenographic steps to analyze the data gathered. These steps coincided with the previous steps mentioned above.

Gonzalez (2010) advocates a six step process data analysis process to which Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002) added a step just before the elaboration of the outcome space.

(i). Familiarization step: the transcripts were read several times so I could become familiar with their contents. This step helped correct any mistakes within the transcript.

(ii) Compilation step: The second step was to require a more focused reading in order to deduce similarities and differences from the transcripts. The primary aim of this step was to compile students' answers to certain questions that have been asked during interviews. Through this process, I identified the most relevant elements in answers. This happened during the open coding stage.

(iii). Condensation step: As part of this process, I selected extracts that seemed to be relevant and meaningful for this study. The main aim of this step was to sift through and omit the irrelevant, redundant, or unnecessary components within the transcript and consequently decipher the central elements of the participants' answers.

(iv). Preliminary grouping step: the fourth step focused on locating and classifying similar answers into the preliminary groups. This preliminary group was reviewed again to check whether any other groups showed the same meaning under different headings.

Thus, the analysis presented an initial list of categories of descriptions. This happened during the axial coding stage.

(v). Preliminary comparison of categories: this step involved the revisions of the initial list of categories to bring forth a comparison among the preliminary listed categories. The main aim of this step was to set up boundaries among the categories. Before going through to the next step, the transcripts were read again to check whether the preliminary established categories represented the accurate experience of the participants.

(vi). Naming the categories: After confirming the categories, the next step was to name the categories to emphasize their essence based on the groups' internal attributes and distinguish features between them. This happened during the selective coding stage.

(vii). Final outcome space: in the last step, I discovered the final outcome space based on their internal relationships and qualitatively different ways of understanding the particular phenomena.

Role of the Researcher

My goal was to observe and record student perceptions of writing conferences. Because I measured student views, the subjective framework fits. As the researcher, I was involved and interacted with participants. The research methods allowed me to interact with students and interpret their perceptions. I asked open-ended questions to ensure that I was getting my students' experience: "The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting" (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). My research revolved around their meaning. After categorizing their perspectives, I used this as feedback to improve my teacher-student writing conferences.

Bracketing Before Researching

Richardson (1999) points out that phenomenographic researchers should have awareness of biases that enter the study. These biases could persuade participants into saying something or behaving in a particular manner (Richardson, 1999). In order for me to be aware of my own notions, I bracketed, which is setting aside my own understanding of a phenomenon (Vagle et al., 2009). Before I conducted phenomenographic research, I bracketed my own perceptions of the phenomenon, which is below.

I'm a 32-year-old Filipina-American cis-gendered female from the South. My Southern Belle accent and conservative fiscal thoughts may project Republican, but my "go-with-the-flow attitude" shows a more Libertarian stance.

I identify with interpretivism, which means people construct reality through meanings. In other words, I believe people learn through experience. My paradigm will interact and shape my relationship to my research because I will mostly listen. Since I think people's experiences are valid truths, I will collect data that will show me how students interpret writing conferences. I am not looking for hard facts and numbers. I will seek student interpretations of their experience. I know that "subjectivity operates during the entire research process" (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17). Still, I hope that if I document exactly what my subjects say, I can see more objective research.

I identify that the interpretive framework of social science best describes my personal philosophy. I'm very much in line with the paradigm of interpretivism (constructivism). In particular, social constructivism is the epistemology that best connects with me.

My research bias could be that I am a teacher who wants to help her students. I want to discover something life-changing for our schools, so I may be too eager to ensure that students find the benefits in conferencing as I do. I have read research and can attest to how powerful writing conferences can be for students. Writing conferences build a relationship between the students and teachers. Writing conferences are an opportunity to give feedback, clarify, ask questions, and goal-set. Writing conferences are also urged by my administration to give students valuable feedback. There are so many benefits to conducting writing conferences that I would be surprised if no students see any benefit. However, I need to remember to use the data I gather. I also need to hone in on the student experience part because their perceptions of student-teacher writing conferences are what is most important.

Methodology

In this section, I describe the participant logic, data protocols, data collection, and trustworthiness of my methods.

Participant Selection Logic

The research was conducted at Mountain High School (pseudonym), which is one of two high schools in the Mountain County School District in Upper, Ga (all pseudonyms). This is where I work as an English teacher. Mountain High is a newer school, opening up in 2010. This Title I public school is made up of approximately 1,000 students, 50% female and 50% male. Seventy-five percent of students are on free or reduced lunch. Classes include remedial, on-level, honors, and college classes for students in grades 9-12. We also have career pathway classes like cosmetology,

technology, and criminal justice. The population is 77% White, 20% Hispanic, 1% Black, and 0.4% Asian.

I chose my school for convenience and the fact that my classes participate in student-teacher writing conferences. The students and I are also familiar with each other, which may have made them more comfortable with giving me candid answers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The participants in this phenomenographic study included 22 freshmen in a rural GA high school. I interviewed five students; I also had the same five in a focus group. The number was small because it would be almost impossible to conduct in-depth interviews with more students than that in a meaningful way. These students were in my English 9th grade class on a regular on-track level. In phenomenography, researchers can only select participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study. These participants were all exposed to at least one teacher-student writing conference with me in the 2021-2022 school year. I chose my own students for convenience, what Glesne (2016) calls “backyard research” (p. 48). The backyard research was attractive to me because of the “relatively easy access” (Glesne, 2016, p. 48). Backyard research was not only convenient, but it allowed me to have “prolonged exposure” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged exposure means the more time I spend with my participants, the more I will learn about them. This time together may have helped them become more comfortable speaking honestly with me. Since I wanted their genuine perspective, gaining my trust and familiarity was vital. However, there are problems with backyard research. As a backyard researcher, I am an insider. As an insider, I may have had a difficult time recognizing patterns because I am used to the practice (Lipson, 1984). To

combat making assumptions, I did ask follow-up questions during my interviews and focus group discussion to eliminate my assumptions. Regardless, I may have been so familiar with the task of writing conferences that I made assumptions and could have failed to ask more clarifying questions.

I gave surveys to all my students who turned in a form and consented (participant approval and parent approval), conducted five interviews in my sixth-period class, and conducted a focus group during my 6th period English class at school. The interview students and the focus group students were the same students. Since students were under 18, I received parental/guardian consent as well.

First, 22 students were given an anonymous survey about their first writing conference of the year. These 22 students were all freshmen. Students took the survey during class; I had four separate freshman classes. The survey included both closed and open questions. I used at least 20 minutes for students to complete the survey at the end of class, which they did in that time. They conducted the survey at the end of class, so our school-wide warm-up did not get interrupted.

One week after the survey, five students were individually interviewed. These students were in my sixth-period class. I have only eight students in that class, but three did not turn in a consent form. I also had a student assistant in that class, so she was able to help me watch the other students who were not interviewed. During the interviews, my student assistant helped run the classroom while I interviewed the students in the hallway. I wanted privacy for each student, which is why I interviewed these students individually. Because the interviews last from 6-8 minutes, I was able to conduct all five interviews in a week.

Even though the students were in my sixth-period class, my goal was to choose the participants through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2014). With purposive sampling, I recorded as much variety as I could in my small class to observe the conceptual differences between the experiences (Sin, 2010). Purposive sampling allowed me to choose as much of a diverse group as possible. In that class, I had both male and female students of White and Hispanic race. Lexile ranges were from elementary to middle school, but they are all on the on-level graduation track. I chose from both genders, both races, and a range of Lexiles to help me see a broader experience.

Lastly, the same five students participated in a focus group, where they were interviewed together. The focus group was recorded in Otter.ti and took 21 minutes. I chose the same five students to see if there were any follow-up questions I wanted to discuss as a group. The same five also helped me maintain diverse responses since I was using purposive sampling. I asked questions based on some of the responses from the interviews and surveys. I was careful in sharing what was said in interviews; I asked questions as a whole group, not revealing what was specifically said by whom in the interviews. Overall, questions varied since questions should be flexible in phenomenological research. The focus group was during my sixth period. The other three students were not present; one was absent and the other two were dismissed for a sporting event. I thought that was the perfect time to complete my focus group since the students who were not participating did not feel left out. The survey, interview, and focus group were all completed in a month.

I also obtained permission to perform the study from the district, parents of the students, the students, and the Institutional Review Board. Participants were given my assurance of their confidentiality on the consent forms and verbally.

Instrumentation

Before I collected any data on their perceptions, students completed at least two writing conferences with me as their teacher. The conferences occurred after a summative writing assignment. One occurred in winter 2021 after a writing summative on a district common assessment. The second writing conference occurred in spring 2022 after a narrative writing assignment. During these teacher-student writing conferences, I reviewed the rubric and reviewed what the students did well and what they did not do well. I also set a writing goal with the student, which I documented on a personal chart that also had reading data (Lexile information). I asked the students if they had questions. To end the conference, I asked the students to summarize what they did well, what they did not do well, and their writing goals for the next writing assignment.

At the end of the second writing conference, we looked at the student's previous writing goals to see if the student reached their writing goals from the first conference. At times, I had to adjust or amend their goal.

Procedures

In the phenomenographic study that I conducted to capture the voices of freshmen students about writing conferences, I used three data collection methods: a survey, interviews, and a focus group. The use of these methods was instrumental in triangulating the data collected. Each data source was chosen due to my focus on ensuring that the students' experiences are minutely captured. I gathered multiple pieces

of data and asked questions in multiple avenues to seek clarity and ensure that I recorded their experiences accurately.

Surveys

I used an anonymous survey (Appendix A) to collect data from some of my students (22 9th graders) after the students finished their second student-teacher writing conference. I gave the survey within one week of the second conference because students were more likely to remember the conference. The questions were both open-ended and closed-ended questions, which gave me ideas of what they thought about student-teacher writing conferences. The open-ended questions were for elaboration and had no character limit, so students were able to write as much as they liked. The closed-ended questions were multiple-choice, which allowed me to identify patterns or trends within and between students. The questions were anonymous, in an attempt for students not to feel inclined to answer a certain way. I wanted the students to feel comfortable answering as honestly as possible. The idea of using an anonymous survey may have allowed students to respond candidly about their experiences in a writing conference. The surveys were the first data source that gave me an idea of what students think about student-teacher writing conferences.

Some questions from the survey include the following:

- Open: What, if anything, did you find helpful about the writing conference(s)?
What was the most helpful part?
- Open: What, if anything, did you not find helpful about the writing conference?
- Closed: Would you recommend a conference to a peer?

Yes

No

I chose a survey over a scale because scales are intended to measure something, whereas surveys generally produce more descriptive data. I wanted students to tell me their thoughts about writing conferences which they experienced.

Student Interviews

After looking at the survey data, I separately interviewed five students who were available during 6th period, which is a regular 9th-grade class with a student assistant. Even though I have eight students in that class, only five returned a consent form. Interviews were conducted in the hallway outside my door for privacy. My student assistant was not able to watch students by herself, so I had to be close to my classroom. These students chosen were either White or Hispanic. There was no other race in that class. There were one male and four females. There was one Hispanic male and one Hispanic female. The other three were White females. Their academic levels were similar, on-level students. The semi-structured interviews helped the students elaborate on the questions given in the survey. The 6–10-minute interviews were also a chance for me to ask questions based on the results of the data from the survey. I asked probing questions to support my interpretations of the survey. The interviews allowed me to further discuss and clarify the common themes I found in the surveys. Van Manen writes (1997), the interview “may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). The interview helped me seek a better understanding of the student responses.

These were semi-structured forms because I wanted to stay focused, but had room to ask clarifying questions when needed. I used the interview protocol (see Appendix B), but elaborated to seek more information as needed. I also used a recorder and notebook. I used Otter.ai for the interviews. Otter.ai recorded and transcribed (although I went back and fixed some words). The data collected from the interview helped me identify relevant themes I later discussed in the focus group.

Focus Group

I used a focus group with all five students at one time during my 6th-period class. I asked similar questions to the interview questions and conducted more clarifying questions based on previous individual interviews (e.g., Tell me what it was like from your point of view during and after the first conference. Please provide examples to illustrate your answers. What about the second conference?). The focus group questions helped me identify commonalities and differences in the way my five participants experienced the writing conferences (see Appendix C). I used the focus group to clarify aspects coming from the interviews and also to identify common experiences and perceptions among the informants. The focus group session lasted 30 minutes. I used a recorder and notebook. I used Otter.ai as a recorder for the interviews. Otter.ai transcribed my interviews.

I used a focus group as a final method, so students had the chance to discuss anything additional from the interview and survey. I liked the idea of having all five students together; they collaborated on answers and possibly felt more confident in a group setting. The main reasons for using focus groups, according to Bloor et al. (2001) are:

- To clarify and/or expand the data previously collected through other methods.
- In mixed method designs, when you want to explore a topic or collect ideas or group narratives to be used in later stages.
- To share and discuss with the informants the results/findings of the study.
- When we want to know the rules and intrinsic functioning of a certain social group.

A focus group was the best concluding method for me to discuss some findings with the group in order to hear more elaboration about their experiences in student-teacher writing conferences.

Writing Conferences

Students in my class completed two writing conferences with me unless they were absent. Both conferences occurred after students submitted their writing assignments. These conferences were used for evaluation and remediation. I called students individually to my desk and used the assignment's rubric to see how the students performed. We discussed the success criteria and remediated as needed. For example, if a student needed help with imagery, I would provide a mini-lesson. Even though students were not editing, I still wanted to provide an explanation for what was missing from the rubric. We had one conference at the beginning of the 2021 school year after a district common assessment; the writing assignment was a constructed response. The other conference occurred in March 2022 over a narrative piece. The details of both assignments are in Table 2. Only students who participated in a writing conference with me could participate in my data collection.

Teacher-Student Writing Conference #1: Constructed Response

On the district common assessment, students had to write a constructed response based on an excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice*. The directions were as follows: “Describe the contrasting personalities of Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett. Use citations from the text to support your description.” Students were to write how the two sisters had contrasting personalities using textual evidence. Responses were typically a paragraph. After the common assessment was turned in, students were called to my desk to review their constructed responses. I asked them to read their responses out loud to me. After students read, we evaluated the response together. We evaluated the response using a rubric developed by 9th-grade English teachers in the district (see Table 4). Students also had a copy of the rubric during the test. Then, I asked the students what they could have done better and what they did well. Students gave me a verbal summary of what they could improve on and what they did well. Common topics discussed were citing in MLA format and answering the question. The conferences took about five minutes with each student.

Teacher-Student Writing Conference #2: Narrative

The second conference occurred in March 2022. Students wrote a narrative about the text they were reading, *The Odyssey*. Students wrote a narrative from the cyclops’s point-of-view instead of the original point-of-view of Odysseus. The directions were as follows: “Rewrite ‘The Cyclops’ from Polyphemus’ point of view. Consider what he does before Odysseus and his men arrive, what he does in the fields, what his interests might be, how he might live when he’s alone, etc.” During the writing of their narrative, students asked me questions about imagery and dialogue, so some students had feedback

throughout the process. However, the formal conferences occurred after the narrative was turned in. When the narratives were turned in, students were called to my desk for a conference where students read their narratives out loud. After students read, we assessed and assesses the responses again, together. We graded the response using a rubric developed by 9th-grade English teachers in the district (see Table 4); students had a copy of this rubric during the writing process. Then, I asked students what they could have done better and what they did well. Students gave me a verbal summary of what they did well on the writing assignment and what they could improve for the next narrative. Students wrote down a writing goal on a Google Doc for their next narrative. I did not have students write down a writing goal during the first conference because I did not practice writing goals at that time. The conferences took about five minutes with each student.

Table 2

Two Teacher-Student Writing Conferences for Participants

Writing Conference Assignment	Question	Type	Rubric (Given to all students during the assessment)	Date
<p>1. Students took an online district summative assessment over various standards.</p> <p>On the assessment, students had to write a constructed response after reading an excerpt from <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>.</p> <p>When tests were turned in, students were called to my desk to assess their constructed response.</p>	<p>Describe the contrasting personalities of Jane Bennett and Elizabeth Bennett.</p> <p>Use citations from the text to support your description.</p>	Constructed response	<p>For a total of five points:</p> <p>Restate the question= 1 pt.</p> <p>Answer the question= 1 pt.</p> <p>Cite from the text about <u>the personalities</u> = 1 pt.</p> <p>Explain the contrasting personalities = 1 pt.</p> <p>Summarize your answer = 1 pt.</p>	Fall 2021
<p>2. After students read <i>The Odyssey</i>, their summative was to write a narrative about the cyclops from a different point- of-view.</p> <p>When narratives were turned in, students were called to my desk to assess their narrative.</p> <p>*During this one-week assessment, some students received informal feedback about their narrative. These students asked for help, whereas some students did not want to receive feedback throughout the writing process.</p>	<p>Rewrite "The Cyclops" from Polyphemus' point of view. Consider what he does before Odysseus and his men arrive, what he does in the fields, what his interests might be, how he might live when he's alone, etc.</p>	Narrative essay	<p>For a total of 100 points, your story must include the following elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • five or more paragraphs (30 points) • plot-- beginning, middle, and end (30 points) • at least one simile or metaphor (10 points) • visual imagery (10 points) • at least one example of onomatopoeia (10 points) • dialogue (10 points) 	Spring 2022

Participants

Twenty-two participants volunteered for the survey part of the study. Five of those 22 completed an interview and focus group. The five were from my sixth-period class because I had a student assistant who could teach the other students while I conducted the interviews and focus group. I assigned each of the five a pseudonym as

part of their involvement in this research. Participants were all from my 9th-grade English class and were on a regular on-track level. No participants received any additional compensation or class credit. Out of the 22 anonymous surveys, fifteen of the students were White and seven were Hispanic. Twelve were male and ten were female (See Table 3 for participant profiles). Even though I did not know their specific answers on the survey, I was able to see who brought back consent forms; therefore, I could determine the race and gender of the survey participants. For my interview and focus group, I had one male and four females. There was one Hispanic male and one Hispanic female. The other three were White females. While I would have liked a more ethnically diverse group of participants, Whites and Hispanics are the majority population of Mountain High School.

Table 3

Student Participant Profiles

Data Collection Tool	Gender	Race	Grade/Class
22 anonymous survey results	12 males 10 females	15 White 7 Hispanic	All 9 th ELA
5 interviews	1 male 4 females	1 Hispanic male 1 Hispanic female 1 White females	All 9 th ELA
1 focus group (comprised of same students interviewed)	1 male 4 females	1 Hispanic male 1 Hispanic female 1 White females	All 9 th ELA

Descriptions of Five Participants from Survey, Interviews, and Focus Group

The following are descriptions of the five students who answered the survey, interviewed, and participated in the focus group. They were all freshmen at Mountain

High School. These students participated in two writing conferences with me. One conference was over a constructed response on a district common assessment; the other conference was after a narrative. All names are pseudonyms.

Table 4

Demographics of the Interview and Focus Group Participants

Participant	Race	Sex	Experience with teacher-student writing conference before ours
Helen	Hispanic	Female	No
Bri	White	Female	No
Eli	White	Female	Yes
Joe	Hispanic	Male	No
Laura	White	Female	Yes

Data Collection Summary

This qualitative study utilized three data sources--an anonymous survey, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group--in order to triangulate data. An anonymous survey using Google Forms was collected at the end of class. The survey contained both open and closed-ended questions about writing conference experiences. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded on Otter.ti and took place in the hallway during 6th-period, which was the period that they had class with me. The interviews took a week; I interviewed one student per day. There was a total of 32 minutes of audio recordings. I also typed notes on my computer during the interview. Each interview was transcribed at least three times, resulting in 20 pages of transcripts. Lastly, a focus group with the same five students occurred in my classroom during the time they all had me, which was sixth period. The assistant teacher and the other students who did not have a permission form were not present during that time. The focus group resulted in 21 minutes of audio

recordings and two pages of typed notes. Each data source was used to develop themes and identify commonalities related to the perceptions of the participants.

Data Analysis Steps

I used ATLAS.ti for my data analysis because I practiced ATLAS.ti in research classes at Kennesaw State during my doctoral experience. I also liked the idea of having digital files since I had a lot of data; however, I had recordings and notes from the interviews and focus group as a backup.

Here are the steps that I followed to analyze data:

1. Preparing and organizing the data for analysis.

I uploaded the survey answers, interview recordings, and the focus group recording from Otter.ti to a Google Doc, where I transcribed each of the files (except the survey). I then uploaded all the files to ATLAS.ti.

When I input the data to ATLAS.ti, I started with familiarization by reading through the transcripts. I read the transcripts at least three times. Agar (1980) suggests that researchers "... read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the data as a whole before breaking it into parts" (p. 130).

2. Coding the data (reducing the data into meaningful segments and assigning names for the segments).

I coded the data to start making sense of themes and categories. This is called open coding. Basically, I read through my data several times and then started to create tentative labels for groups of data that summarized what I was seeing occurring based on the meaning that emerged from the data. Coding helped me interpret their perspectives

by describing, classifying, and interpreting the codes. This process allowed me to have the data “segregated, grouped, regrouped and relinked in order to consolidate meaning and explanation” (Grbich, 2007, p. 21).

3. Combining the codes into broader categories or themes.

I used ATLAS.ti to look for categories and themes in the interviews and focus group. This is called axial coding. Axial coding helped me identify relationships among the open codes. I looked for relationships, which gave some collective meaning. I then labeled the categories. After labeling, I wrote a narrative analysis to make meaning. Finally, I made an interpretation of the findings or results (Crewsell, 2014). After this step, I conducted another step called selective coding. Selective coding is finding the variable that includes all of the data. I then reread the transcripts to selectively code any data that related to the main variable.

Bernard (2006) argues that analysis “is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place” (452). As an English teacher, I will be excited to look for and analyze themes.

4. Representing, displaying and making comparisons in the data graphs, tables, and charts.

I used the network view to help me visualize the analysis of the data. Network views were instrumental in showing the triangulation achieved. I also made a table to illustrate the experiences of the students. I used categories from my analysis to represent the data. These visualizations (Appendix D) helped me understand the data in a different format.

Data Analysis

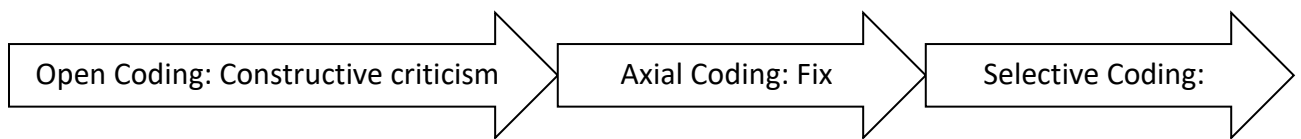
Qualitative findings from the anonymous survey, interviews, and focus group are organized and analyzed below.

First, I uploaded the interview and focus group transcriptions to ATLAS.ti and read through the data at least three times. I also uploaded the survey results into ATLAS.ti. I started to code each data set with open coding, looking for generalizations. I coded responses like, “fix” and “help” in the interviews and focus group. For the survey, I wanted to see how many times students have had conferences. I looked specifically at numbers and percentages for those who had a conference before having one with me versus those who did not. I also open coded “fix” and “help” on the surveys, since those words were so prevalent. For this specific example from the survey, I open coded “constructed criticism”: “Ms. Johnson's conferences are different because she gives more constructive criticism.”

Then, I used axial coding for each data set to help me identify relationships among the open codes. I looked for relationships and labeled the categories. Some categories included helpful, not helpful, negative, and positive. For example, I used the words “constructive criticism” in this response from the survey and categorized this response as “fix”: “Ms. Johnson's conferences are different because she gives more constructive criticism.” I used axial coding here to code “constructive criticism” to “fix” because I only had two responses that said, “constructive criticism.” I wanted to move those two to a broader category, so I coded them to “fix” which was a more prevalent response in the survey. The category “helpful” seemed like I was helping students fix mistakes, so I thought “fix” would be the best fit.

The last type of coding I used was selective coding to find an overarching category. For example, I used the words “constructive criticism” in this response from the survey and categorized this response as “helpful”: “Ms. Johnson's conferences are different because she gives more constructive criticism.” I moved my “fix” category to “helpful” and combined them with other codes like “improved.” See Figure 3. for an example of how I coded from open, to axial, and then selective. Eventually, this code went under the writing improvement theme.

Figure 3: Example of Coding in Survey Results



After I completed coding, I tallied the most common words across all three data sets. Common descriptors from all three data points are included in Table 5. Doing so gave me insight into some of the more common topics and issues students addressed in describing their experiences of writing conferences.

Table 5

All Data Common Descriptor Words and Frequency in Data

Common Descriptor Words	Word Frequency
Improvement	22
Fix	20
Help	14
Mistakes	12
Positive	9
Confidence	9
Balance	7
Relationships	7
Feedback	4

Thematic Analysis

I used thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti. Even though I could have found the thematic analysis by hand, ATLAS.ti assisted me in ensuring I looked at all data. I could have been overwhelmed with too much data and missed something if I relied on just myself. Technology greatly aided me.

Themes helped me visually see the different categories. Qualitative analysis exhibits themes that become the study's findings (Merriam, 2009). The categories helped me determine trends in the research, which helped me with the results. I used ATLAS.ti because the program easily assigned codes and discovered themes after transcription. ATLAS.ti also created visuals, which helped me categorize different themes. The visuals, which were large graphics like word clouds, helped me better understand my data and helped me look at my data from an alternative angle.

After analyzing the survey, interviews, and focus group, five themes emerged. These are the details of how these themes were derived from the data.

I recorded the individual interviews and focus group on Otter.ti. After the one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti. I also uploaded the survey results to ATLAS.ti. I then went through the transcriptions and survey results to start coding. Coding was used to identify themes correlated with the research questions. Bernard (2006) states that coding is searching for patterns of data to make sense of why they are there to begin with. I used ATLAS.ti to look through the survey, interviews, and focus group transcriptions to digitally mark codes. I marked participant words and phrases that established a particular theme. There were 18 codes that I marked, but later combined these to form themes.

After combining the codes, I derived five themes. These themes were based on word frequency about perspectives and experiences from the interviews and focus group. The five themes are (i) Writing Improvement, (ii) Overall Positive Experiences, (iii) Gained Confidence, (iv) Balanced Feedback, and (v) Immediate Feedback.

Subthemes emerged from selective coding from all three data sets. I then broke those codes down into broader categories that were prevalent in all data points. Themes and subthemes are provided in Table 6. Table 7 shows the number of iterations from each code family. More specifically, Table 7 outlines the five most prevalent code families and the number of iterations from greatest to lowest number of iterations.

Table 6

Themes and Subthemes from Focus Group

Theme	Subthemes
Writing Improvement	Helped, fix, mistakes, improve, get better, skill
Overall Positive Experiences	Positive, good, recommend, healthy, bond, close, understanding
Gained Confidence	Nervous at first, never experienced, get better
Balanced Feedback	Equal, good
Immediate Feedback	Tell/told us, never knew (awareness)

Table 7

Code Families and Iterations in all Data Points

Code Families	Number of Iterations
Writing Improvement	42
Overall Positive Experiences	9
Gained Confidence	9
Balanced Feedback	9
Immediate Feedback	8

After I completed coding, I tallied the most common words across all three data sets. Common descriptors from all three data points are included in Table 7. Doing so gave me insight into some of the more common topics and issues students addressed in describing their experiences of writing conferences.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, rich descriptions ensure trustworthiness (Merriam & Associates, 2002). I used the open network view in ATLAS.ti to ensure rich, thick description and trustworthiness by using participant data. The data in the networks illustrated the most prevalent code families. Data that supported each code family was uploaded using the open network tool which guided the data analysis process. The data tool generated connections that connected the themes to the experiences of the participants. These network views supported my data because it captured the words and phrases of the participants which supported the most prevalent themes. The network view also ensured that I was trustworthy as the researcher; I carefully analyzed the experiences of my participants.

I also used member checking, which is when the researcher shares their findings with the participants to make corrections to the interpretations of their statements. I orally shared my findings with the focus group. The participants gave me feedback about my interpretation. This was particularly important in my phenomenographic research because I wanted to capture their voices accurately.

Credibility

In order to triangulate data, I used surveys, interviews, and a focus group. I used a phenomenographic approach to record students' experiences. Recording their perspective accurately promoted credibility.

Transferability

This research may or may not be transferable because this study was completed with my students and their experiences with writing conferences in my classroom. This study may not be transferable because my students have a particular relationship with me that may or may not mirror other teacher relationships. Also, my style of conferring may be different. In contrast, this study may be transferable in that it may provide other teachers with students' perspectives on the model of writing conferences that I use in my classroom. These experiences may be noted for English conferences, and these experiences may also help all content teachers conduct more productive conferences with students.

Dependability

I was detailed in my methods and descriptions to ensure researchers can replicate my same study. I also used overlapping methods with surveys, interviews, and focus groups.

Confirmability

I used bracketing before my study to make sure that I put aside my own bias and focused on the individual experiences of my students. This helped me with the admission of my (the researcher's) beliefs and assumptions. I also used triangulation to reduce effect of investigator bias.

Ethics

Students participating in this study underwent the rigorous IRB requirements of Kennesaw State University and the Mountain County School district. I obtained permission from both institutions to conduct the study. I explained the research to my students at the beginning of the study and answered any questions they had. I also reached out to parents through a letter to obtain permission to collect data from student participants. In the letter, I explained the purpose of my study, which was to conduct a phenomenographic exploration of student perceptions on teacher-student writing conferences. I described in the letter that all students will be given surveys; some will be interviewed individually and participate in a focus group. They also were told that all student participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities. No personal information will be published.

Once I had confirmation and signed forms of consent from all parties, I proceeded with the study. A copy of the district's IRB approval remains locked at the district office, while all IRB-related paperwork connected to Kennesaw State University is being safely stored for five years. After five years, all related paperwork connected to the study will be destroyed. Destroying the paperwork will protect student identity and ensure confidentiality. Everything on a computer is on a password-protected computer.

Summary

My purpose for this chapter was to explain and define the methods I used to conduct research to determine student perceptions of teacher-student writing conferences. I included an examination of the research and rationale, my role, the methodology (participant selection and instruments), the phenomenographic steps, and the issue of

trustworthiness. Chapter 4 will follow the methodology from Chapter 3 and present the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

This qualitative study focuses on exploring how students perceive one-on-one (teacher-student) writing conferences. The 22 participants in this study were freshmen students in my English classes. My research questions for this work focused on how these freshmen viewed their teacher-student writing conference. My research question is *How do 9th-grade students perceive their experiences in writing conferences?*

The following are the areas of interest or topics on which the study will be focused to respond to the previous research question:

- Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
- Elements of writing conferences students do not find useful
- Aspects identified by students that could make writing conferences more useful

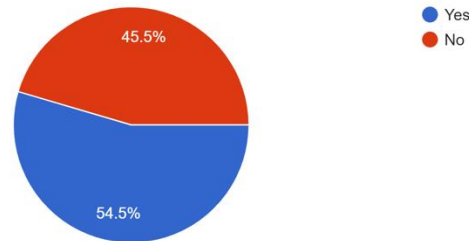
The data collection for this study included an anonymous survey, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. This chapter examines the data collected from these sources to identify patterns and/or other findings that may be helpful in addressing the research questions.

Anonymous Survey Results

Twenty-two students took an anonymous survey on Google Forms to describe their experiences with writing conferences. Through that survey, just over half of the students (55.4%) said they had engaged in a writing conference before my class (see figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Conferences Before My Class Survey Results

Have you completed a writing conference in another English class (before my class)?
22 responses



Seventy-two percent of students who answered “yes” to having had a previous writing conference had writing conferences in the 8th grade, which was the highest overall grade level that students previously had writing conferences. Most students said that teachers helped them improve their writing in writing conferences: “I was in the 8th grade when I would sometimes have writing conferences [*sic*]. The teacher would call us up and would give me pointers on what I would mess up on. The conference [*sic*] would last from 1-3 minutes depending on the length of the essay or writing project.” This response was typical in the manner and length of previous writing conferences. Responses indicated that teachers would call the student, give immediate feedback, and take only a few minutes to do so.

Twenty-one out of 22 students said that they completed a writing conference with me. The one student who did not complete the conference with me was unable to continue with the survey and exited with the use of a feature that exits participants from a survey if a participant does not qualify for the survey. Because the student did not complete a conference with me, his/her survey was terminated. I only wanted to focus on students who had a writing conference with me.

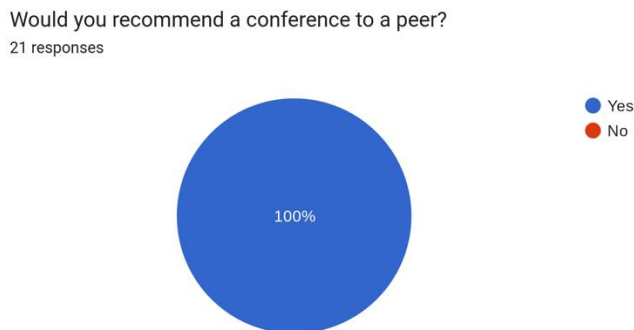
Helpfulness of Writing Conferences

Eighteen students said that my writing conferences helped them fix mistakes. Two said that they did not know how my writing conferences have helped. One student said that the writing conference with me did not help.

Recommending Writing Conferences

Every student said that they would recommend a teacher-student writing conference. Most of them said that they would recommend a conference because the conferences help fix mistakes (see figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2 Recommending Conferences to a Peer Survey Results



Improving Writing Conferences

When asked what I could do to make writing conferences more helpful, six stated that I could go into more detail about their mistakes (one even offered that I do a mini-lesson), 11 said nothing should change, three said that they did not know, and one said I could improve by giving feedback about what I like about the writing. See Table 8.

Table 8*Survey Results about Improvement*

Question: What could Ms. Johnson do to make writing conferences more helpful?

Number of students	Results	Example of student explanation
1	More positive feedback	“Tell more about what she likes about the writing.”
3	I don’t know	“To be honest I have no idea.”
6	Needs to be more helpful	“She could read what we did wrong and maybe make us a mini lesson on what everyone needs help on.”
11	Nothing; everything is fine.	“Nothing because it helps me as it is.”

Comparison of Previous Writing Conferences

When asked how my conferences were different from previous writing conferences that they experienced, three students said they were the same as other teachers’ writing conferences, eight said they were different (mostly these students said that I go more in depth), three said that they did not know or left a blank answer, and four said that they did not have a writing conference before me. There were only 18 answers for this question.

Table 9*Survey Results about Differences of Previous Writing Conferences*

Question: How are Ms. Johnson's conferences different from other teachers' writing conferences?

Number of students	Results	Example of student explanation
3	The same as previous writing conferences.	“They feel about the same.”

3	They didn't know the difference.	"D/N."
4	They did not have a writing conference prior.	"I never had a conference before but I can tell that Ms. Johnson really cares about the improvement of others rather than just telling students what they missed and not explaining it to the student so they can reflect on that feedback."
8	The writing conferences are different.	"Her conferences are different because she seems to actually invest and take interest in them. She seems to care more about helping her students succeed. Her compliments and pointers really help."

Additional Comments about Writing Conferences

The last question pertained to additional comments. Most of the students did not have any additional comments about writing conferences. One student wrote this: "I think they are good for students because it shows the kids what they messed up on why they messed up and how they can fix it." Another student said that we should have weekly writing conferences.

Interviews

Five students from my sixth-period class conducted a one-on-one interview during class time. I, as the researcher, listened to the interview recordings several times, transcribed, read the transcriptions, reviewed, and analyzed interviews. I analyzed interviews using the open coding, axial coding, and selective coding like mentioned earlier. Interview questions were focused on students' experiences of writing conferences

with a focus on positive or negative experiences. Below is a description of the five students I interviewed; those same five were in the focus group.

Helen is a Hispanic female who never had a writing conference. In the beginning of her interview, she told me that she had a writing conference in science class, but I later clarified with her that it was not a writing conference; the science teacher simply told her what she missed on a test. Regardless, Helen had two writing conferences with me and said that the conferences gave her “helpful tips.” She specifically remembered her feedback on the second writing conference, which was over a narrative. She said that I helped her with “imagery and dialogue.”

Bri is a White female who could not recall ever having a writing conference. She said that she remembers the two we had together and was nervous about the first one. She explained how the writing conferences helped her fix mistakes. She said that she thinks writing conferences are “necessary” to help students “fix mistakes.”

Eli is a White female who remembers writing conferences in the sixth and seventh grades. She says that they were short and to the point and that they helped her with punctuation. Eli did not remember specific details about our writing conferences. She did say that writing conferences are beneficial to help with mistakes, but teachers need to understand that students write differently.

Joe is a Hispanic male who says that he never had a writing conference. He says that writing conferences make him “feel good.” He elaborated to say that they make him a more confident writer because no one ever compliments his writing. He said that writing conferences are important for students.

Laura is a White female who had a writing conference in the eighth grade. She said that her eighth-grade teacher came over to the students and gave “constructive criticism” on an informative essay. In my class, she remembers the two writing conferences. She was nervous before the first one, but the praise in the conference built her confidence. She said that she felt confident going into the second conference because she revealed in the focus group that it was because she knew what to expect (member checking).

In the interviews, students overwhelmingly discussed how conferences were helpful in improving their writing (see Table 10). All five students said that writing conferences helped them improve their writing. Specifically, they said that I would tell them what they needed to improve, and they would learn about their writing errors. One aspect that was surprising was how specific their memories were of the conferences. Four out of five students could give me examples of what I told them to fix. Because I remembered what their writing assignments were, their memories of the feedback seemed to be accurate. For example, two students discussed punctuation when recalling a constructed-response assignment. Two other students recalled imagery and dialogue when we discussed their narrative writing. Their memories indicated that these conferences were noteworthy, possibly because the feedback was tailored to them.

Table 10*Interview Common Descriptor Words and Frequency in Data*

Common Descriptor Words	Word Frequency	Example
Helpful	8	Eli: "I think they're helpful because it makes sure that they know what they're doing right and wrong."
Remembered specifics	5	Joe: "You helped me to make sure that I need to proofread before turning something in and just also helped me to remember to at least read over it twice and to capitalize and space my paragraphs."
Improved/Fixed mistakes	5	Bri: "At first, I was nervous, but after you talk to me about the mistakes I made and I was able to fix them. I thought that they were worth it. Like they're very beneficial and I think you need them. So, you know, like, what you've messed up on and the next writing you do, you can fix your mistakes."
Confidence	2	Laura: "Before the first conference, I wasn't like completely confident in my writing...Then after it, I felt a little better because you helped me like go over it and review." Teacher: "OK. Did you feel confident after, or did you feel less confident?" Laura: "Confident."
Nervous	2	Teacher: "Before that did you feel nervous, or did you feel confident?"

		<p>Helen: “I was nervous.”</p> <p>Teacher: “You were nervous. Why were you nervous?”</p> <p>Helen: “Because I really didn't have none during my school.”</p>
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Focus Group

The same five students in the interviews were in the focus group. I used the focus group to ask additional and clarifying questions from the previous interview. The focus group was 22 minutes. The focus group questions are listed in Appendix C. Even though many questions were the same as in the interview, I forgot to directly ask students to describe their experience overall in the interview. This time, I directly asked the question about the perception of teacher-student writing conferences. Table 11 is a transcription of students talking about how their experiences with teacher-students writing conferences are overall positive.

Table 11

Transcript of Perceptions of Conferences

Teacher (me as the researcher): *So overall, tell me about your experiences overall with writing conferences? It can be negative, positive, neutral or something else, okay?*

Student	Quote
Helen	“For me, it's positive. It helps me a lot like from like tips that you give me about like, oh, like you should do this or like next time put this instead of this. It's helpful.”
<i>Laura</i>	“It's helpful for me too for those same reasons.” [I asked her if she means positive, too. She nodded in agreement.]

Joe	<p>Joe: “It’s helpful for me, too, so when I do ever want to write another thing, I can always think back to what you told us and taught us so I can do better in other writings.”</p> <p>Teacher: “So, it's positive for you, too?”</p> <p>Joe: “Yes.”</p>
Eli	<p>Eli: “It's in between a little bit of a neutral, closer towards the positive side because I know that it's supposed to be helpful but sometimes, like, they tell stuff that's like we already know and that we like should like get better at but we don't have like the um...”</p> <p>Teacher: “The skill?”</p> <p>Eli: “Yeah.”</p>

The focus group had a more relaxed atmosphere, which created an environment for discussion. Students were able to add to each other’s thoughts as we discussed topics. In addition, this was a chance for me to member check, specifically asking why students were nervous before a writing conference. In the interview, a few students said that they were nervous; I wanted to clarify that they were nervous because of the lack of experience in teacher-student writing conferences. Members clarified that feeling nervous came from not experiencing a conference before or having very little experience with one.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Looking across the three data sources, I identified five themes related to my research question (*How do 9th-grade students perceive their experiences in writing conferences?*) and the following topics of interest:

- Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
- Elements of writing conferences students do not find useful
- Aspects identified by students that could make writing conferences more useful

Instead of answering the research question first, I wanted to see how the topics of interest were addressed by the data points, which is shown in Table 12. Categorizing my data into these three interest points helped me visualize how to address the overall research question. The following are the themes categorized within the interest points.

Table 12

Emergent Themes and Interest Points

Emergent Theme	Interest Point(s)
Writing Improvement	Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
Overall Positive Experience	Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
Gained Confidence	Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
Balanced Feedback	Aspects identified by students that could make writing conferences more useful
Immediate Feedback	Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial

Writing Improvement

The overwhelming response shows that students find writing conferences to be helpful in their writing, specifically improving their writing skills. The theme appeared 42 times across the survey, interview, and focus group that indicated that students think that writing conferences bettered their writing. Many students suggest that writing conferences are mainly about refining writing skills. The word *improvement* showed up

22 times in the data. Specifically in the survey, one student wrote, “I never had a conference before but I can tell that Ms.Johnson [*sic*] really cares about the improvement of others rather than just telling students what they missed [*sic*] and not explaining it to the student so they can reflect on that feedback.” One-on-one writing conferences give students the differentiated feedback that they need to improve their writing.

Individualized feedback was also seen in Laura’s interview. In her interview, Laura commented, “I think it improved my writing because the things you told me to fix stuck with more, and I was like, like I tended to not do those things as much as I did.” Laura experienced individualized learning with personalized teacher feedback, which is one of many benefits to writing conferences (Martin & Mottet, 2011).

Students also said that they remembered my critiques. In the focus group, Joe said, “Because it helps me from when I write another one. I can just remember everything that you did in the first one so I can improve the writing.” One student even indicated that developing a writing goal after the conference was helpful: “What was helpful was when we made writing goals and when she would tell us what was wrong with the writing and what we needed to do to fix it.” Students seemed to acknowledge that writing conferences go beyond a one-time meeting and helped them consider their writing for the future.

Students indicated that they were learning through a social environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Through interaction, they were improving their skills by discussing and relearning writing concepts. Students were actively learning as the conference was taking place. Whether students were getting feedback, practicing a technique through a mini-lesson, or goal-setting, students were participating in the learning process.

Gained Confidence

Students indicated that they were nervous about the first conference, but found confidence during and after the writing conferences. In the focus group, Joe said that he was nervous before the first conference because "...we hadn't experienced it already." Although the word *nervousness* does not necessarily mean a negative connotation, there seems to be anxiety before students confer with the teacher. Oftentimes, according to my data, students are nervous because they have not had a writing conference before. The students also determined that they were not nervous the second time around because they knew what to expect. Bri said in her interview, "At first, I was nervous, but after you talked to me about the mistakes I made, and I was able to fix them. I thought that they were worth it. Like they're very beneficial and I think you need them. So you know, like, what you've messed up on and the next writing you do, you can fix your mistakes." Eli, in her interview, also confirmed Bri's thoughts: "We will it's kind of nerve wracking at first because you don't know what to expect from it but like once you're doing it it's a lot more explained out and stuff." It was evident that students were not familiar with the conference experience, which made them anxious about the process.

Improvement and experience created confidence for students; in an interview, Joe said that he liked conferences "because normally, no one ever compliments my writing." Helen said in her interview, "I felt kind of great in confidence in the tips that you gave me." Not only did students find the writing conference helpful and empowering, but they felt that the time we spent together created a positive relationship. The intimacy of giving one-on-one feedback may have contributed to students gaining confidence in their writing.

Another reason students may have felt confident after a writing conference is that they created a deeper relationship with me. Words like *close* and *bond* were used to describe the positive relationship writing conferences create. In the focus group, Helen confirms the connection that writing conferences can create: “I think it's healthy. I mean a close bond with your teacher, like you and [student assistant] seem like you have a good bond, writing conferences and can form a bond for the future.” Later in the focus group she said this: “I like you like having a close bond, like bond with my teacher. It makes me feel more comfortable and like, whenever I need help, just go because I'm close with the teachers.” Bri discussed in the focus group that establishing a positive relationship goes a long way: “It's good to be close with your teacher, so you feel like you can talk to them about what you need help on. The way that you do your writing conferences is good, like you don't get angry with us. We make mistakes; you are very understanding and you explain everything well.” Creating a comfortable space to discuss writing also helped me build a connection with students.

Students found that writing conferences helped and improved their writing as shown in Table 13. Students used words like *fix* and *mistakes* several times in the data, showing that writing conferences are a tool that refines writing skills. Also in this theme, students indicated that positive relationships were formed with the teacher in writing conferences. These relationships built student confidence. Writing improvement and confidence were created during writing conferences, which confirmed that students had an overall positive interaction with me during writing conferences this year.

Table 13

Table of Data Points Showing Writing Improvement in Conferences

Survey Answers	Interview Answers	Focus Group Answers
“Ms.Johnson's advice and tips on what to do to make my writing better.”	Bri: “Because it just helps you like other papers and to like help fix your mistakes.”	Bri: “It was good. It was helpful, so I’m glad we took one, we had one.”
“The helpful part was teaching me a bit more about punctuation.”	Joe: “Because it just helps you like other papers and to like help fix your mistakes.”	Joe: “It’s helpful for me, too, so when I do ever want to write another thing, I can always think back to what you told us and taught us so I can do better in other writings.”
“telling us what i could work on and explaining it so that we know.”	Laura: “Then after it, I felt a little better because you helped me like go over it and review.”	Laura: “You gave help with like what we did wrong in it. So you helped us with it.”
“It is helpful when teachers give me advice on something or even just the complements they give out, it can really boost confidence and make me want to try and do better than my previous work.”	Helen: “Oh yeah it really helped me with the imagery of dialogue.”	Eli: “To explain in depth the way that we were supposed to write them correctly.”

Balanced Feedback

There were a few negative aspects that were discussed about writing conferences. In the survey, one student said that conferences take time: “I feel like they can be time consuming sometimes, but worth it.” Time has been an issue that several teachers have complained about as well (Wenk 2018). Perhaps because of time restraints, teachers feel too pressed for time to give balanced feedback.

Some students expressed that feedback needs to be balanced. Those who experienced the conference with me, not only want critique, but also praise. One student in the survey said, “It is helpful when teachers give me advice on something or even just the complements they give out, it can really boost confidence and make me want to try and do better than my previous work.” In her interview, Laura also echoed that writing conferences should have balanced feedback: “Be equal on how you give the advice in like the compliments of the writing.” Equilibrium in feedback made students feel successful; when students discussed confidence, it was related to the praise they received about their writing. Students understand writing conferences are used for improvement, but conferences are also a chance to compliment writing. Remembering Joe’s comment from earlier, he shows that students want and need more compliments: “Because normally, no one ever compliments my writing.” Writing conferences can be an avenue for saying what students did wrong and what they did right.

Immediate Feedback

Even though feedback should be balanced with positive and negative aspects of student writing, students discussed the effectiveness of immediate feedback given in writing conferences. Helen said, “For example, like I’m with you or like, like telling me ‘you need this and this.’ And they know what to do and like how to do it.” Helen commented that immediate feedback raised her awareness when I corrected her about putting a comma before the word *because*: “I think they should explain to us what they have wrong. Like for an example like when comma doesn’t come before because I didn’t know that. Yeah, I would always put the comma before because.” Helen perhaps

experienced one writing conference goal, which is to learn and apply knowledge to future writing pieces (Anderson, 2000).

When asked what Ms. Johnson (me) could do better during writing conferences, a student replied, “She could read what we did wrong and maybe make us a mini lesson on what everyone needs help on.” This student indicated the importance of immediate feedback and remediation. Not only should conferences be about feedback, but they should be about learning. Teacher-student writing conferences are an instructional conversation to help students with writing (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Students yearn for an explanation and a lesson on what they did incorrectly. Simply saying to fix something without an explanation does not satisfy students. As mentioned previously, the student even used the term “mini lesson,” which indicates students want to grow. Students are looking for immediate feedback to improve their understanding. Only correcting student errors on paper is not effective, but having a dialogue is effective because teaching writing during a conference fosters growth (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001).

Overall Positive Experience

The theme Overall Positive Experience helped me answer my research question, which is *How do 9th-grade students perceive their experiences in writing conferences?*

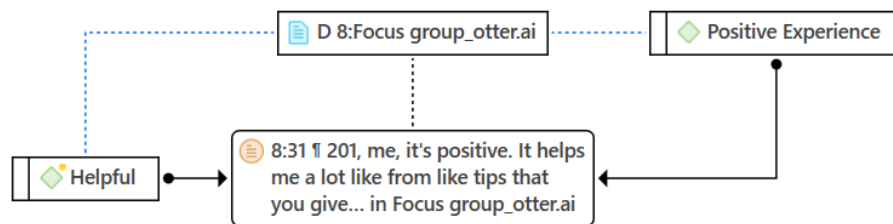
The theme Overall Positive Experiences was presented after all the data was analyzed. I directly asked students if they thought their experiences were positive and all students in the focus group agreed that they were. There were nine mentions of the word *positive* from students. Even though I failed to directly ask if experiences were positive in the survey and interviews, I did receive these answers, which I coded as positive experiences.

All students in the survey said that they would recommend a teacher-student conference to a peer. Recommending a conference because they thought it was helpful to them or it would help others illustrates that their experiences were positive (see figure 4.3). Bri recommended writing conferences to teachers and peers: “I think it should stay the same. You do a good job getting the point across and helping kids with their papers. I think all teachers should do writing conferences because they help kids a lot.” Bri and other students advocated for writing conferences to be used in classes, which makes me see that their experience was also positive. To suggest a writing conference would mean that the students see the benefits and also had a positive experience themselves. Bri commented that other teachers should try writing conferences, too. If Bri is recommending that teachers practice writing conferences, she is indicating that the experience was useful.

In student interviews, the words *positive experience* did not come up, but there were indications of positive experiences. For example, in his interview about his writing conference experiences, Joe said, “It was really good. It made me feel good that it helped me improve my writing a lot more.” The words “really good” indicated that the experience was positive and helpful since his attitude about the conferences was positive. Another person in the survey said that the writing conference was good, which indicated a positive experience: “My first writing conference was in 9th grade. The conference was good, I would say they help. The teacher conducted the conference by correcting me and helping me understand what i did wrong.” These good experiences were coded to positive experiences.

After analyzing the data, students thought teacher-student writing conferences were positive (See figure 4.3). There was not a negative comment except for the nervousness that was mentioned in the earlier theme. One student in the survey mentioned that he does not remember the conference. One student in the interview (Eli) also forgot a lot of specifics about the conferences. However, not remembering something does not mean not having a positive experience.

Figure 4.3. Network View for One Positive Experience Code



Summary

Using qualitative methods proved to be an effective means to collect and analyze data necessary to answer my research question and topics. The quantitative data that were taken from the anonymous survey, interviews, and focus group provided qualitative findings to measure the teachers' and students' perceptions pertaining to what they perceived in teacher-student writing conferences in my class. Supportive qualitative data was derived from the focus group because I was able to ask in-depth questions; I needed more explanation on survey answers and interview questions, so the focus group helped. I also used member-checking during the focus group and after the focus group to clarify topics. Open-ended questions in all the data sets allowed me to achieve a deeper

understanding by analyzing students' voices to further explain how students perceive writing conferences. From this analysis, five themes emerged from the data (i) Writing Improvement, (ii) Overall Positive Experiences, (iii) Gained Confidence, (iv) Balanced Feedback, (v) Immediate Feedback.

All students in the focus group said that writing conferences were positive. I did not directly ask if students thought writing conferences were positive in the interview and survey, but all five students said that they were positive when asked in the focus group. All five students in the interview described the writing conferences as helpful. Words like *improvement*, *help*, and *fix* were used in all data sets. In some cases, students were able to identify what they were told during the last writing conference, which indicates that the conference was memorable. Students remembered specific skills such as imagery and dialogue when discussing our last writing conference.

On the other hand, students admitted nervousness before conferences. Specifically, three students explained being nervous before the first writing conference. They did not know what to expect; out of 22 survey participants, 45% of students have never had a writing conference. However, students were able to gain confidence after the conference, stating that they understood what to fix and even had compliments on their writing.

Most importantly, students described how writing conferences could be better. Balancing positive and negative feedback was an area of need according to students. Sometimes, I often tell them what is incorrect instead of what is correct. These students yearn for praise in their writing as well as critique. Giving more positive feedback may instill confidence in a writer. In turn, students who are confident in their writing are more

willing to hear constructive feedback (Hale, 2018). Thus, giving positive feedback may help students receive critiques, which will help their writing overall.

Overall, students had a positive experience with writing conferences. They found conferences helpful and built teacher-student relationships. They overcame nervousness with experiences, while enjoying immediate feedback. Lastly, students gained knowledge through timely feedback, but also needed commendable suggestions to keep quality feedback balanced.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of freshmen students regarding their experiences in teacher-student writing conferences. A secondary purpose was to examine the following topics:

1. What are students' overall perceptions about writing conferences?
2. What elements (if any) of writing conferences do students find useful?
3. According to students, what can teachers do to make writing conferences more useful for students?

In this study, I used qualitative data with data sources that combined survey data, student interviews, and a focus group. Surveys were given to students who turned in a permission form. Twenty-two students participated in an anonymous survey, a Google Form. Interviews were conducted in person with five students from the high school in which I teach, Mountain High School; these participants conferred with me in a writing conference about their work. Interview questions were semi structured and contained a series of open-ended questions. In addition, a focus group was conducted to clarify previous interview questions and add additional information. Interview and survey questions were designed to elicit information pertaining to student experiences in teacher-student writing conferences.

Interpretation of the Findings

Before answering the main research question, I will interpret the findings from the three main topics. My research question is *How do 9th-grade students perceive their experiences in writing conferences?*

The following are the three main topics I will analyze first.

- Elements of writing conferences students find useful/beneficial
- Elements of writing conferences students do not find useful
- Aspects identified by students that could make writing conferences more useful

Elements of Writing Conferences Students find Useful/Beneficial

Students overwhelmingly found writing conferences to be useful. According to them, conferences helped them improve their writing. Timely and personalized feedback was the greatest benefit of conferring with me about an assignment. Students were able to correct errors immediately after a mini-lesson or verbal suggestion. Interacting and learning through their writing conference environment connects to Dewey's (1938) theory of learning by doing. Students were learning by completing their writing, discussing their writing, and remediating their writing to fix errors.

Students also commented on gaining confidence. Even though most students I interviewed claimed that they had not had any or had little experience with writing conferences, they gained confidence in the writing after the conference. Many students admitted to being nervous before the conference, but nervousness diminished after experiencing a conference. Students learned about their writing in a positive way, like in Helen's case. In the focus group, she gave this piece of advice to fellow students about not stressing about the conference: "To not be nervous about it. They have to be ready for what they're going to hear and like, it's okay for our students to make mistakes, which is like...it's it is gonna be like stressing, but the teachers were just going to help you on your mistakes." Similar to Helen, several students echoed the anxiousness of feeling judged; however, it is evident that students see the critical need for critique.

Students seemed to gain confidence after the writing conference. In the survey, one student wrote, "Getting to look back at the mistakes i used to make before to how much i have improved." Students were able to see improvement after we corrected their papers. Vicki Spandel (2001) states, that "a conference also offers ... a quiet and safe moment in which to receive help on a particular problem" (p. 366). After the nervousness of discussing writing with a teacher, students took note that writing conferences offered writing improvement in a helpful environment.

Being nervous seems like a natural part of conferring even with teachers: "Conferring, after all, creates a feeling of anxiety-even panic-in us, whether we are new to workshop teaching or we are workshop veterans" (Anderson, 2000, p. 3). If anxiety occurs with teachers who are usually steering the conference, students are likely to experience anxiety, too. However, students in this study found the benefits of teacher-student writing conferences after their first conference.

Aspects Identified by Students that Could Make Writing Conferences More Useful

Even though students found teacher-student writing conferences to be useful to increase writing skills, students described wanting more positive feedback. Students understood that conferences were an avenue for constructive criticism, but suggested teachers give both negative and positive comments. Comments included that teachers should balance both types of feedback. When asked in the survey what I could do to make writing conferences better, a student suggested, "Tell more about what she likes about the writing." Most students valued my informative comments, but students yearned for balanced feedback that gives positive encouragement combined with thorough explanations (Rae & Cochrane, 2008). However, it is important to note that feedback

with all praise and no helpful feedback can be problematic. Hattie & Timperley (2007) claims that the least effective type of feedback can be praise with no helpful information. Praise without critique can detract from the assignment and skills the student is learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback should be linked to learning intentions since one main purpose of writing conferences is to hone writing skills.

Bandura's (1993) self-efficacy theory plays a role here. Students need to gain confidence in order to believe that they can achieve their writing goals. Students need positive feedback, so they can recognize their strengths to have more motivation to write. Since students' self-efficacy is tied to achievement, it is vital that students have a positive perceived self-efficacy in order to achieve more through writing.

Elements of Writing Conferences Students Do Not Find Useful

Interestingly, there was not a lot of data about what students did not find useful. In fact, there was not enough for a theme to emerge. However, there were a few comments that I would like to mention.

In the survey, I asked what was helpful in writing conferences. One student wrote, "There was nothing really helpful to be honest." Because the survey was anonymous, I was not able to probe into this experience. However, I used member checking with my focus group and asked what this student could mean. Several students discounted the comment, claiming that the student simply does not care. I was not able to explore this comment further.

Other negative experiences were indicated in the survey, but there were not any negative experiences indicated in the interview and focus group. One student in the survey said that time was a factor, indicating that it does take time to complete a

conference. Another student commented that writing conferences make him feel stupid if he leaves something out: “Me feeling stupid because of something I forgot about.”

Finally, a student in the survey said that writing conferences are not helpful “when she would criticize the length of the writing project.” Many of these negative experiences may be connected to feeling judged since the words *stupid* and *criticize* were used.

Students may have low-self efficacy if they think their writing is not up to par. Teachers should increase student self-efficacy by giving encouraging words to help achieve a writing goal. As mentioned earlier, students suggested more balanced feedback. Praising the students for something in their writing can give confidence to students, which may motivate the student. Students should feel energized after a conference (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). Thus, helpful praise can make the feedback effective and empowering. Overall, we want to help with writing, not criticize the writer as Calkins (1994) reminds teachers: “Teach the writer, not the writing” (p. 228).

Answering the Research Question

After analyzing all three data points, the research question can be addressed. My research question is *How do 9th-grade students perceive their experiences in writing conferences?* I have concluded that students have an overall positive experience since students learn from the conferences, bond with the teacher in the conferences, and recommend conferences.

Primarily, students find writing conferences to be helpful. In all three data points, students commented on how writing conferences improve their writing because they get immediate feedback. Several students said that they can recall something I told them from a conference, which indicates that conferences are effective. In her interview, Laura

said, “It improved my writing because the things you told me to fix stuck me with me more. I tended not to do those things. The spaces after the period. The capitalization and punctuation.” Other comments made in interviews included skills I taught on the narrative; students recalled needing to use imagery and dialogue, which indicates these conferences were memorable.

All in all, students specified that teacher-student writing conferences were not only helpful, but needed. These effective conferences support student learning and should be a common practice, as Bri says in her interview: “I think they're very helpful. I think they're necessary... It did help my writing a lot. Because we both went back and you explained to me what I did wrong, and I could fix it.” Writing conferences can help students with current assignments and future assignments because feedback is immediate and explained. Writing conferences individualize instruction and help students build better writing habits (Ray & Cleaveland, 2004). With positive experiences of writing improvement, immediate feedback, and gained confidence, most students in this research claim that teacher-student writing conferences are a strategy that has powerful influences.

Limitations of the Study

As with any study, it is important to consider the limitations. The students in the current study's sample were in a rural high school in North Ga, which may affect the generalizability of the results. The results are also limited due to the use of purposive sampling procedures and type of writing conference. The researcher was selective in recruiting study participants due to convenience known as backyard research. The sample was also restricted to 9th grade students in the researcher's class who experienced a writing conference with her. Students only participated in a writing conference with a

teacher after an assessment; however, there are several different types of writing conferences (conferences before or during an assignment). These inclusionary criteria may have led to a more restricted sample; however, they were also advantageous in that students were comfortable being candid about their experience with the researcher as their English teacher. In contrast, some students may not have been comfortable being candid for the same reason; perhaps students did not want to tell the researcher as their teacher pessimistic thoughts about the topic to shield the researcher from negative emotions or fear of teacher retaliation.

Another limitation of this study was that the purpose of this study was to collect and analyze information about students' experiences and perceptions; thus, the researcher relied on student self-report for responses. Students may have inaccurate memories or may have distorted information. Though student reports can provide unique and valuable perspectives, it is important to consider these limitations when interpreting results. It is common for students (especially this age group) to have inaccurate metacognitive knowledge and beliefs: "...learners may underestimate or overestimate their competence, relative to the subjectively perceived complexity of the task," (Veenman, 2017, p. 247). This means that their beliefs about how they work best, what they are capable of, and how much support they need may be inaccurate. These types of beliefs may alter their perceptions of their experiences. Even though the researcher as their teacher may see academic growth with writing conferences, students may not. Just like experiences, beliefs are subjective (Veenman, 2017).

Finally, researcher assumptions are another limitation. The researcher assumed that writing conferences are beneficial for students; therefore, she expected students to

also see the benefits. There is bias for the researcher even though she participated in bracketing. The researcher also assumed that the students would express honest opinions during the study; however, there is no guarantee that students were candid.

Recommendations

Replication of this study with a larger sample and diverse population could potentially add to these findings. A full-scale study conducted with a sample representing an entire school with different teachers conducting conferences may also be beneficial to understanding student experiences with writing conferences. This would allow for a study that is potentially generalizable.

It is also recommended that the study be conducted without the researcher as the teacher to eliminate bias. Students may also feel more comfortable expressing their opinions with a third-party observer. Finally, various types of conferences could be studied. Perhaps students may find peer conferences more helpful than conferences with teachers. In fact, students may find writing conferences during a writing session more beneficial than a writing conference after a writing assignment. Students may find writing conferences to be more evaluative if a grade is attached to a conference.

Implications

The study's findings offer teachers valuable insights into the perceptions that students have about teacher-student writing conferences. Because writing conferences are meant to support students, it is imperative that those involved are conscientious of students' perceptions about teacher-student writing conferences and make concerted efforts to diminish potential barriers in the future. Educators should ensure that students are receiving balanced, timely feedback to support student writing. The findings may also

increase the practice of teacher-student writing conferences in classrooms because the majority of the data show that students experience these conferences positively. Teachers may give written feedback already, but research shows that conferring improves writing skills: “Students who receive verbal feedback have stronger beliefs that their efforts will result in positive outcomes than students who receive written feedback” (Agricola, Prins, and Sluijsmans, 2020). Therefore, teachers should practice oral feedback.

Another implication is that students could discuss more about their writing in conferences. If I had given students more time to talk, they may have felt that conferences were more about improving writing skills and their thinking rather than about the teacher correcting their work. Teachers could allow students to speak more during the writing process, even in conferences, so students know that what they have to say about their writing is important (Schultz, 2003). Students could then realize that writing conferences are about what they want to say about their writing process, instead of the teacher fixing writing mistakes. Students may also be more self-directed learners if they understand that they must also speak in a conference. Having students speak more in future writing conferences may also help the teacher understand their thinking. Because I centered my writing conferences around evaluation, students spoke very little about their writing process, which prevented me from learning about why and how they produced the piece I had evaluated. Student voice would have informed me of my teaching because I would have been able to better understand what they needed writing assistance on and what they were understanding. Checking for understanding is important; thus, having students speak about their learning could have informed me about any writing

misconceptions that they may have. I would have been able to hear what they were thinking, so I could reteach or accelerate learning.

In addition, although the conferences were mandatory, and therefore did not allow students to exercise much agency, I did see some elements of agency, or “the power to originate action” (Bandura, 2001, p. 3) through goal setting and talking about future writing. Perhaps if students asked for a conference during a writing assignment, more agency would have been demonstrated. According to social cognitive theory, agency is necessary for students to engage in self-regulation, or “regulate and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior through the influence of existing self-beliefs” (Code 2). Although components of self-regulation were mentioned, such as goal setting and a few mentions of writing improvement in student responses, motivation to write did not seem to be prevalent.

Even though students did compose writing goals towards the end of the year, if students had opportunities to goal-set from the beginning of the year, it may have helped them with agency. Because I presented my conferences as evaluating a writing assignment after it was turned in, students did not have the chance to self-evaluate their writing process. Again, I, as their teacher, directed most of the conferences, which is seen in several studies about writing conferences in the classroom (Daiute et al., 1994; Nickel, 2001; McKeaney, 2009; Hawkins, 2019). My conferences were about reviewing the rubric against their work, when in reality, they could have evaluated themselves with a rubric, and evaluated their writing out loud to me. When students speak, teachers can better understand their perceptions about writing. Students did not have much of an

opportunity to have agency over their writing, mainly because I did not give them a space to use their voice.

Although the current study provides critical information regarding student perceptions of teacher-student writing conferences, further research is needed in several areas. Namely, it would be beneficial to examine student perceptions of different types of writing conferences. How can a writing conference during an assessment differ from a writing conference after an assessment? How would students perceive an informal conference during brainstorming rather than a formal conference after a writing assignment is turned in? Additional studies should also include a greater number of participants to determine whether different academic backgrounds consider teacher-student writing conferences differently. Would an honors class find the conference mundane, or would they be more eager to receive personalized feedback? Would honors students have enough self-efficacy to become agents of their own learning, asking for conferences? Would students in special education classes find teacher-student conferences to be intimidating and frustrating? This information could be critical in understating other factors that may affect students' perceptions of teacher-student writing conferences.

Conclusion

After conducting this research, I feel encouraged to offer a few final thoughts on the insights I have gained. I am now confident in the benefits that writing conferences provide, especially with student perspectives. After this dissertation, I will collaborate with teachers in my school to explain the benefits of writing conferences and share my students' experiences. All students recommended teacher-student writing conferences;

therefore, English teachers should focus on implementing this strategy in classrooms. As someone who practices writing conferences, I am even more excited knowing that students see the benefits of this practice. I also knew that writing conferences benefit students according to the research (Anderson, 2000; Bell, 2002; Flynn & King, 1993), but now I have data that confirms that students see the benefits as well. However, there are some areas I need to work on, like providing balanced feedback and thinking about student voice. Those are areas that I can accomplish if I give students a chance to speak more about their work. I may even consider informal writing conferences during a writing assignment, so conferences are not just evaluative. Nonetheless, students found the conferences helpful and positive. As literary professionals, it is exciting to know that students agree with this practice that has been harnessed in some English classrooms. Now, we can practice conferring with confidence.

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Appendix A: Questions on Google Form Survey

Please be as specific as possible in your responses. This will remain anonymous. This survey will not affect your grade.

1. Closed: Have you completed a writing conference in another English class (before my class)?

Yes

No

2. Closed: What grade(s) were you in?
3. Open: Please explain in detail what your writing conference was like. How did your teacher conduct the conference?
4. What grade were you in the previous explanation?
5. Open: If you have, did you find the writing conference helpful? Why or why not?
6. Closed: Did you complete a writing conference with me this year?

Yes

No

7. Open: What, if anything, did you find helpful about the writing conference(s)?
What was the most helpful part?
8. Open: What, if anything, did you not find helpful about the writing conference?
9. Closed: Would you recommend a conference to a peer?

Yes

No

10. Why or why not?
11. Open: What could I do to make writing conferences more helpful?

12. Open: What could other teachers do to make writing conferences more helpful?
13. Open: Please add any additional comments about writing conferences.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview # _____ Date _____/_____/_____

Script

Welcome and thank you for your participation today. My name is Jacqueline Johnson, and I am a graduate student at Kennesaw State University conducting a research project titled Student Perceptions and Experiences on Teacher-Student Writing Conferences. Basically, I want to know what you think about teacher-student writing conferences. This interview will take about 30 minutes and will include 18 questions regarding your perceptions and experiences on our writing experiences in this class. I would like your permission to audio record this interview, so I may accurately document the information you convey. If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please feel free to let me know and we will stop. All of your responses are confidential. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used only for class and educational purposes.

At this time I would like to ask for your verbal consent and also inform you that your participation in this interview also implies your consent. Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop, take a break, or return a page, please let me know. You may also withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin? Then with your permission we will begin the interview.

Demographic Questions:

*These questions were asked orally.

1. What grade are you in? (check response):

9th 10th

2. What is your gender? (check response):

M F Does not identify or wish to respond

3. What is your ethnicity? (check response):

American Indian Alaska Native Asian Black or African American Native Hawaiian

Pacific Islander White Other Two or more races

4. Are you Hispanic or Latino?

Hispanic or Latino: A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. The term, "Spanish origin", can be used in addition to "Hispanic or Latino".

Yes No

5. How many teacher-student writing conferences do you remember participating in in my class? (check response):

1 2

6. Before this class, how often did you have teacher-student writing conferences? (fill in):

7. Thinking about your answer to my previous question, would you please explain your experiences with teacher-student writing conferences? Did you have them in middle school? What were they like, if so. Could you please provide examples to illustrate your previous experience?

8. If you did have writing conferences, how could those experiences improve if at all? If you did not have writing conferences with your teacher, do you think it would have helped your writing? If so, how?

9. Think about your middle school teacher-student writing conferences and the ones you had with me. What are the similarities and differences between the two experiences?

10. Let's think about the two teacher-student writing conferences that we had in class. We will talk about the first one, which was about constructed responses. Tell me what it was like from your point of view during and after the first conference. Please provide examples to illustrate your answers.

11. How do you think the first writing conference helped or didn't help your writing? Tell me your personal experience and give examples.

12. Are there any other aspects you would like to highlight about the first teacher-students writing conference?

13. Let's think about your second conference which was about narrative writing. Tell me what it was like from your point of view during and after the second conference.

14. How do you think the second writing conference helped or didn't help your writing? Tell me your personal experience and give examples.

15. Are there any other aspects you would like to highlight about the second teacher-students writing conference?

16. How would you improve the writing conferences to better help students? What could I do differently or the same? What advice would you give to teachers who want to do writing conferences with their students?

17. How do you value writing conferences?

18. What would you like to add about teacher-student writing conferences?

Thank the participant for his/her participation.

Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol

Source: <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/vpsa/pdf/assessment/focus.pdf>

PHASE 1:

I want to run one focus group for 50 minutes.

I am choosing five students in 6th period class based on the convenience of class size and diverse learners. Even though they are all on-level students, their Lexile (data taken from i-Ready) ranges from 2nd grade to 7th grade. I want to choose a variety of responses to probe if possible.

Questions:

Let's think about the two teacher-student writing conferences that we had in class. We will talk about the first one, which was about constructed responses. Tell me what it was like from your point of view during and after the first conference. Please provide examples to illustrate your answers. What about the second conference?

How do you think the writing conferences helped or didn't help your writing? Tell me your personal experience and give examples.

How would you improve the writing conferences to better help students? What could I do differently or the same? What advice would you give to teachers who want to do writing conferences with their students?

Script:

Part one: welcome participants, explain purpose and context, explain what a focus group is, and make introductions. Explain that information is confidential and no names will be used. You will either have a note-taker or record the proceedings. I plan to record and take notes myself.

Part two: ask your questions; remember to use probes and follow up questions to explore the key concepts more deeply.

Part three: close the focus group— thank participants, give them contact information for further follow up if requested, explain how you will analyze and share the data.

The facilitator will be another member of the English department at my school.

The location will be in my classroom during 6th period. This is a location the students are familiar with.

PHASE 2: CONDUCT THE FOCUS GROUP

1. Bring materials: I will have the questions for the facilitator and a copy for myself, a recorder and notebook.
2. I will introduce myself and the facilitator.
3. I will set a positive tone and make sure everyone is heard.
4. I will probe for complete answers.
5. I will monitor questions and time closely.
6. I will not argue with answers.

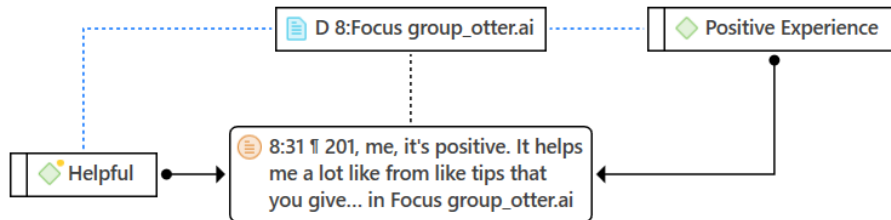
I will thank the participants and tell them my next steps.

PHASE 3: INTERPRETING AND REPORTING THE RESULTS

1. I will summarize the meeting, transcribe notes, and transcribe audio as soon as the meeting is over.
2. I will analyze the summaries.
3. I will look for trends and themes.
4. I will interpret the results.
5. I will look for major findings.
6. I will suggest recommendations.
7. I will write the report that will have the purpose, outcomes, process, findings, and recommendations.
8. I will submit the report to my dissertation chair.
9. I will make adjustments/take action on what I learned
10. I will schedule a meeting with my chair to discuss the implications
11. I will highlight main themes, issues, or problems that arose in the focus group.
12. My chair and I will discuss how to address #11.
13. I will prioritize the results and make actions plans

Appendix D: Network View and Demographics

Network View for One Positive Experience Code



Demographics of the Interview and Focus Group Participants

Participant	Race	Sex	Experience with teacher-student writing conference before ours
Helen	Hispanic	Female	No
Bri	White	Female	No
Eli	White	Female	Yes
Joe	Hispanic	Male	No
Laura	White	Female	Yes

