WRITING IN THE MIDDLE:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SEVENTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe what four seventh-grade teachers in four districts in southern Idaho do that helps achievement on both the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA) and Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). Through analysis of interview, observations, and classroom documents, similarities and differences between the four teachers was documented and reported. The results of this study suggest there are key practices that these teachers have in common that may contribute to student test success, but it also suggests that state standards and assessments influence the teaching practices of these successful teachers in both positive and negative ways.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2005, I took a position as a seventh grade writing teacher at the middle school fully believing that all my students should and could learn to write. Although I had never taken any methods classes for teaching writing, I had participated in several district-sponsored workshops on writing and had taught writing and language usage in my sixth-grade classes. I had a new language arts curriculum based on Idaho state standards for seventh grade and new textbooks purchased the year before. I was familiar with the requirements of both the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA) and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). I felt prepared to take this new position and was excited about the opportunity. Yet as the year progressed, I learned that teaching students to write effectively while satisfying high-stakes test requirements was a difficult task.

After my first year in the middle school, I spent the summer trying to understand what the best way to teach writing might be. I found a great deal had been written about how to teach writing by both researchers and practioners (e.g., Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1994; Harris & Graham, 1996; Murray, 1985; Routman, 2005). Yet much of the research on writing focused on high school or elementary settings rather than middle schools (see Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hillocks, 1986; Smagorinsky, 2006)

As I worked with the veteran seventh-grade writing teacher on our staff, I also learned curriculum and instruction in the middle/junior high school setting had changed extensively over the last few years. It had changed from mostly grammar instruction

with some writing in the reading course to an emphasis on writing with some grammar supplementing the writing instruction. This change had happened because the DWA was moved from the eighth grade to the seventh grade. However, my colleague also noted that with the implementation of the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) with its emphasis on language usage, the curriculum had begun to revert to more grammar instruction. Further, she had no easy answer as to what and how to best teach my students.

As I studied that summer, I found no clear methods on how to balance the teaching of writing and language usage in middle/junior high schools. The issue was further complicated by the pressure to "ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and State academic assessments" (United States Department of Education, 2004). This uncertainty on how best to teach writing at the middle/junior high school level compounded with pressure to improve student performance on state assessments left me anxious and frustrated.

As the end of my second year approached, I had many tools for teaching writing in my tool kit but no clear understanding of how best to use them to effectively teach my students to communicate through writing while at the same time prepare them to perform well on both a state-sponsored writing assessment and a high-stakes multiple choice language usage test. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) in their study of math teaching practices in Japan, Germany, and the United States suggested that to improve education, even with standards to set the course, and assessments to provide the benchmarks, "… it is teaching

that must be improved to push us along the path of success." I knew I needed to improve my teaching. I had the means I believed; now I needed the way.

Background of the Study

For me, the most important thing I can teach my seventh-grade students is how to write effectively. I found as I began to study the best ways to teach writing that I was not unique in this belief. For example, 100 percent of survey respondents on the 10th annual International Reading Association survey of "what's hot" and "what's not" agreed that, though writing was not a "hot" topic for 2007, it should have been (Cassidy & Cassidy, 2007). The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges also has said, "Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many" (2003, p. 11). The Commission authors further suggest that writing is a "threshold skill" for hiring and promoting among salaried employees (2004), and quality writing is considered an important job requirement among state government employees (2005). Writing is not only one of the "three R's" of a basic education, but also offers important economic advantages for those who can write well.

In order to address this issue, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) launched an initiative that focuses on academic excellence in the teaching and learning of writing (NCTE, 2007). Five themes adopted by the NCTE's Writing Initiative Program include writing as a tool for thinking and learning, improving the quality of every student's writing, assessing writing to support and account for learning,

using parents and others as partners in the writing and learning process, and building successful school-wide programs in writing. The NCTE initiative identifies the results it would like to see in students' work, and it provides suggestions for including the entire school community in the quest to meet this goal. It does not, however, address how teachers best plan and organize for instruction to accomplish these goals.

Even if the initiative had addressed this issue, teacher planning and organizing for instruction in the classroom is affected by their beliefs about and knowledge of writing and language usage instruction as much as any other factor (Anderson, Raphael, Englert, & Stevens, 1991; Bai & Ertmer, 2004; Ballone & Czerniak, 2001; McCarthey, 1990). Langer (1999) documented major distinctions between teachers who made a difference and those who did not while studying three groups of teachers in urban schools with diverse populations. She found that teachers who made a difference used a variety of different teaching approaches based on student need. Effective teachers combined teaching skills and integrated preparation for district or statewide tests into the ongoing curriculum. They pointed out connections among concepts and experiences across in-school and out-of-school applications. They taught their students strategies for organizing their thoughts and completing tasks and adopted a generative approach to student learning, going beyond students' acquisition of the skills or knowledge to engage them in deeper understandings. And they created social contexts for learning. In other words, the teacher took an active role in teaching students to write effectively. Yet even teachers who know how to best teach writing can be affected by high-stakes testing environments like that in which we now teach.

A great deal of attention is being given to statewide and high-stakes assessments for accountability purposes. Hillocks (2002) studied the impact of state writing assessments in five states – Illinois, Kentucky, New York, Oregon, and Texas. He found most state assessments were instituted partly to insure that writing was being taught effectively. He also found these assessments affect standards for good writing adopted by teachers, the kind of instruction offered, and the writing curriculum available to students (Hillocks, 2002). In other words, the teacher's writing instruction was impacted both positively and negatively despite their knowledge and beliefs about how best to teach writing.

In summary, policy makers and professional organizations agree that learning to write well is essential for students, and teachers play a key role in the development of high-performing student writers. As more attention is given to statewide assessments of writing for accountability purposes, the task of teaching students to write effectively while satisfying the demands of these assessments becomes more difficult.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study was designed to address was how to best teach seventh-grade students to both write well and still perform well on both state assessments. This qualitative study describes what four highly effective teachers did in seventh-grade classes in four districts in southern Idaho to achieve success in student writing and language usage on both the Direct Writing Assessment and Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

The following questions guided the study:

1. What are teachers' beliefs and attitudes about writing and language usage curriculum and instruction?

2. What are teachers' curriculum and instruction decisions regarding writing and language usage?

3. How do teachers plan for teaching a unit on writing?

4. How do the state assessments affect teacher planning in a seventh-grade language arts setting?

Thus the purpose of this study was to find and describe the best way to effectively use the tools I had by interviewing and observing what highly effective teachers of writing and language usage do in successful seventh-grade classes.

Importance of the Study

Understanding how teachers effectively prepare students to write well and still perform successfully on state-sponsored tests is important for several reasons. First, students in Idaho middle/junior high schools are performing poorly on national tests of writing ability.

The State of Idaho administers two statewide tests, one for writing and the other for language usage. The first is the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA), which is a performance-based assessment in writing. The DWA requires students to plan and write an essay in response to an assigned prompt within a 90-minute time frame. The 2007 scores on the DWA for middle school/junior high students showed 75 percent of seventh

graders at the *Proficient* or *Advanced* levels (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.b).

The second is the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT), a multiple-choice test of language usage administered in the fall and spring. The results for the Spring 2007 ISAT assessment for language usage show that the overall achievement for seventh graders was 65 percent *Proficient* or *Advanced* (Idaho State Board of Education, 2009).

At first glance, these numbers do not seem too bad; however, when we look at the writing scores of students in Idaho on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) we find that only 29% of Idaho eighth grade students scored at the *Proficient or Advanced* level (Idaho State Board of Education, 2007). This indicates partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work. Students are able to produce an effective response within the time allowed that shows a *general* understanding of the writing task they have been assigned. Their writing also shows that these students are aware of the audience they are expected to address and include supporting details in an organized way. The grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization in the work are accurate enough to communicate to a reader, although there may be mistakes that get in the way of meaning. Although the percentage of students scoring *Proficient* and *Advanced* on this test was not significantly different from the national percentages, it does indicate that on this rigorous test of student writing ability work needs to be done to improve student achievement.

Second, the professional literature has a great deal to say about how to teach writing and language usage, but could be enriched by studies that link teacher pedagogy to student outcomes at the middle/junior high school level. Although several important reviews of research on best practices in teaching writing exist (e.g., Langer & Applebee, 1987; Levy & Ransdell, 1996; MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006; Smagorinsky, 2006), specific guidance for improving writing instruction for middle school students has not received as much attention from researchers or educators.

A recent example is a meta-analysis conducted by Graham & Perrin (2007) about the effects of specific types of writing instruction on adolescents' writing proficiency. The study provides several research-based recommendations for adolescent writing instruction. However, when reviewing the list of studies included, only 18% of the studies in this statistical review were specific to seventh and eighth grades. In addition, the authors suggested that before implementing any of the elements, teachers needed to be mindful that the strategies were not a writing curriculum and that the needs of students should be considered. Not all elements of the recommendations were found to be effective with all students and all teachers. Moreover, the elements identified in the report were not jointly tested or methodically compared with each other. This means that teachers of middle school students have limited guidance when planning and organizing curriculum and instruction based on existing instructional conditions.

The third, and perhaps most important reason to Idaho teachers, is the responsibility to "integrate all aspects of teaching in order to make curricular, instructional, and evaluative decisions based not only on [our] subject expertise

and pedagogical knowledge, but also on [our] understanding of how young adolescents think, and how environments and instruction are best organized to promote the development of young adolescents" (Simmons & Carroll, 2003, p. 387). Students in the middle/junior high school setting are expected to use their abilities to read and write to engage with complex ideas and information. To engage adolescents, instruction must capture their minds and speak to the questions they have about the world as they think about their place within it. They have to be able to interact with challenging content while sharpening their skills. Pedagogy and content that adheres too closely with what works with young children are not likely to hold the attention of adolescents, nor will it prepare them for the rigors of high school or college (Ippolito, Steel, & Samson, 2008).

Teachers in Idaho seem to be doing an adequate job when measured by state assessments of writing and language usage, but not when measured on national assessments. We have a great deal of literature on how to teach writing but much of that is focused on elementary and high school levels. This leaves Idaho teachers believing they are doing a good job by using the best practices of teaching writing that may or may not work for adolescents and still having students inadequately prepared for higher education and/or the work force.

In summary, significant numbers of Idaho students perform poorly on national assessments of writing. And even though research has been done in the teaching and learning of writing and language usage, it is unclear if those methods are effective in seventh-grade language arts classes. Teachers in Idaho have a responsibility to learn how to best teach students to write well and achieve at high levels in selected response and

performance assessments of writing and language usage. The work of this study will add to and extend the research on writing and language usage as it applies to the middle school setting.

Overview of the Methodology

This is a qualitative study in which four seventh-grade writing and language usage teachers' beliefs and planning decisions were studied in order to provide an understanding of how they teach students to write well while achieving success on the state-mandated assessments. I selected this method because it permitted me to study specific issues in depth and detail without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis which contributed to the depth, openness, and detail of the study (Patton, 1990). The population was a purposeful sample selected because of the potential for information-rich data that helped answer the questions of this study. The data was gathered through interviews, observations, and written documents. I used a grounded theory strategy for data analysis because it offered a systematic process for analyzing the information I gathered (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Definition of Terms

Direct Writing Assessment: a timed performance assessment that requires students throughout Idaho in grades 5, 7, and 9 to write to a prompt scored holistically (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.)

Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT): The language arts assessments of the ISAT are composed of items that address standards, goals, and objectives for grade 3-8 and 10 in two separate assessments, reading and language usage. The reading goals

and objectives for each grade are distributed among two reporting categories: Reading Process and Comprehension/Interpretation. The language usage goals and objectives for each grade are distributed among two reporting categories: Writing Process and Writing Components (Idaho State Board of Education, 2009)

Language Usage: the component parts of writing that include prewriting, revising, sentences, conventions (grammar, mechanics or punctuation, and capitalization), and spelling as defined and reported on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (Idaho State Board of Education, 2009)

Writing: the process or result of arranging ideas to form a clear and unified impression in order to create an effective message through argumentation or persuasion, description, exposition, and narration (Harris and Hodges, 1995). The terms "writing" and "composition" will be used interchangeably in this study.

Summary

This chapter introduced the background, the importance, and the methodology of the problem this study attempted to answer. Chapter 2 reviews the literature associated with the teaching and learning of writing and language usage in middle/junior high school settings. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative methodology used, the participants who took part, and limitations of the study. Chapter 4 includes the findings and analysis for this study. Chapter 5 offers a summary of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and my concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe what highly effective teachers do in seventh-grade classes in four districts in southern Idaho whose students have achieved success in student writing and language usage on the Direct Writing Assessment and Idaho Standards Achievement Test. There are a number of factors that influence the teaching and learning of writing and language usage in middle/junior high school classrooms. The aim of this chapter is to review the literature related to those factors. This review was developed through a study of theoretical and empirical research literature about the teaching and learning of writing and language usage.

Educators in middle/junior high settings have learned to think differently about the nature of writing, the abilities of students, and how to best teach writing over the last century. The first section of this review offers a historical perspective on those changes. Second, I review the theoretical literature on the social and cognitive processes of writing to provide an understanding of how students learn to write. Third, I describe three evidence-based instructional models or approaches commonly used by educators when teaching writing and language usage. Fourth, I review the literature about the impact of teachers' beliefs on planning and organizing for instruction. And finally, I provide a review of the effects of state mandated assessments on writing instruction.

Historical Perspective

The teaching and learning of writing and language usage have changed significantly in the last century. Before the 20th century, the content for teaching English Language Arts (ELA) was mostly reading and spelling (Squire, 2003). It wasn't until the 20th century that writing and grammatical studies were included in language arts textbooks. Even then the focus was penmanship, manuscript form, and elements of grammar and usage. The prevailing pattern for teaching language arts was reading in elementary school, grammar in junior high, and literature in high school. This pattern began to change when interest in how to best teach writing emerged in the 1960's with the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) study commissioned to find out what was known about the teaching of composition. The resulting report entitled *Research in Written Composition* by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963), commonly known as "The Braddock Report," reviewed writing research that covered studies from the early part of the 20th century through 1962.

Though this report forcefully rejected grammar-based approaches for improving student writing, no one best method for teaching writing was suggested. In fact, the report was as much a discussion of how to conduct research as it was a review of the research findings. Braddock, et al., felt that "research in composition, taken as a whole, could be compared to chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms [were] being defined usefully, a number of procedures [were] being refined, but the field as a whole [was] laced with dreams, prejudices, and makeshift operations" (1963, p. 5).

In 1986, George Hillocks reviewed writing research from 1963 to 1983. The findings of this review provided some clear directions for practice and policymaking, particularly in secondary settings and for two areas of instruction -- mode of instruction and focus of instruction.

Mode of Instruction

Hillocks (1986) described three modes of instruction that were used in the teaching of writing. In the most common and widespread mode (presentational), the instructor dominated all activity, with students acting as the passive recipients of rules, advice, and examples or models of good writing. He found this to be the least effective mode examined. The second mode was called the natural process mode. In this mode, the instructor encouraged students to write for other students, to receive comments from them, and to revise their drafts in light of comments from both students and the instructor. But the instructor did not plan activities to help develop specific strategies of composing. This instructional mode was less effective than the average experimental treatment, but more effective than the presentational mode.

Hillocks labeled the most effective mode of instruction environmental, because it brought teacher, student, and materials into balance and took advantage of all resources of the classroom. In this mode, the instructor planned and used activities which resulted in high levels of student interaction concerning particular problems parallel to those they encountered in certain kinds of writing, e.g., generating criteria and examples to develop extended definitions of concepts or generating arguable assertions from appropriate data and predicting and countering opposing arguments. This mode placed priority on high

levels of student involvement. In contrast to natural process, the environmental mode placed priority on structured problem-solving activities, with clear objectives, planned to enable students to deal with similar problems in composing. Hillocks further suggested that the environmental mode of instruction could incorporate elements of both the presentational and the natural process modes, but moved beyond both to suggest more effective approaches to teaching composition.

Focus of Instruction

Hillocks (1986) found that the focus of instruction had important implications for teacher practice as well. His review supported the Braddock Report (1963) findings that the study of traditional school grammar had no effect on raising the quality of student writing. He suggested that standard usage and mechanics should be taught after careful task analysis and with minimal grammar. He found that for teaching writing there was a place for the study of models, which is the basis of the product-approach to writing instruction, because it was significantly more useful than the study of grammar. At the same time, treatments which used the study of models almost exclusively were less effective than other available techniques.

On the average, Hillocks (1986) found that using techniques such as scales, criteria, and specific questions which students applied to their own or others' writing was over two-and-a-half times more powerful than the traditional study of model pieces of writing. By using the criteria systematically, students appeared to internalize them and to use them when writing new material even when they did not have the criteria in front of them. The review also suggested the treatments that used inquiry, such as presenting

problems of various kinds from which students developed arguments, also helped improve the quality of student writing. It focused students' attention on strategies for dealing with sets of data, strategies which were then used in writing. Though all these techniques might make occasional use of models, they did not emphasize the study of models.

Hillocks used a meta-analysis of quantitative experimental research for his review about the most effective methods of writing instruction similar to Braddock et al. had done in the previous study. Unfortunately, this de-emphasized the research which used other theories and methods of investigating writing. Two examples are the works by Emig (1971) and Graves (1983) which showed the potential of case studies for understanding the processes of writing. Emig (1971) in her work studying the composing processes of twelfth graders suggested that writing is not linear but recursive, thus shifting the focus of writing from a product approach (i.e., narrative, descriptive, expositive, persuasive, and sometimes poetry) to a process-centered approach (e.g., pre-write, draft, revise, edit, publish).

Graves (1983) further supported teaching writing as a process by studying the process young writers used when they composed. In the early years of implementing the process-centered approach as a way to teach students to write, it was regarded as a nondirectional model of instruction with very little teacher intervention (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). However, process approaches did not reject interest in the product (i.e., the final draft). The aim was to achieve the best product possible. Also, the writing outcome was not preconceived as it was in a product-focused approach. Table 2.1 shows

a summary of the differences between these two approaches as provided by Vanessa Steele (2004) of the British Council of Teaching English.

Table 2.1

Process vs. Product Writing

Process writing	Product writing
• text as a resource for comparison • ideas as starting point • more than one draft • more global, focus on purpose, theme, text type, i.e., reader is emphasized • collaborative • emphasis on creative process	• imitation of a model text • organization of ideas more important than ideas themselves • one draft • features highlighted including controlled practice of those features • individual • emphasis on end product

Today, most educators believe that producing a written text is a "mental recursive process coupled with procedural strategies for completing writing tasks" (Prichard & Honeycutt, 2006), which more closely aligns with the environmental mode Hillocks wrote about rather than the natural process mode which aligned with the early years of the process approach. As a result, the process-centered approach now frequently includes explicit instruction in self-regulation, searching prior knowledge, goal setting, and other strategies not included when the process-centered approach was first developed.

In reviewing writing research from 1984 to 2003, Smagorinsky (2006) noted that this period brought about changes in the way researchers and theorists thought about

composition research. Research had moved from searching for universal truths to generating new questions about the nature of teaching and learning as they were "enacted amid competing political agendas, constructed subjectivities, social goals and structures, discourses, and value systems" (p. 12). While researchers still seek to identify effective instructional practices, such as best practices for teaching regardless of setting and participants, they now also attempt to contextualize practice to answer why it is happening.

In describing the findings of research conducted from 1984-2003 in middle and high school composition, Hillocks (2006) suggests "researchers and many teachers know quite a bit about what constitutes effective teaching of writing" (p. 74). Teachers of writing are giving more attention to the specific processes of particular writing tasks and focus on strategies that help students learn to work with the content of their writing. He cited the work of Langer (1999) as one of the most valuable about teaching writing in secondary schools (see Chapter 1 for a summary of this research). His review also supported his earlier findings that teaching approaches that had clear objectives and emphasized strong interaction among students and the teacher and focused on task-specific procedural knowledge were most effective. But he further suggests that teachers are either unaware or do not put into practice the research evidence for using task-specific knowledge when teaching writing. He posits that this is due in part to teacher training and in part to the impact of state assessments on teaching writing.

In summary, this historical review shows that there has been a great deal of excellent research published in the last century that has greatly impacted how writing is

taught in secondary schools. This examination into the best practices for teaching writing has caused teaching the ELA to change from isolated skill instruction to integration of skills and experiences (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing) in the elementary school and English with a blend of literature and writing in middle/junior high and high schools. We are starting to have the knowledge necessary to decide what pedagogical content knowledge teachers of writing should have, including using approaches that focus on task-specific procedural knowledge. The studies in the last century also taught us a great deal about the cognitive and social process of writing. The next section discusses those particular processes relevant to the teaching and learning of writing.

Cognitive and Social Processes of Writing

Two frameworks that have shaped writing and language usage teaching practices today are the cognitive and social processes of learning. There have been many theorists of the cognitive and social schemes, however, the theories of Hayes and Flowers (1980) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) in which learning is shaped by the cognitive processes and of Vygotsky (1978) and Bakhtin (1981) in which learning is shaped by the social context (e.g., values, experiences, and actions of teachers and students) are relevant to the teaching of writing since studying them sheds light on how students learn to write. Within these cognitive and social frameworks, writing is seen as a complex and recursive process that is dependent on a variety of cognitive processes and on the social context of the writer. The following sections provide more details about these theories.

Cognitive Process

Research on writing processes in the United States initially settled on cognitive processing theory (Prior, 2006) which is based on research studying the mental activity before, during, and after the writer puts pencil to paper. Two influential cognitive processing models are those developed by Hayes and Flowers (1980) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). In the Hayes and Flowers (1980) model, composing is described as consisting of three phases: planning, translating, and reviewing. During the planning phase, students generate and organize ideas and set goals. This phase can be difficult for all writers, but particularly beginning writers who give little consideration for organization and goal setting (Harris and Graham, 1996). During the translating phase, students compose the writing based on material generated during the planning phase. Fluency in translating is related partly to the writer's ability to draw upon their background knowledge and experiences, which particularly places cognitive and physical demands on novice writers (Needels and Knapp, 1994). The reviewing or revising phase, which includes rereading, editing, evaluating and then reorganizing, deleting, and rewriting, also places demands on beginning writers. Hayes (1996) updated the model to include an emphasis on the central role of working memory in writing and also included a place for motivation and affect in the framework. He felt that these additions provided a more accurate and more comprehensive description of the writing processes than the 1980 model.

A second cognitive processing theory pertinent to the teaching and learning of writing is that developed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) which includes two types of

cognitive processes -- knowledge-telling and knowledge-transforming. In knowledge-telling, writing flows from language acquired through everyday experience. Once writers have identified a topic and ideas related to the writing task, they proceed from one idea to the next rather than develop an overall plan or a sense of the end product. The writing is developed in a "what next" strategy or a stream of consciousness with little forethought for the end until it is reached. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) found that this knowledge-telling process was common in younger writers. On the other hand, knowledge transforming is typical of expert writers who transform ideas through "a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text" (p. 13). Writers in the knowledge transforming processes manage their own cognitive behavior during the writing process. They call upon their knowledge of writing to aid the writing process. This might include setting goals and purposes for the writing, deciding the form of the writing, reflecting on the process to improve their writing, and thinking about the needs of the different types of audiences. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) suggest that the problem of shifting students from knowledge-telling to knowledge-transforming writers can be overcome by explicitly teaching mature composing strategies.

Social Context

The cognitive processing theories were critiqued as too narrow in their understanding of context, so theories that attend to the social, historical, and political contexts of writing dominate and influence the teaching and learning of writing today (Prior, 2006). The social context in which students learn to write is very important

(Bakhtin, 1981; Cambourne, 2000; Dyson & Freedman, 2003; NCTE, 2004; Tompkins & Tway, 2003; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992; Vygotsky, 1978). Ideas of what counts as appropriate knowledge and effective communication gain their meaning from diverse contexts both in and out of school. Bakhtin (1981) suggested that teachers and students call upon a history of experiences with language and content that add richness and depth to emerging ideas in order to create new learning. In other words, student learning is shaped by the interactions between classroom experiences such as lessons in writing and the background knowledge and experiences of the student including previous out-of-school experiences such as keeping a journal. To Bakhtin, language is learned only when it is learned with and from others. Thus learning happens in the dialogue between the individual and the social environment. This mixture of background knowledge and social context intermingle within writers and become part of the dialogic nature of the composing process.

Vygotsky's theory further supports the idea that learning is collaborative and dependent on interaction (1978). He suggested that it was inherently social and could be guided or scaffolded through instruction by a more experienced other. Vygotsky called this concept the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD is where a learner gradually takes on more responsibility for their own learning through guided instruction. These interactions between the student, teacher, and environment foster the development of the student's higher mental processes.

Taking Bahktin and Vygotsky together helps us understand how students grow as writers. They create a need to pay attention to the historical, cultural, and social

background students bring to writing, the classroom environment in which the writing occurs, and the curriculum and instructional decisions made by the teacher. Schultz and Fecho (2000) suggest that understanding the social-contextual issues and how they influence writing development shifts our perspective from the individual writer and product toward seeing the writer and the text in multiple contexts that are reflective of classroom curriculum and pedagogy and shaped by social interactions.

In summary, the teaching and learning of writing and language usage is complex. It can be defined as a cognitive process embedded in a social context. Understanding the theoretical frameworks of cognitive process and social context for writing and language usage guides teachers' decisions when planning and organizing for instruction. By studying and applying cognitive and social process theories to the teaching of writing, we establish a theoretical foundation that operates in conjunction with the developing abilities of students. Ultimately, teaching to these abilities fosters intelligent strategies and confidence in self and in writing. A discussion of several instructional models and approaches that support both the cognitive and social context aspects of writing is included in the next section.

Instructional Models and Approaches

In Idaho, writing instruction in middle/junior high schools is comprised of two components—writing and language usage. In the following, I present the most common research-based instructional models and approaches supported in the literature.

Writing

Researchers have given us a good idea of what students need in order to become skilled writers, and their efforts to identify effective instructional practices in writing have resulted in a variety of different approaches. The following is a description of three evidence-based instructional approaches one might find in seventh-grade writing and language usage classrooms in Idaho. They are *Writers Workshop*, *Self-Regulated Strategy Development,* and *6+1 Traits.*

Writers Workshop Writers Workshop is a student-centered approach to writing, with the teacher taking an indirect role in the process. Atwell (1987) suggests Writers Workshop is a method to engage middle/junior high school students in their own writing efforts. In writing workshops, students learn to view texts from the reader's and writer's point of view. Writing workshop approaches offer the opportunity to implement research-based practices (Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1994; Harwayne, 2001) and use the social aspect of adolescents to improve their writing (Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Simmons & Carroll, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978).

Atwell (1987, 1998) describes a framework of seven principles that undergird the Writing Workshop philosophy: 1) writers need regular chunks of time to think, write, confer, read, change their minds, and write some more; 2) writers need topics; 3) writers need response from peers and teacher during the composing process; 4) writers learn mechanics in context from teachers who address errors within individual pieces of writing; 5) children need to know adults who write; 6) writers need to read from a wide variety of texts, prose and poetry, fiction and non-fiction; and 7) writing teachers need to

take responsibility for their knowledge and teaching. This foundation informs instructional decision making and student learning in the Writing Workshop approach.

The writing workshop isn't a formulation of grade-level skills and methods, but rather a set of four routines: the mini-lesson, writing workshop proper, the group share meeting that ends every class, and the status-of-the-class conference (Atwell, 1987; 1998). A typical writing class consists of a five-minute lesson, quick status-of-the-class check, at least half an hour for writing and conferring, and five or ten minutes for concluding a whole-class share session. Mini-lessons are based on student need rather than on a set or prescribed outcomes. The status-of-the-class conference is a way to quickly and comprehensively map where each writer stands each day. The heart of the writing class is where the teacher and students write on their own for at least half an hour. The purpose of group share is to bring closure to the workshop and to find out what other writers in the workshop are doing. During group share, the teacher models for the whole group ways of listening and responding to writers. The writing process is an integral part of Writers Workshop.

Self-Regulated Strategy Development The Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) instructional approach was developed by Harris and Graham (1996). Students are explicitly and systematically taught strategies for planning, drafting, revising and editing their writing, as well as strategies for regulating the process of writing. The SRSD instructional approach requires teachers play an active, facilitative role in the development of writing abilities by conferencing, modeling, prompting, and dialoguing with students. There are six basic stages of writing instruction in this model: 1) develop

background knowledge, 2) discuss, 3) model, 4) memorize, 5) support, and 6) perform independently each strategy and self-regulation component. Harris and Graham (1996) suggest these stages are not meant to be followed like a recipe, but provide a general format and guideline. A teacher would use these procedures to teach the strategies for composition and self-regulation.

To teach strategies for composition, a teacher would instruct students in a specific strategy for generating, planning, writing, and revising their papers. An example strategy for planning is a basic process consisting of three steps: 1) think – Who will read this? Or Why am I writing this?, 2) plan what to say, and 3) write and say more. The first step encourages the writer to consider the purpose for completing the paper and to set the audience. This helps the student set goals for the paper. During the second step, the student uses a series of prompts to generate, organize, and evaluate possible writing content. And during the third step, a student is reminded to use the plans already devised and to continue the process of planning while writing. The student would also be taught strategies for self-regulation in order to manage the writing process.

To teach strategies for self-regulation, a teacher would instruct students to monitor their comprehension when writing, much like meta-cognition in reading, as well as to apply specific strategies to complete an assignment. These strategies include goal setting, self-instruction, self-monitoring and self-assessment, and self-reinforcement. These four basic self-regulation abilities are closely interrelated. For example, self-reinforcement involves some elements of both goal-setting and self-evaluation. The purpose of self-regulation is to teach student to use strategies that help them comprehend

the writing task, produce effective and efficient writing strategies, and to use these strategies to monitor and mediate their writing behavior (Graham, 2006). Harris, Graham, and Mason (2006) posit writing quality and efficacy are enhanced by writing strategy training.

6+1 Traits The 6+1 Traits model was developed in the 1980's by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory as an evaluation rubric to give a standard vocabulary to describe writing. Hillocks (1986) suggests that such scales and criteria are effective in the teaching and learning of writing. The model has been expanded from primarily an assessment to also function as a model for writing instruction. The 6+1 Traits model consists of seven writing characteristics: ideas and content, organization, sentence fluency, voice, word choice, conventions, and presentation. (Spandel, 2001; Culham, 2003). Table 2.2 shows the descriptions of each trait as defined by Spandel (2001).

The rubric criteria are taught by having students assess models of writing through each lens of the rubric and then revise their own writing based on the highest scored model. "Student writing improves when the traits are used in a systematic way in the classroom and throughout the school" (Culham, 2003). However, Routman (2005) offers a caution about using this model. "While students' test scores may be higher when their teachers adhere strictly to a set of writing traits, the writing is often 'vacuous' – simplified and homogenized." This suggests that while use of the traits can provide a language through which student writers can improve their writing, it can also stifle creativity when students attempt to use the models as a formula.

Table 2.2

6+1 Traits

Trait	Description
Ideas and content	The main thesis, impression, or story line of a piece, together with the documented support, elaboration, images, or carefully selected details that build understanding or hold a reader's attention.
Organization	The internal structure of a piece that begins with an engaging lead and wraps up with a thought-provoking close. In between, the writer links each detail to a larger picture and includes transitions.
Voice	The presence of the writer on the page -- the writer's passion for the topic and sensitivity to the audience are strong and the text virtually dances with life and energy
Word Choice	Precision in the use of words. The writer chooses words to create just the right mood, meaning, impression, or word picture
Sentence Fluency	Finely crafted construction combined with a sense of rhythm and grace. This is achieved through logic, creative phrasing, parallel construction, alliteration, absence of redundancy, and variety in sentence length and structure.
Conventions	Punctuation, spelling, grammar and usage, capitalization, and paragraphing; the spit-and-polish of preparing a document for publication
Presentation	The publication of a piece of writing (e.g., word processing)

Integral to each of the instructional approaches above is the writing process which has become the primary paradigm for many state and local school systems (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004). Though, according to Totten (2003), director of the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project, it is unclear that this paradigm shift has taken hold. Based on evaluations from teachers with 1 to 25 years of experience who attended a summer institute held in Arkansas in 2002, Totten found that the concepts of process writing had "existed in some parallel educational universe" for most participants, but they had little or no inkling about facets of best practices in the area of writing or how to implement them in an effective manner. However, most researchers today agree that the writing process approach to teaching writing does help students improve their writing and thus should not be abandoned (Prichard & Honeycutt, 2006). A teacher's use of these instructional approaches would be affected by her knowledge about each approach, beliefs about teaching writing, and influence of state-mandated assessments (Cimbricz, 2002).

Language Usage

For purposes of this study, language usage is comprised of the writing components of grammar, conventions, and spelling. These three components are an important part of writing instruction in the middle/junior high school. In fact, as noted in the history section, these components constituted much of the curriculum for the middle/junior high school in the past. When these basic skills are integrated and connected to relevant and challenging curriculum, students learn more (Knapp, Adelman, Marder, McCollum, Needels, Padilla, Shields, Turnbull, & Zucker, 1995; Langer, 2002).

The first language usage component is grammar. A great deal has been written on the teaching of grammar at all grade levels by those who advocate teaching it (Mulroy, 2003) and those who don't (Hillocks & Smith, 2003). The most common reason for teaching grammar has been to improve writing, and it accounts for a major portion of time in the English curricula of today's schools (Hillocks & Smith, 2003). There is a place for grammar instruction (NCTE, 2002; Noguchi, 1991; Weaver, 1996) in the seventh-grade writing and language usage classroom. For example, one grammar skill which research suggests is effective in improving student writing is sentence combining. In sentence combining activities, students are asked to generate new sentences from already-formed sentences. Because of the importance of this skill in the overall writing process, direct, systematic instruction may be necessary for many students (Saddler, 2007). The meta-analysis conducted by Hillocks (1986) indicated a significantly greater effect size for sentence combining than for a focus on grammar in improving writing. However, research supports the inclusion of grammar skills within the writing process (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Graves, 1994; Routman, 2005; Weaver, 1996).

The second language usage component is conventions, which includes punctuation and capitalization. For writers, punctuation can be both complex and troublesome to master. Hodges (2000) suggests that this may be because of unstable usage practices of some punctuation elements, such as commas and apostrophes, and to the multiple functions of certain punctuation marks, such as periods that close sentences and abbreviations or capital letters that start sentences and proper nouns. Teaching grammar does not affect the use of conventions in student writing (Hillocks, 1986), nor

does teaching and practicing skills in isolation necessarily transfer to use in daily writing (Coles, 2000; Knapp, et al, 1995). Research suggests that students learn more when basic skills are integrated and connected to relevant and challenging curriculum (Knapp, et al, 1995; Langer, 2002), and may develop over time and from experiences both in and out of school (Hodges, 2003).

The last language usage component is spelling. Spelling remains a subject about which divergent views are held regarding both theory and practice (Hodges, 2003; Templeton, 2003). Over the last 100 years, spelling instruction has moved from rote memorization of words to studying word families to spelling as a developmental process. Current implications of research suggest that sustained reading and writing with focused and sustained word study is necessary to improve student spelling (Templeton, 2003). No matter the method, spelling maintains a secure spot in the curriculum, and it remains a supported subject both inside and outside school as shown by nationally televised spelling bees and documentaries. The best way to teach spelling remains unclear, especially in middle school where little research exists (Hodges, 2003).

In summary, teachers have many instructional models and approaches to select from when making curriculum and instruction decisions and must often negotiate between desires to teach writing or to teach the component skills of writing (Dyson & Freedman, 2003). Writing process approaches have not been universally successful because of time constraints, pacing concerns, and teacher training and beliefs, though most researchers do not suggest abandoning them (Applebee, 1981, 1984; Dyson & Freedman, 2003; Hillocks, 1986, 2002; Langer & Applebee, 1987; Pritchard &

Honeycutt, 2006; Swanson-Owens, 1986; Totten, 2003). In addition, there is not one "writing process," but a flexible process influenced by the kind of writing being attempted (Atwell, 1987; Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991; Graves, 1994; Routman, 2005).

Writing process research does not offer simple prescriptions for practice. Nor does it offer easy answers to the teaching and learning of writing skills (i.e., grammar, conventions, and spelling), except that these skills should be integrated into the writing process (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1983; Hillocks, 1986; Weaver, 1996). The basic issue for teachers of middle/junior high school students trying to satisfy both the DWA and ISAT requirements is to understand which instructional approach to use so students learn to write effectively and at the same time satisfy state-mandated assessments.

Effects of Teacher Beliefs and High Stakes Assessment

Ultimately the issue of which instructional practice to use to improve student achievement in writing and language usage may be moot because of two important factors that influence the decisions teachers make that can directly affect student achievement. The first is teacher beliefs about the teaching of writing and the second is the pressure for increased test scores on high-stakes assessments. Teachers' beliefs influence their decisions about how much time to allocate to a topic, what topics to teach, which students will be taught, what the sequence of topics should be, and what standard of achievement students will be held accountable (Porter, Floden, Freeman, Schmidt, & Schwille, 1988). A second factor that influences teachers' decision making is preparing students for state-mandated tests. The test content may become the curriculum,

instruction may be direct, and assessment may become practice for tests if teachers do not have the knowledge, skills, and support to be effective teachers of writing (Hoffman, Paris, Salas, Patterson, & Assaf, 2003; Popham, 1999; Stiggens, 2001, Wiggins, 1998). These factors are explored further below.

Teacher Beliefs

Despite the importance of writing, many students do not write well enough to meet grade-level demands in school. Findings from the two most recent writing assessments conducted by the NAEP reveal that a high proportion of students are not developing the competence in writing needed at their respective grade levels (Greenwald, Persky, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). Yet, effective instructional practices have been developed and tested to help students become "strategic, knowledgeable, and motivated writers who are not hampered by inefficient or faulty transcription and sentence construction skills" (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 5).

Yet there are researchers who argue that while the research into writing instruction and cognitive and social processes has increased understanding of student learning, this scholarship "will not contribute to changes in classroom practices and student learning on a large scale without concurrent attention to teacher beliefs, and interpretations of their practice and learning" (Anderson, Raphael, Englert & Stevens, 1991; Pajares, 1992). Indeed, it seems that "beliefs are far more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks and problems and are stronger predictors of behavior" (Pajares, 1992, p. 311).

In describing the difference between knowledge and beliefs, Pajares (1992) stated knowledge is based on objective facts and beliefs are based on personal evaluation and judgment. He suggested that teachers' beliefs are instrumental in defining tasks and selecting the cognitive tools to interpret, plan, and make decisions about such tasks; hence, they play a critical role in defining behavior and organizing knowledge and information (Pajares, 1992, p. 324). The results of several studies that have examined the effect of beliefs on instructional practices (e.g., Anderson, Raphael, Englert, & Stevens, 1991; McCarthey, 1990; Robblee, Garik, Abegg, Faux, & Horwitz, 2000; Ballone & Czerniak, 2001; Bai & Ertmer, 2004) appear to support Pajares's work on the impact that teachers' beliefs have on their practices, decision making, and behaviors.

Knapp, et al., (1995) found that teachers' beliefs about writing and how to teach it were integral to how they chose to teach it. "Out of professional development experiences, background knowledge, and formal preparation, teachers forge an image of the subject area … and how it should be conveyed to the students." Knapp, et al., (1995) found four basic concepts of writing among teachers. The first two concepts, writing as a tool for learning and writing as a means of communication, were associated with frequent opportunities to write extended text. The third, writing as a system of rules, was linked to patterns where students did little or no writing of extended text. The fourth, writing as an outlet of self-expression, was evenly distributed across writing classes that offered opportunities for extended text writing. Although writing textbook curricula and district assessment policies played important roles in what and how teachers taught writing,

teachers found ways to provide opportunities for students to write which supported their philosophy of writing instruction (Knapp, et al., 1995).

Teachers are central to the effective teaching and learning of writing and language usage due to the role they play in making curricular, instructional, and assessment decisions. "When all is said and done, what matters most for students' learning are the commitments and capacities of their teachers . . . Teachers learn just as their students do: by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by looking closely at students and their work; and by sharing what they see" (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Thus looking at teachers' underlying beliefs and sentiments about writing and language usage is important because they inform the customs and practices that influence their classroom behaviors and decisions. One purpose of this study is to describe teachers' beliefs about writing and how those beliefs affect instructional and curricular decisions, especially as a teacher negotiates the tensions between writing and language usage in an environment of state mandated assessments.

Effects of High-Stakes Assessments

A second factor that influences teachers' decision making about teaching writing is preparing students for state-mandated tests (Cimbricz, 2002). In Idaho, two assessments affect the teaching of writing in seventh grade classrooms – the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. The purposes of statewide testing in the State of Idaho are to:

- measure and improve student achievement;
- assist classroom teachers in designing lessons;

- identify areas needing intervention, remediation, and acceleration;
- assist school districts in evaluating local curriculum and instructional practices in order to make needed curriculum adjustments;
- inform parents and guardians of their child's progress;
- provide comparative local, state, and national data regarding the achievement of students in essential skill areas;
- identify performance trends in student achievement across grade levels tested and student growth over time;
- help determine technical assistance/consultation priorities for the State Department of Education (Idaho State Board of Education, 2008a).

Teachers of seventh-grade students are under intense pressure to ensure that students perform well on these assessments because these assessments have become the primary accountability indicator. Federal law requires states, school districts, and schools to produce annual report cards detailing accountability and assessment information and progress toward annual goals (Idaho State Department of Education, n.d.a). Researchers have found positive and negative effects of high-stakes testing on students, teachers, administrators, and policymakers (Amrein & Berliner, 2002a; Amrein, & Berliner, 2002b; Braun, 2004; Passman, 2000; Elliott & Boroko, 1999; Maurice & Karr-Kidwell, 2003; Wei, 2002; McMillan, 2005; Maudau & Clarke, 2001).

Two examples of possible negative effects can be found in the studies of Hillocks (2002) and Mabry (1999). Hillocks (2002) found that in states where high-stakes tests were administered, teachers used traditional approaches to teaching writing (e.g., five-

paragraph essay, presentational mode of instruction with little use of the writing process, and little teaching of strategies beyond the prewriting stage). Mabry (1999) analyzed the contradictions between the direct assessment of student achievement in writing in classrooms and the state-mandated performance assessment. In particular, she argued that scoring rubrics are essential in large-scale and standards-based performance assessments since they promote reliable assessments, but that the consequence is standardized writing as well. This in turn standardizes the teaching of writing.

On the other hand a perceived positive impact of state assessments was found by Yeh (2005). He showed that teachers believed that the quality of the curriculum did not suffer under the pressure of Minnesota's two state tests. Teachers also thought that testing improved the quality of their instruction and made both the students and themselves more accountable for learning. Everyone involved put in greater effort to ensure that all children succeeded. In general, by a two-to-one margin, the Minnesota teachers thought that the impact of state testing was positive.

Tests are an important reporting mechanism for the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) measurements mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Although there are many articles on high-stakes testing, only a few are based on empirical research. This problem is well documented by Sandra Cimbricz (2002), who examined the relationship between state-mandated testing and teachers' beliefs and practice. She writes, "Most of the professional literature I was able to locate was theoretical rather than empirical…. The exclusion of 'non-empirical' works (e.g., essays, anecdotal reports, testimonials) reduced an extensive list of citations to a small body of work." The

literature in the relationship between testing and teaching is overrepresented by essays, anecdotal reports, testimonials, and protests appearing in educational publications. These assessments do have an impact on teacher decision making, but it is unclear to what extent. This study attempted to extend our understanding of the relationship between state-mandated testing and teaching in actual school settings, which according to Cimbricz (2002) is "greatly needed."

Summary of the Literature Review

Teachers make daily decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment which affect the learning of their students. They also make decisions that help students be successful writers and consumers of writing. Knowledge about how students write has grown in the last 40 years with theoretical frameworks for what happens inside the individual as well as inside the classroom. Also, curriculum standards and assessments have been developed to improve the overall efficiency and effectiveness of public education (Idaho State Board of Education, 2007). Yet, it is unclear how this research has translated into practice in middle/junior high schools in Idaho, especially in the current environment of accountability. Educators understand that implementation of high-stakes assessments such the DWA and ISAT influences curriculum, instruction, and assessment for student achievement. What is unclear is how these assessments affect the planning and organizing decisions teachers make. This study is an effort to bring understanding of the relationship between state-mandated testing and the teaching of writing.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

For this study I examined how highly effective language arts teachers in four seventh-grade classes in four districts in southern Idaho plan and organize for instruction to prepare students to write well and to perform capably on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. These state-sponsored assessments evaluate student ability in writing and language usage. Being a seventh-grade language arts teacher, I have found that balancing my instruction to meet the demands of both assessments can be challenging. The intent of this study was to describe how highly effective teachers find a balance in their instruction so that students learn to write well and perform well on both assessments.

To best answer the questions of this study, I chose to conduct a qualitative study in which I interviewed and observed four seventh-grade writing and language usage teachers about their beliefs and planning and organizing decisions in order to better understand the relationship between effective instructional practices and student outcomes as measured on state-mandated testing. This method allowed me to approach the fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis. In the first section of this chapter I introduce the study participants, the second section describes the data sources, and the third section describes the process I used to analyze the data.

Participants

The study took place in language arts classrooms in four middle/junior high schools in southern Idaho. I limited the selection to southern Idaho schools because of

travel time as I visited each site several times. Although the actions of the principal and students play a part in student achievement, the primary focus of this study was the teachers. In order to find the highly effective teachers, I identified schools that met three criteria – state test data, school demographics, and willingness to participate.

The first criterion was published test data from the 2006 Direct Writing Assessment (DWA) and the Spring 2006 language usage section of the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT). A program was considered successful if it had 75% or more students at *Proficient* or *Advanced* on both the DWA and the ISAT. This was rather difficult as many schools performed well on one assessment but not the other. I did however identify a list of 11 schools in southern Idaho from which I randomly selected four – two urban and two rural. Patton (1990) has suggested that by intensively studying extreme or unusual cases more can be learned than from looking only at the average case.

The second criterion was published data on school demographics. In order to add depth and strength to the study, I included schools with varied socio-economic status in both urban and rural settings. This data can be found at SchoolMatters: A Service of Standard & Poor's (2007).

The last criterion was the willingness of teachers and administrators in the schools to participate in the study. This was an important aspect of teacher selection as the study required a time commitment of several hours from the participants.

Once the sites were selected, I called the principals of those schools to see if they were willing to have the study conducted in their schools and asked them to introduce me to the language arts teachers (see Table 3.1 for school characteristics).

In the small, rural schools, there was only one seventh-grade language arts teacher, but in the urban schools there were two at each school. To identify one of the two language arts teachers for participation, I asked the principal to make a recommendation as to which teacher he/she felt would best know the school program and contributed to the success of the program at the school. Fortunately, all four principals of the schools selected were willing to participate and I arranged a time to meet and interview each of them. See Appendix A for blank participant consent forms.

At the first meeting with the principal, I interviewed him/her about the language arts program at the school and each then introduced me to a seventh-grade language arts teacher. I explained the purpose of the study to each and asked if they were willing to participate and each did. The consenting teachers were asked to provide three interviews, two observations, and copies of monthly lesson plans.

The Schools

The four schools selected to participate had characteristics that were quite similar, but in many ways were as different as the communities in which they were located. Two of the schools were located in rural communities and two in urban settings. The percentage of low socio-economic status students ranged from 20% to 44% and was based on free and reduced lunch statistics. All schools had over 75% of *Proficient* and *Advanced* students as measured on both the DWA and the ISAT assessments in the 2005-2006 assessments.

Table 3.1

School Characteristics in 2007/2008

	Elise's School	Jocelyn's School	Kate's School	Greta's School
Setting	Rural	Rural	Urban	Urban
Socio-economic Status (SES)	44%	35%	20%	27%
Number of 7th Grade Students	82	110	305	258
Average Class Size	22	23	25	26
2006-07 State Assessments for 7th Grade	DWA – 77% ISAT – 82%	DWA – 87% ISAT – 86%	DWA – 87% ISAT – 80%	DWA – 87% ISAT – 88%
Ethnicity of 7th Grade	White – 94% Other – 6%	White – 95% Other -- 5%	White – 86% Other – 14%	White – 89% Other – 11%

The schools were identified before the results of the 2006-07 school year were available and all but one maintained their percentages, but the implementation of a new language arts ISAT test in 2007 may account for the drop in achievement. The one common characteristic that was difficult to quantify was the confidence and trust the principals expressed in the teachers. They allowed a great deal of freedom with little oversight in the daily running of their classrooms.

The Teachers

The four teachers who participated in the study were all knowledgeable, dedicated teachers. Elise, Jocelyn, Kate, and Greta (pseudonyms) had been teaching seventh-grade language arts in their schools for at least two years. Each teacher selected her pseudonym

for use in this study. As a token of appreciation, each teacher was given a $50 gift certificate from a bookstore.

There were a number of similarities and differences between the teachers as shown in the table below. These teachers worked in four different schools in southern Idaho, two rural and two urban. All four were of European American descent and had 2 to 8 years of experience.

Table 3.2

Characteristics of Teachers

	Elise	Jocelyn	Kate	Greta
Years Experience	10	8	2	8
DWA Scorer	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Training	Elementary	Elementary	Secondary	Elementary
Highest Degree	Masters	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
District Committee Work	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
School Setting	Rural	Rural	Urban	Urban

Though each of these educators taught seventh-grade language arts in quite different settings, the only obvious similarity was that the participants were all women. This was mainly because there was only one male teacher in one of the urban schools and the principal selected the female teacher. See Appendix D for interim case studies, which include full descriptions of each teacher, their setting, their beliefs, and instructional practices.

Data Sources

Patton (1990) suggests that to achieve triangulation in a qualitative study, in-depth, open-ended interviews, observations, and written documents should be used. This study used these methods of data collection. All interviews were tape recorded and field notes taken at each interview and observation. I transcribed each interview and typed each observation and then e-mailed copies of the materials to the participant to verify the accuracy of the information. This resulted in minor changes to the draft descriptions of each site. I conducted the interviews and observations over a period of one school year usually meeting with teachers during their personal preparation time or after school. I tried to vary the observations to include both morning and afternoon sessions. When I met with teachers for the first interview, I also arranged for a time to observe. For some of the sites, these interviews and observations were conducted on the same day, while others were on different days. These times were scheduled depending on the comfort level of the teacher being observed and time constraints of traveling to the sites.

All the participants were given an opportunity to read, verify, and comment on all interview summaries, observation notes, and descriptions as well as add information they deemed important to the study (Patton, 1990). The purpose of the member checks (Glesne, 1999) was to ensure that the data collected, impressions, and interpretations accurately reflected the participant's perceptions. This corroboration helped increase my confidence that the findings were credible and worthy of consideration (Patton, 1990).

After the observations and two of the interviews were completed, I wrote interim case studies of each site. These interim case studies lead to more interview questions that

I asked in the third interview and provided an opportunity for the teachers to clarify and verify the information gathered to that date. All the teachers took the opportunity to add and change information.

Interviews

The interviews with the principals and teachers at each school were the major data sources, because interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences (Creswell, 2003). The interviews focused on teachers' beliefs or attitudes about writing and language usage, ways of organizing and planning their instruction, and thoughts about the impact of the state sponsored tests in their classrooms.

Interviews were conducted at each teacher's school using standardized open-ended questions (see Appendix C for a copy of the interview questions). I selected this as the major source of data because it was the best way to "understand and capture the points of view . . . without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories" (Patton, 1990, p. 24). One 30-minute interview was conducted with each principal and three 30-60 minute interviews were conducted with each teacher.

I contacted each principal via telephone for initial consent to conduct the study at the school (see Appendix B for contact scripts). This was followed with an e-mail and/or phone call to set up an appointment for the interview. The purpose of the principal interviews was to obtain an overall picture of the individual school's language arts program, gather signatures on consent forms, and identify a teacher for participation in the study. I also asked each principal to introduce me to the seventh-grade language arts teacher(s) at their school, which they did. I did not know any of the teachers before I

contacted them, though after we met and talked, I found that we had all participated in the Direct Writing Assessment scoring sessions together. However, I had only met one at those sessions.

The language arts teachers were interviewed three times. During the first interview, I asked the standardized open-ended questions plus clarification and extension questions as they came up. The questions I asked determined the beliefs and attitudes of the teacher regarding teaching writing and language usage, established what the teacher found particularly effective in teaching writing, and set a time for the first observation.

The purpose of the second interview was to have the teacher reveal her thought processes when planning and organizing the writing and language usage curriculum and instruction. The teacher was given a scenario about how they would plan to teach writing a research report and asked to "think aloud" while planning this unit. In addition, at the second interview I followed up on questions that had arisen from the first interview and observation.

The purpose of the final interview was a last member check in which questions identified after previous interviews or identified across cases were followed up on, as well as to gather additional information that had come up the data. For example, one question that came up was the use of the *Step-Up to Writing* program. Three of the teachers had used it, but it was not clear if the fourth had, so I asked about it in the final interview. Not only had she not used it but had not heard of it.

The teachers were very interested in hearing about what other teachers were doing and were anxious to read the interim case studies. Often after an interview or

observation, the teachers would ask about the results of other interviews and we would talk about what some of the differences and similarities meant. Their ideas and thinking about writing, language usage, and state assessments helped to bring attention to how and why these teachers approached what they believed should be taught and what they actually taught. For example, two of the teachers thought the state assessments were valuable but intrusive. Two of the teachers embraced the state assessments and used the data to guide instructional decisions. This process of member check (Glesne, 1999) served to deepen my understanding of the data and also verified information I had collected.

Observations

A second source of data was two observations in the each teacher's classroom. The purposes of the observations were to get a better understanding of each teacher's teaching situation, to follow up on impressions and comments from the interviews, to document some specific teaching practices, and to provide time for further conversations with the teacher. My role was as a passive participant (Patton, 1990), which meant that I was present in the classroom but did not interact with the students or participate in the lessons. The students were always interested in the stranger sitting in the room and the teacher would introduce me, then I found an observation post and assumed the role of a spectator in the classroom.

These observations offered first-hand experience with participants and allowed me to make observations that were not revealed during the interviews. At the first observation, I carefully drew a floor plan of the room and noted the types of posters and

kinds of other materials attached to the walls. I noted how the class was configured and what types of visual aids and electronic resources were available to the teachers. In my field notes, I made a reference to the fact that the classrooms where all very similar and very much like my own. The observations also offered an opportunity for triangulation of the data that was gathered in the interviews and to confirm field notes generated during and after the interviews. For example, during the interviews only three of the four teachers mentioned using a form of daily oral language (DOL) to teach language usage, and yet during my classroom visits I observed all teachers while they taught a DOL lesson.

For each interview and observation I took field notes, which consisted of descriptions of what I experienced and observed, quotations from people I observed, my feelings and reactions to what I saw, and field-generated insights and interpretations (Patton, 1990). My field notes consisted of:

- Date, time, place observed, and page numbers
- Specific facts, numbers, details
- Sensory impressions such as sights and sounds
- Specific words, phrases, and summaries of conversations
- Questions for further investigation

I used a double-entry format for taking field notes. I divided the page vertically and used the left side for direct observations—concrete, verifiable details and the right side to capture my personal reactions, opinions, feelings, and questions about the data on the left side. If there was time after an observation to ask the teacher about any questions

that had arisen, I did; but if not, I e-mailed the questions to the teacher later and then attached their answers to the field notes when I received them. If any questions still remained unanswered or were unclear, I added them to the final interview.

After each observation, I reviewed the field notes and wrote a brief summary of what I observed and my impressions. For the most part, these summaries included a description of what I observed, my impressions, confirmation of data from the interviews, and a few questions for follow up.

Program Documents

The third source of data was program documents. The purpose of collecting program documents is to "provide … information about many things that cannot be observed" (Patton, 1990, p. 233). The artifacts or written documents I gathered included copies of lesson plans, generic student assignments, and written curriculum documents. All the teachers provided a year's worth of lesson plans from the previous year, and these proved to be a valuable resource for triangulation and confirmation of interview questions, especially in determining pacing of the curriculum. One of the urban-based teachers had a difficult time providing this request because she was not required by her district to keep lesson plans. She did however keep a kind of daily memo in an agenda similar to what was issued to students. She had included sticky-note with thoughts about pacing and activities. The other three teachers did keep lesson plans that were more detailed.

The student assignments consisted of copies from the activities that the teachers handed out on the days that I observed and materials used for the research report. Some

of the artifacts were copies of the DOL exercises, pages from the research report project, and copies of teacher created materials. These items were helpful for triangulation purposes when I began the analysis, interpretation, and reporting process. See Table 3.3 for a summary of which data contributed to which research question.

Table 3.3

Data Sources

Research Question	Principal Interview	Teacher Interview	Observ-ation	Artifact	Scenario
What are the teachers' beliefs and attitudes about writing and language usage curriculum and instruction?		X	X		X
What are the teachers' curriculum and instruction decisions regarding writing and language usage?		X	X	X	X
How do teachers plan for teaching a unit on writing?		X	X		X
How do the state assessments affect teacher planning in a seventh grade language arts setting?	X	X	X	X	

Data Analysis

I chose to use a constant comparative method of data analysis developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later refined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method offers a way to focus deeply on a relatively small sample while systematically describing the characteristics of a phenomenon in an existing setting. The basic strategy of the method is to do just what its name implies – constantly compare. Researchers using this method develop the theory

from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, I began with an incident from an interview, observation, field note, or document and compared it with another incident. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that were compared to each other, e.g., fun activities, grammar exercises, planning activities, materials, writing process, questioning. Comparisons were made within and between levels of conceptualization until a theory were formulated.

Patton (1990) suggests that there is "no definite point at which data collection stops and analysis begins" (p. 377). This is because the data is coded as it is gathered. Like the writing process, the data analysis is recursive. The following steps were used to gather and code the data.

The first step was to make sure all the data had been gathered through the second interview and the observations had been transcribed and organized. I read through the transcribed interviews, field notes, and written documents. From this initial reading, I wrote the interim case studies for each site to identify the unique characteristics of the writing and language usage program specific to that school. Descriptions included context of the school, teacher beliefs and attitudes about writing and language usage, curricular and instructional decisions, and negotiations between writing and language usage. Validation of the findings was done by triangulation of the data from the various sources and by member checks from the principal and teachers on the draft descriptions submitted for their review. Corrections were made based on comments derived from these reviews. I then conducted the last interview with each teacher.

After the last interview, the next step was to incorporate the final data collected. Then I made four complete copies, one master copy for safekeeping; one copy for writing on, which I color coded to each teacher; and two copies for cutting and pasting.

The third step was to reread through all the data. I carefully read the transcribed interviews, field notes, and written documents to get a sense of the whole with the purpose of conceptualizing the data. This meant "taking apart an observation, a sentence, a paragraph, and giving each discrete incident, idea, or event, a name, something that stands for or represents a phenomenon" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I read through the material, I began coding the data using post-it notes and highlighters. I made notes, comments, observations, and queries in the margins about bits of text that struck me as interesting, potentially relevant, or important to the study.

The fourth step was to begin a detailed analysis by organizing the material into "chunks" or combining comments and notes that seemed to go together (Creswell, 2003). I did this by cutting apart common quotes, comments, and notes centered on a research question and organizing them into a file folder. I then wrote a description for the file contents which included the properties, characteristics, and dimensions. For example, one file was labeled "how teachers negotiate tensions between the two tests." This file included quotes about influence of tests on planning and organizing, how much time spent teaching writing or writing language, and beliefs about balance between writing and language usage.

This process was repeated for each set of data while keeping in mind the list of groupings that I extracted from the first transcript and checking to see if they were also

present in this second set. I made a second list of comments, terms, and notes for each set and compared this list with the one derived from the first transcript. These two lists were then merged into one master list of concepts derived from all sets of data. This master list formed a beginning outline reflecting the patterns in the study. For example, four terms on the master list were standards, 6+1 Traits, exercises, writing process. These patterns then became the categories or themes into which subsequent items were sorted. Finally, the data belonging to each category was assembled in one place using the second copy and reread and analyzed.

The final step was interpreting the data with theme or category descriptions and examples across the four cases to answer the questions of this study. I reviewed the literature that supported the themes and categories identified in the analysis. This brought depth and understanding to the research findings.

Limitations of the Study

Qualitative methods typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a small number of people or cases. This increases understanding of the cases and situations studied but reduce generalizability (Patton, 1990). The findings of this study are interesting and enlightening, particularly when discussing the similarities of the planning and practices of these four educators teaching in different settings and with different populations. It is important to understand, however, that even though I have gathered the data in an ethical manner, the findings of this study are limited by several factors. A discussion of these limitations follows:

First, only four schools in four districts in southern Idaho were included in this study. This is due in part to the criterion of having 75% or more of the students performing at *Proficient* or *Advanced* on the both the DWA and ISAT. It was difficult to find schools that met this condition, especially in rural settings. Another factor was the geographic accessibility of the sites to where I live and work. The four sites selected are representative of the schools in southern Idaho and did fit all the criteria set for site selection, but may not be representative of all schools in Idaho.

Second, a site selection criterion was the percentage of students achieving *Proficient* or *Advanced* on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test, which may not be the best indicator of teaching writing effectiveness. However, the link between effective instructional practices and student outcomes is important. For the last four decades, students' scores on standardized tests have increasingly been regarded as the most meaningful evidence for evaluating U.S. schools whether or not educators agree with this use of the results (Popham, 1999; Stiggens, 2001). And in the state of Idaho, the ISAT is a test being used for accountability purposes in assessing schools' adequate yearly progress.

The purpose of this study was not to build a correlation between practice and assessment, but to describe what teachers do in classrooms where students perform capability on the state assessments. This was best accomplished, I believe, by studying schools in different settings and with different socio-economic populations. But this assumption does limit the conclusions drawn from the data gathered in the study.

Third, although the data collection took place over the course of a school year, time was a limiting factor for this study. I am a full time teacher and so time was a factor not only in the time available I could dedicate to the gathering of data, but also the distance I could travel to the sites. It was also a factor for the study participants. They are all full time teachers as well, so the observations and interviews were limited by their time constraints as well.

More time in the classroom to observe would have been helpful, but was not feasible. Though I visited each teacher and their classes several times over the course of a year, it was difficult to build strong relationships. However, by using structured interview questions during the first interview, I was able to gather specific data to answer the study questions, which could be validated later during classroom observations and lesson plans provided by the teachers. The time spent in these classrooms is not an account of all that happened in them, nor was it intended to be. It was meant to provide a description or what Guba and Lincoln (1981) call a slice of life in the lives of these four teachers.

A fourth factor that limits the conclusions of this study is alluded to above. In a qualitative study the investigator is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data, and as such brings their personal biases to the study. I am a teacher of seventh-grade language arts. This helped in building rapport with the teachers as I was perceived as a colleague who knew and understood the issues being discussed. On the other hand my experience in the seventh-grade language arts classroom limited my sensitivity to small nuisances in what I was seeing in the classroom. However, I worked hard at

putting my biases aside when observing in the classrooms by objectively noting exactly what I saw and observed in 5 minute increments. I also used the interview scripts and tried to stay close to the resulting data to guide further interview questions.

This background experience was helpful as well because I was able to step into the classrooms with a rich understanding of what I was seeing and hearing. Less time was needed to build background knowledge at the beginning of the study. My experience was also helpful in knowing when and where to ask more questions to deepen understanding of the answers teachers provided. In qualitative research, the researcher must be able to rely upon her own instincts and abilities throughout most of the research effort (Merriam, 1998). I believe my experience in the classroom is a limitation, but it was helpful as well.

Finally, this study took place in seventh-grade language arts classrooms only. We know students build schemata that enables them to construct meaning and understanding through many experiences and over time. The K-6 experience of these students may well have been a factor in their achievement on the state assessments. For the purpose of this study, I looked only at what teachers in seventh-grade settings did to influence student outcomes, but with an understanding that students do not come as clean slates to seventh-grade. However, the seventh-grade teachers do have a great deal of influence on student outcomes of state assessments at this level because of the standards addressed at seventh grade and an awareness of the test requirements. Thus, the study findings should enhance our understanding of student achievement at this grade level.

I gave careful thought to these issues and believe the information gained from the compromised aspect of the study will nevertheless be valid and useful to educators like me interested in improving teaching writing and still helping students do well on both state assessments.

Overview of Following Chapters

This chapter provided the methodology used in this study. The presentation and analysis of the study findings are included in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 includes the summary of the findings, implications for practice, recommendations for further research, and my concluding remarks.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

This chapter is organized around the four subsidiary questions that guided the research. Through the qualitative methods of interviewing, observing, and collecting classroom documents, I gathered data by asking four teachers about their beliefs on teaching writing and language usage (question #1), about the curriculum and instructional decisions they make (question #2), how they plan for teaching a writing unit (question #3), and how the state assessments affect their planning for writing and language usage (question #4). Each teacher is presented in the order that I met them, so first is Elise, then Jocelyn, Kate, and finally, Greta. For each research question, I have provided a cross-case analysis which identifies similarities and differences in how these teachers prepare students for both writing well and testing well on state assessments. This chapter presents the findings and analysis for this study.

Teacher's Attitudes and Beliefs

The first research question examined the teachers' attitudes and beliefs about writing and language usage curriculum and instruction. During the first interview, I asked teachers several questions about their beliefs on the most important function of the seventh-grade program, what the most important concepts were to be learned, how best to teach those concepts, and what they saw as their role in the classroom. I also asked what each teacher thought about the state assessments and what they believed made their program unique. Each teacher's answer to those questions is provided below followed by a cross-case analysis.

Elise

Elise sat across from me, arms folded and legs crossed, almost in a defensive stance as we sat down in the library for our first interview. She smiled tentatively as I started the recorder and asked the first question on the subject of her beliefs about teaching and learning writing and language usage. "You should have given me these questions before hand!" she exclaimed and with a smile relaxed and began to reflect on her beliefs.

Elise stated that the most important function of the seventh-grade language arts program was to teach students writing and language usage skills "that they can use later in life." Students need to know "how to write properly, including correct punctuation, grammar, and spelling." She asserted writing is best learned by "practicing." She had her students write in her class every day, including journaling or writing to an expository prompt. To teach language skills, Elise said she had students practice them. She assigned a daily language review (DLR) exercise each day, which the students then corrected in class. As the students corrected the DLR, she asked them to explain why the answers were correct. She said, "…we don't just correct it. I want them to know why we correct, so they are also participating. I want them to know the rules as to why we do things. Not just that it is the English language, but this is why we do it. So I try to teach them the rules behind what we do and why we do it." The discussion of what the errors were and why they needed to be corrected was an important aspect of the DLR routine.

Elise saw herself in a traditional teacher role in the classroom, which means she prepared students to be successful by carefully planning what would be taught and then

teaching that concept or skill. She said, "…I'm here to teach and that is what my job is and I tell them that their job is to learn. That is what they should focus on and hopefully we will have a balance of where they might teach me things and I might learn things. But I think my job is to teach those kids and teach them to be ready to take those tests but also to be ready for life." Based on my classroom observations, Elise did take a directive role in the classroom by setting the goals and objectives, guiding and directing student activities, and leading discussions. Most interaction was whole class, though Elise did monitor and assist individual students as they worked.

Elise said the state assessments were important and played a role in her teaching of writing and language usage, especially when practicing for the Direct Writing Assessment. However, Elise said she did not practice specifically for the ISAT like she did for the DWA, but she did focus her instruction if she found there were low scores in a particular strand of the ISAT. For example, if syllabication was shown to be low on the ISAT, then she would spend specific time on syllabication or prefixes, suffixes, and base words. According to the principal at her school, the ISAT had become the assessment of choice for reviewing results because of the strands information provided for each student. Goals were set for each student who then had a discussion with an adult about their individual ISAT scores and goals. When I asked Elise if she would change anything if the DWA or ISAT were removed or eliminated from the seventh grade, she said no. She said, "I would still follow the state standards. I do some intense writing things before the DWA, and some intense review things before the ISAT. I might scale down the reviews but still would follow the standards."

When asked what made her program effective, Elise stated there were two thing. The first was the rigor of it. She said, "Every day we are learning something." Whatever the situation, every day Elise planned to teach something or review something. It might be a fun game or a practice exercise, but she felt students were learning. "They are practicing the skills that are important and that I know they need to know." Even though Elise wished at times that she had "a bag of tricks that could wow" students, especially when they were practicing the language usage portions of the curriculum, she was happy with what she did. Elise also stated her program was unique because she had created herself. This allowed her to address the standards and the needs of her students in the best way she could. She liked that she taught both reading and writing, because she had the freedom to overlap concepts so students made connections, which deepened their understanding.

Jocelyn

Jocelyn was an energetic, bubbly teacher who had a difficult time articulating what she believed about the teaching and learning of writing and language usage though she expressed strong opinions. This difficulty was partly due, I believe, because she was struggling with incorporating what she had learned during her summer workshop with her current practice. She had participated in the Boise Writer's Project the summer before our visit and was quite affected by what she learned there. She was enthusiastic about what she had learned, but was still working out how that learning fit within her current belief system and practices. We sat across a table in her classroom for the first interview

and her answers were as much a think aloud and exploration of her beliefs as an answer to the interview questions.

Jocelyn stated that the most important function of the seventh-grade writing and language usage curriculum was to support learning across the curriculum, teach language usage and writing, prepare for state assessments, and prepare students for life. The most important concept or skill that students should learn by the end of the seventh grade, Jocelyn asserted, was to "write because that is a skill that they can use their entire life." She also thought grammar and language usage were important so students were "writing correct sentences."

The best way to learn to write Jocelyn said was by practicing, especially different kinds of writing. She used the *Step Up to Writing* program to teach expository writing, because it helped give students a "pattern to go by." The *Step Up to Writing* program features research-based, validated strategies, and activities that help students write narrative, personal narrative, and expository pieces; actively engage in reading materials for improved comprehension; and demonstrate competent study skills (Auman, 2007).

For language usage, Jocelyn had traditionally taught the skills through worksheet practice. However, she said, "Well, I used to kill and drill with some worksheets, but I just don't think that is going to stick. So I'm trying to work on more within the writing process, like in a writing workshop situation where I could give maybe a mini-lesson and show them this is a compound sentence." She hoped that it would stick with kids better in that format.

In the mean time, she used a program she had purchased the year before called *Grammar Punk*, which she was excited about and hoped it would help students better learn the skills. *Grammar Punk* (n.d.) is a collection of grammar lessons, grammar exercises, English games, and ESL games using dice, K-9 story cards, creative writing kit, and *The Writer*. It provides 15 minutes of "lesson-a-day" curriculum that can be adapted to any teacher, student, and classroom. According to Jocelyn, it is a fun way to teach basic grammar to her students. Jocelyn also stated that the terminology or vocabulary of writing and language usage were important, because they were used on the state assessments, so she used them in her instruction and assessments. For example, some sample ISAT vocabulary are prewriting, revise, edit, commas, hyphens, and semicolon. Some sample DWA vocabulary are ideas and content, organization, and conventions. The vocabulary was included in her rubrics when assessing writing so students were exposed to the words in context.

Jocelyn saw her role as a coach or mentor. She said, “I don’t want to be [a teacher] who is a dictator and says this is what you must do. I want to come along side them and take them from where they are at to another place and make them believe in themselves. I think that is huge.” For Jocelyn, this meant planning the instruction and activities in ways that kids were inspired to do their best and also helped her build strong relationships with her students. Based on my classroom observations, Jocelyn took a directive role in the classroom by setting the goals and objectives, guiding and directing student activities, and leading discussions. However, there was a great deal of teacher/student interaction, both individually and whole class.

The state assessments Jocelyn considered helpful as they gave her a picture of what a student could do on a given day. Though she cautioned that they gave "just one little piece of the puzzle of the whole child." She asserted that the assessments were important because they were good for parents and they guided the curriculum. She wanted students to succeed, so she did what she needed to in order to prepare them to do well on the assessments. When I asked her if she would change anything if the state assessments were moved to another grade or eliminated, she said she would probably change the intensity of the expository writing, but that she would still teach it because students needed to know it. One thing she would change was having the writing timed. She felt that by adding a time constraint, it made the students not follow the writing process since there was not enough time to do a rough draft, fine tune it, and edit it. Jocelyn said she thought both assessment were important and gave her and parents good information.

Jocelyn said she created the language arts program she used so that it "fit [her] seventh graders and [her] own personality too." This was what made her program effective she thought. She used the textbook as a resource and used multiple resources from experts "who have already figured out a lot things." According to Jocelyn, the strength of her program was the teacher.

> "I kind of think it is the teacher. I think this is what I was born to do. I take it very seriously and I do my absolute best to do the best job I can for the kids. I try to make if fun. I think my biggest strength is creating relationships with my students. I did a research project this summer and

> students are more apt to learn from you if they have a relationship with you. I just think that is very important. If they are angry with you or if they don't have any relationship with you or if they don't feel any connection there, they won't do very well. I kind of feel like that is really important."

So for Jocelyn, the strength of her program was not only her ability and flexibility to exercise her "own professional judgment for the programs that [she] used" to help students learn the concepts and skills she taught, but also her commitment to build strong relationships with students.

Kate

Kate was a young beginning teacher who was precise and succinct about what she believed about the teaching and learning of writing and language usage. Kate was the only secondary trained teacher of the four teachers in this study. She taught on the same team with her cooperating teacher. She said that she borrowed a lot of ideas from her, and they would often come up with ideas together or she would bounce ideas off her. However, the only unit that they taught together was poetry. She sat next to me at a table in her room as we began the first interview. Each answer to an interview question was very thoughtfully and carefully articulated.

Kate stated the most important function of the seventh-grade language arts program was to teach students "how to write well and speak well, because they will use it in every aspect of their lives." The most important skills or concepts that students should learn were the basics like "how to form a sentence, use semicolons and commas, and

capitalization and end marks." But above and beyond the basics, Kate asserted, students needed to know "how to write well."

She said the best way to learn to write was "a lot of practice, repetition, getting used to being comfortable with writing." She gave her students a lot of freedom on the choice of topics to write about. Practice was also the best way to learn language usage Kate said. This practice came in the form of daily oral language exercises. It was important to her to explain to her students the need for proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling so they had a purpose for caring about these skills. She said, "I teach them separately, but when we do the writing they are required to check for comma usage and capitalization and things like that. So I do bridge the gap between the two, but I do teach them separately."

Kate viewed her role in the classroom as an instructor who was more teacher centered than she wanted, but felt it was necessary. She said, "I do a lot of instructing, so I would say that my classroom is more teacher centered than I would like. But with the content, it almost has to be until we move into the writing and then I try to do as much student centered as I possibly can. So I would say my role is mainly an instructor." She elaborated further that this meant she gave students more choices in topics and more collaboration time to work with other students. Based on my classroom observations, Kate did take a directive role in the classroom by setting the goals and objectives, guiding and directing student activities, and leading discussions. Most teacher/student interaction was whole class during my observations, though she did monitor and assist individual students when they worked on assignments.

The state assessments, Kate asserted, served in giving her "students a goal or a reason as to why they need to learn how to do this." *This* being writing and language usage. She also stated that the assessments influenced her planning and teaching, but she did not use the student data results to guide her instruction. When I asked her what if anything she would change if the state assessments were moved or eliminated, Kate said she would probably keep it all the same. She liked having one big writing project a quarter and with the DWA it worked out well. She would like to have the DWA moved to the end of the seventh grade though to get a more accurate picture of how a seventh grader writes. She said that her school did practice for the ISAT to get students used to the format, and she would not do that anymore. Kate was uncertain about what she would change if the ISAT was not given.

Kate was a new teacher so wasn't familiar with what other schools did, but she felt that what made her school program effective was that the teachers had a lot freedom to plan and adapt materials as needed. She felt this helped because it was up to the teacher to best serve students by learning "who the students are and find what works best for this guy over here or that guy over there." This was important to her, because she had an average of 30 students per class.

Greta

Of the four teachers selected for this study, Greta was the most comfortable with the interview process and able to clearly articulate what she believed about the teaching and learning of writing. The interviews were set up in the back of her classroom and she

sat on one side of a table while I sat on the other. She was thoughtful yet clear with each response she gave to the interview questions.

Greta stated the most important function of the seventh-grade language arts program was to teach "writing through the writing process." The most important thing an English teacher does is "prepare the kids for life, for college, and even high school with practical types of writing."

The most important concept or skill that students should learn according to Greta was the ability to work through the writing process, especially revising. Another important skill was vocabulary building. And a third skill Greta said was important was public speaking because it was "so critical in high school and college." She also said the best way to learn to write was by studying models of writing, both published and unpublished. She often modeled her own writing process for students, especially the struggle of many revised drafts. She would use a think aloud strategy as she modeled the writing process.

Greta said the best way to learn language usage was practice, but she tried to make it fun. She said, "I think it is difficult to make if fun, but I strive to make it fun. I strive for that by getting the kids up to the white board and using highlighters. I use lots of different colored highlighters and for junior high kids that alone can be enough to raise their interest level a little bit when they're working with this material. It is a simple as that."

For Greta, her role in the classroom was a "motivator and a supporter, because writing is building a trust with students or they won't go where I want them to go." She

thought that the students were so successful with their writing because they were emotionally engaged in the process. She worked hard to build trust and respect and to let students know she cared about what they were writing. Based on my classroom observations, Greta took a directive role in the classroom setting the goals and objectives, guiding and directing student activities, and leading discussions. However, there was a great deal of teacher/student and student/student interaction on the days I observed.

Greta asserted that the state assessments were excellent tools to focus teaching, and validated what she was doing, especially the DWA. She focused less on the ISAT because she felt learning to write was the most important thing that she taught, but felt by following the language arts standards and teaching the best she could her kids would do okay. She did however track the ISAT data. She created lists of students which showed what students were weak or below proficient and would try to remediate those skills by doing some review.

When I asked Greta about what if anything she would change if the state assessments were moved or eliminated, she said she would be extremely disappointed if the DWA were moved or eliminated. She felt that seventh grade was when students received all the writing instruction.

> "Elementary is what it is. We are writing for the feel good and to have some exposure to genres. Eighth grade … is loose. Last night we had open house for parents and many said they don't have the writing instruction in eighth grade, so it is probably not in the curriculum very much because we do away with reading after seventh grade. English class

> becomes a literature/language arts classroom without this structured writing instruction. Okay, ninth grade is classics and literature and again they are not getting that. So I'm afraid that if I'm not teaching that they are never going to get it. Maybe they'll get it in tenth grade or maybe high school but by then they assume that kids know how to write. And so I really feel that I'm serving a huge purpose by teaching writing that will take them into college."

She said the DWA motivated her, and though she might become relaxed about it, she would not change what she was doing. Greta and her seventh grade teammates were only just beginning to focus on the ISAT results and so didn't know what she would change if it were eliminated or moved.

Greta said her program was unique because of the emphasis on academics. She said, "This is an academic school and I'm always saying that to the kids. 'This is an academic school. You must work hard here.' I like that we are that. This is the school for me, and I didn't know that when I came here. But everything I do is academically oriented. If I were to work at a school where there wasn't a push for excellence, I would probably have a hard time." About a third of the students were on a permission to attend, meaning that this was not their assigned school, but they choose to be there. It was also unique because of her program, which is different from the other language arts teacher. She said she was all about the writing, "because I love writing and I love the written word."

Cross-Case Analysis

Though there were many differences in the beliefs of the four teachers in this study, there were key concepts about teaching writing and language usage that these teachers held in common. Table 4.1 summarizes the teachers' beliefs about the teaching of writing and language usage as articulated during the interviews.

First, teaching students to write well was the most important purpose of the seventh-grade language arts program. Per the Idaho state standards, writing well for the seventh-grade means communicating effectively through writing expository pieces like research reports or letters. The expository papers should explain or inform in paragraphs that state facts, give directions, explain ideas, or define terms and include an introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion (Idaho State Department of Education, 2007). It includes using correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling to make writing clear and understandable. The teachers in the study stated that though it was important to prepare students for the Direct Writing Assessment, which they spent extensive time doing in the fall, the main purpose of the language arts program was to teach students skills that they would continue to use. As Elise said, "Yes, they do have to take the Direct Writing Assessment and they do have to take their ISAT tests, but I guess you hope that what I am teaching them are also life skills. That they could write a letter, you know, for an interview or a resumè."

Second, the most important concept or skill that students learn by the end of the seventh grade for three of the four teachers was language usage – grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Greta, however, believed the most important concept or skill was "the

ability to work through the writing process." It was clear that the teachers thought these skills were taught to support writing. As Kate stated, "[I teach] specific things like how

Table 4.1

Teachers' Stated Belief Statements

Teacher Stated Belief	Elise	Jocelyn	Kate	Greta
1. An important purpose of language arts program is to teach students to write well	X	X	X	X
2. An important concept or skill to teach is how to use grammar, punctuation, and spelling correctly	X	X	X	X
3. Writing is best learned through writing often	X	X	X	X
4. Language usage is best learned through drill and practice exercises	X	X	X	X
5. The state assessment focuses and guides teaching and the curriculum	X	X	X	X
6. The teacher's main role -- Mentor		X		X
Instructor	X		X	
7. The most effective thing in each program is the freedom to do what is best for students in the way of instruction and materials	X	X	X	X

KEY: X = Stated Belief

to form a sentence, semi-colons in regards to writing, comma usage, …but then above and beyond is just how to write well."

Third, three of the four teachers asserted that writing was best learned through "practice, practice, practice." They had students write every day in different genres. A few examples recorded in the lesson plans and/or copies of assignments gathered during observations were personal narratives in journals, expository prompts for writing paragraphs, and full essays assigned each quarter. Greta however stated that writing was best learned through emulating published writers like Gary Paulsen or Stephen King. She also provided models of her own writing to show the writing process and the struggles of writing.

Fourth, language usage was best learned through "drill and practice" exercises asserted all four teachers. The teachers seemed somewhat apologetic about using this methodology, but as Greta put it, "[They] need to hear it over, over, and over again because the seventh-grade brain is such that they need to hear it over and over." Elise was quick to emphasize the importance of teaching "them the rules behind what we do and why we do it," but to also "then incorporate them" into the writing. Kate calls this incorporation of writing and grammar attempting to "bridge the gap between the two." The teachers all talked about making the drill and practice exercises as relevant and fun or engaging as possible. Jocelyn said, "It has to be relevant, short, quick, and applicable." According to Elise, this bridging the gap between the two strands of language arts was "key to the transfer between the two."

Fifth, all four teachers believed the state assessments, DWA and ISAT, focused and guided their teaching. Greta was particularly enthusiastic about the DWA, because it "is an excellent tool that focuses my teaching very much and validates what I'm doing and what I find important and matches real writing." All of the educators in the study had participated in the DWA scoring sessions. The DWA was also very influential in guiding the scope and sequence of the fall curriculum. Teachers spent a great deal of time preparing students for the assessment, which is given in late November or early December. The teachers said the ISAT focused the curriculum, but they didn't necessarily focus on it as a guide to curriculum and instruction like the DWA.

The four teachers did not express any question about the validity or reliability of the DWA or ISAT, though they all thought they were important. Jocelyn did say that the results showed only what a child could do on a

> "given day, at this moment, at this time, with this prompt. You know, it is just one little piece of the puzzle of the whole child. I don't think that we should get too focused on the state assessments, with the ISAT, with the DWA. It is almost like it's a picture of the student. It is not the whole student though. It is just a piece or a portion. It doesn't show all of the strengths of the student. It is frustrating sometimes because you know that the students have made gains, but they don't show the gains on the state assessments. I mean, I think they are important. I don't think that we shouldn't have them. I think it is valid."

Sixth, the teachers were split on what they saw as their role in the classroom. This question was designed to get at the mode of instruction, which Hillocks (1986) defined as the role assumed by the classroom teacher, the kinds and order of activities presented, and the specificity and clarity of objectives and learning tasks. Both Elise and Kate viewed themselves as "instructors" who decided what needed to be taught and then taught it. As Elise put it, "I know what we have to learn and what we have to do and I make sure we are on that path." On the other hand, Jocelyn and Greta saw themselves as "mentors" whose role was to motivate and support students. The added quality that appeared to define what being a mentor was for these two teachers was inspiring kids by building strong trust relationships. However, based on my classroom observations, all of these teachers took an active instructional role in the classroom. They selected the kinds and orders of activities to be used for teaching the lesson objectives, they designed the pacing of activities, and they organized instruction based on what they felt would work best for the learning objective. They modified instruction to best meet the needs of the class as a whole, not necessarily for individuals within the class. And all four teachers built trusting relationships with their students.

And finally, perhaps the most difficult question for teachers to answer was what they believed made their programs effective. A common belief among the teachers was their programs were effective because they had the freedom to be themselves by "picking and choosing" the activities that best met the objective being taught and the distinctive needs of the students both as a class and as individuals. They all relied heavily on teacher

created materials they had designed and tested specifically to meet the needs of the students that school year.

Summary

For the first research question about teacher beliefs, Elise, Jocelyn, Kate, and Greta all believed in the importance of teaching writing as a life-long skill. They believed that students need to practice both writing and language usage skills often in order to improve their abilities. Elise believed and the others also stated that grammar, punctuation, and spelling were important concepts to learn, especially when these skills supported learning to write well. Elise and Kate defined their roles as more traditional than Jocelyn and Greta, but all agreed that what made their programs effective was what they brought individually to the teaching and learning processes in their classrooms. This included setting high expectations, having passion for teaching students to write, and having freedom to pick and choose their own materials and activities to best learn the objectives being taught. These teachers believed in themselves, their students, and their programs.

Teacher Curriculum and Instruction Decisions

The second research question examined the curriculum and instruction decisions teachers made regarding writing and language usage. I analyzed the answers to the interview questions, copies of district curriculum documents, and classroom observations to answer this research question. The findings for this question are presented by curriculum and instruction decisions for each teacher followed by a cross-case analysis.

I asked each teacher a number of questions about what they used for curriculum, which included how much time they spent on teaching writing and language usage. As the state standards are required to be used, all four teachers used the state standards as their curriculum either directly or as incorporated within the district curriculum documents. Following are summaries of their responses organized by teacher.

Elise

Along with the district curriculum, Elise used the language arts curriculum map to guide her instruction. The map was divided into quarters, which she followed carefully because of end-of-quarter assessments and "to make sure that what I teach in the quarter is actually taught." She reviewed often and across quarters "to make sure that [students] actually continue to use that skill as we go." Elise stated that she her program was pretty balanced between writing and language usage objectives; however, she probably spent more time on grammar. There were times that she did spend more time on writing when she was preparing students for the DWA and when she taught a research report in the spring. She said she felt "it is a pretty good balance."

For instruction and materials, Elise used the five-step writing process -- brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing -- to teach the process of writing. She also taught writing using the 6+1 Traits, but did not adhere strictly to the program and mostly when practicing for the DWA. Because she thought the writing was best learned by practice, she had students write every day. She used journals to give students opportunities to write to a prompt and to teach the skills of writing like using voice and audience. She used a directed activity with the journals and did not assign time

for free writing. By writing comments on their entries, Elise tried to give them ideas for the next journal entry. She provided opportunities for limited peer editing on major pieces of writing, like expository and research papers, but not on practice writing like in the journals. Though not on a regular basis, Elise also met with students who are struggling with the writing to give them encouragement and support.

Elise taught language usage components of grammar, punctuation, and some spelling through a daily language review. The students had a few minutes to work on daily exercises and then they corrected it on the overhead. The spelling she taught using words that supported the ISAT skills such as syllabication or the prefixes and suffixes and base words. She taught the rules of spelling so that they could not only spell the words, but "also apply it to any other words they [came] across." She gave students a spelling list on Monday, provided practice exercises during the week, and then gave a spelling test on Friday. Students kept a notebook in which half of the notebook had spelling words and the spelling rules they had applied or whatever they had talked about in regard to the spelling. The second half of the notes contained key terms or vocabulary that the students needed to know. The skills were taught separately, but she "include[d] a lot of skills that they will actually include throughout writing or even looking up a word in science."

Elise had several textbook sources from which she selected activities. Much of the seventh-grade language arts program, Elise had created herself. A classroom set of grammar books was available that she used for practice. She also used a daily language review (DLR) program to practice grammar, punctuation, and some spelling. Elise

pulled from several resources, like the textbook, to select activities that she felt best taught the concepts to be learned.

Elise used several forms of assessment. She assessed the journal entries based on length – ½ page is worth 5 points. She was always "giving feedback orally or written." She gave some of the tests from the textbook when she used the grammar textbook, but when she assessed writing she used rubrics. With the writing, she provided written comments to the students, and there were times when she would have some peer editing also. When she was teaching the expository paper, she used the DWA rubric. With all other writing assignments, Elise created her own rubric. Elise administered district end-of-quarter assessments for reading and for English. These assessments also guided her pacing and content decisions much as the DWA and the ISAT.

Jocelyn

Along with the state standards, Jocelyn had some grade level guidelines that she and the other language arts teachers worked out for each grade level. For example, the seventh-grade language arts program focused on non-fiction reading and writing. Jocelyn tried to balance the reading and writing components of her curriculum. During the first and last quarters, she focused on reading, and in the second and third quarters, she focused on writing. The second quarter was particularly devoted to writing because of the DWA. She stated that she spent more time with writing rather than language usage when that was the focus on her curriculum, because she loved teaching writing.

Jocelyn used two main models for teaching writing – the five-step writing process and 6+1 Traits. A new activity she was trying was writer's notebooks in which students

would write about writing and write to prompts that she gave them. To teach the language usage portion of the curriculum, she had the students practice using skill sheets and their own writing, especially with spelling and mechanics. Jocelyn tried to integrate the skills and concepts within the writing and was working toward creating a writer's workshop in her classroom though she had not implemented it at the time of the interviews. Teaching the students the terminology of the writing was important to Jocelyn, and so she used it and modeled it as she taught.

Jocelyn did have a district adopted textbook, which she used occasionally for teaching concepts and skills of the writing and language usage portion of her curriculum. However, she did not use it extensively, because she considered it to be too hard for seventh graders.

For the most part, Jocelyn used teacher created materials and she had "tons of resources" from which she selected activities and/or sections based upon what concept she was teaching. She felt this allowed her to "balance between [her] highest kids and lowest." Jocelyn created many of her materials. "It just depends on what comes, and you have to find the things to be able to teach it." To teach expository writing, she used *Step Up to Writing*. To teach grammar, Jocelyn used *Grammar Punk*, a program she found at a middle school conference. For spelling and mechanics, she mostly taught using student writing.

To assess student learning in writing, Jocelyn used various tests and rubrics. She said she did not give many tests, but always provided a rubric for writing assignments. She also gave lots of feedback on essays. Her comments might include both revision

suggestions, “what they [were] missing” and/or editing suggestions about “what they [needed] to fix.” Because she was trying to integrate the language usage skills with the writing, the comments generally focused on recent grammar, punctuation, and spelling lessons. Based on a lesson I observed and from sample work displayed on bulletin boards, Jocelyn appears to provide written comments on rough and final drafts. She would also meet one-on-one with individual students to help them improve their writing.

For the DWA, Jocelyn showed students a copy of the 6+1 Trait state rubric and had them assess models of writing and also used it to assess their writing. She did not use this rubric on other writing assignments. She gave district end-of-quarter tests on which students were allowed to use their notes. Because she was concerned about the stress caused by these end-of-quarter tests, Jocelyn was thinking about changing to testing more often using short quizzes administered throughout the quarter on the language usage concepts.

Kate

Kate used the district curriculum which was comprised of five concept-based units and the Language Arts Content Standards and Skills Continuum. Kate felt that the conceptual lenses were geared mostly to reading and so she followed the state standards in writing. For pacing, Kate spent 5-6 weeks on writing and the rest of the time on grammar in the first semester. In the second semester, she spends 2 ½ months on writing and the rest of the time on grammar. A big writing project usually came at the end of the year, except for the practice time spent for the DWA. Kate felt there was a balance

between writing and language usage in her program and that she spent about the right amount of time on each.

Kate used the writing process and the 6+1 Traits as a foundation to her writing program. She had students work through the five-step writing process breaking down each step into individual activities to help students learn the steps and use them comfortably. To deepen understanding of writing expectations, Kate had students study the rubrics she used to grade the papers. For example, when preparing students for the DWA, she taught the 6+1 Traits of writing. The students converted the vocabulary into their own words so they understood what it meant. Students pulled out the elements of good writing and then looked at examples to judge if the examples were good or bad based on their rubrics. Finally, the students wrote an expository paper and scored it based on the rubric. After the paper had been scored by several pupils, she held a one-on-one conference with each student. The students then went "back and [made] a separate copy that [was] actually graded." This was generally the routine for all writing assignments, except she did not conference with every student every time, only those who asked for help or who she felt needed it. Kate assigned four big writing units a year and two or three small ones.

When planning for instruction, Kate planned a couple weeks of writing and then a couple weeks of language usage. She tried to integrate the language usage and writing by emphasizing the recently learned skills in the writing. Those conventions then become part of the rubric she used for assessing that particular writing assignment.

When she planned for the grammar and mechanics units, she introduced a different lesson each day. She had the students take notes on the grammar skills, then work on a practice set. Sometimes the handbook had a game to play, which she had the students play for fun and practice. She also assigned daily oral language exercises to practice the language usage skills. For spelling, she followed the Monday – pretest, Wednesday – homework, and Friday – spelling test model.

For materials, Kate relied on a grammar handbook recently issued by the district and on activities she had created or found on the Internet for teaching the objectives in her curriculum. She had tried the *Step Up to Writing* program and used some elements of it, but not many.

Kate used rubrics to assess student writing. She had the students peer edit papers using both rubrics she had created and ones students had modified. She provided students with written feedback by noting editing errors. Kate said she gave an average of three sentences of comments per paper noting things "they have done well and things they need to work on."

Greta

Greta writes an annual plan based on the district curriculum during the summer before school starts, which guides her throughout the year. Students received instruction in spelling and grammar, but the main emphasis was on improving writing skills. Greta taught the processes of writing, including pre-writing activities, focusing of ideas, drafting, revising and editing. She had several district required common assignments that she taught. The first quarter was an expository essay, second quarter was writing to a

DWA prompt, third quarter an oral presentation, and the fourth quarter was a compare/contrast assignment of two or more items which could be completed either in writing or graphically. Greta felt good about the balance in her program, because the students did well on both state and local common assessments. During the year, she said she spent about 75% of her time on writing, which would include writing, presentations, debate, public speaking, etc. and the rest of the time on grammar, punctuation, and spelling skills.

Greta used the writing process and the 6+1 Traits as the foundation for teaching writing. She also used a few parts of the *Step Up to Writing* program. She first introduced the genre of the piece and provided examples from which students took notes in a writer's notebook on the characteristics. She gave students lots of choices on topics when they wrote. Then she had them draft and self-edit. A key element of the writing for Greta was the revision step of the writing process. She had the students revise over time working on one writing trait and perhaps a language-usage skill like sentence structure at a time. Each step was carefully structured so "they can't not do it."

She didn't use peer editing because that "does not seem to work very well." Editing was a difficult process, so she "spoon [fed] them a little bit" at a time. Next, they wrote a final draft that had to meet standard appearance requirements. Finally, they shared the writing in teams or whole class.

For language usage, Greta taught mostly within the writing, but the parts of speech, spelling, and vocabulary were taught separately. She selected activities she felt were creative. For example, while teaching spelling of words with Latin roots, the

students make a collage. She assigned a daily oral language exercise for teaching of language usage concepts.

There was a textbook for the seventh-grade language arts classes, but she didn't use it much because she considered it too elementary and "reading a short story from a book is not how you teach writing." Greta had "created 100% of [her] program." She had gathered materials from lots of different places and searched the Internet to find good ideas. She also used materials she had made and student examples from previous years.

Greta used the state DWA rubric to assess student writing as well as dozens of other rubrics she had created. Students were given written comments on their papers and then they used her comments to set goals on what to improve for their next writing assignment. She also used quizzes and tests on the characteristics of writing. Students reflected in writing on what "they wrote about and what went well [and] what could have gone better." Greta administered end-of-semester assessments for which students studied using a study guide.

Cross-Case Analysis

When looking across the four teacher responses to question two, I found there were five key practices participants had in common when making curriculum and instruction decisions about what and how they taught and assessed writing and language usage in the seventh-grade setting. These practices were using the writing process and the 6+1 Traits of writing to teach writing, using grammar exercises in the form of daily language review for teaching and reviewing language usage, using writing strategy instruction to focus on how and why specific topics were to be learned, and using the

state standards to make planning and instruction decisions. Table 4.2 summarizes these findings.

Table 4.2

Common Instructional Practices

Practice	Definition
Standards/State Assessments	Teachers consistently use state standards and assessments to direct and focus their planning, pacing, and assessing
Traits	Teachers used the vocabulary of the 6+1 Traits and models of papers showing examples and non-examples of papers
Exercises	Teachers used grammar exercises such as daily oral language or daily language review as well as skill-and-drill practice exercises to teach language usage skills
Writing Process	Teachers purposefully and consistently taught a five-step writing process to teach students to pre-write, draft, revise, edit, and publish their work
Writing Strategy Instruction	Teachers consistently made an effort to help students process information in meaningful ways, e.g., activate prior knowledge, use advance organizers, check lists, organize and relate ideas, ask higher order questions, think aloud, present materials in small steps, provide models of expert work, increase student responsibility

The first instructional practice was using the state standards and assessments to direct and focus planning, pacing, and assessing. These four teachers focused on and

followed the state standards even going so far as to check them off as they were accomplished or taught. A key motivating factor in using the standards was the perceived alignment of the state assessments to the standards. Elise put it this way, "Our state district standards are set up to teach them things they need to know for those tests." Each teacher was very aware of the state assessments. They paced their curriculum so as to have written, studied, and practiced the expository essay required for the Direct Writing Assessment. They used skill-and-drill exercises to address the topics assessed on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

The second instructional practice used for teaching writing was using the 6+1 Traits of writing. Although these six traits were originally designed as a way of assessing writing (Spandel, 2001; Culham, 2003), the teachers in this study used them as an instructional model because the vocabulary was used in the rubric for the DWA. All teachers taught the vocabulary, which are voice, organization, conventions, word choice, sentence fluency, and ideas. They not only defined each vocabulary term, but they also studied the key elements and showed examples of good and poor use of the traits. Students practiced writing to expository prompts similar to the DWA. However, the teachers did not use this model strictly or exclusively. Kate said, "I might not stick to it as strictly as some people might, but the traits are definitely something that I refer to." The 6+1 Traits vocabulary formed the lens through which students revised and assessed their work when preparing for the DWA, but not for other writing assignments during the year.

The third instructional practice was skill and drill exercises to teach language usage. This includes grammar, punctuation, and spelling. The main method for grammar

and punctuation instruction was completing daily oral language exercises and/or exercises from a textbook or teacher created materials. Each teacher extended the exercises to include discussions of why the answers where correct. They tried to make it fun by playing games or using serial stories, and they strived to make it relevant by connecting the skills to the writing. The spelling was taught with lists in a Monday-pretest, Wednesday- practice, and Friday post-test format or some variation of this by Greta, Kate, and Elise, but Jocelyn taught spelling and mechanics "just in their own writing."

The fourth instructional practice was using the writing process as the main model for teaching writing. The five-step writing process formed the foundation of the writing program like the beef stalk in a stew. The writing process used by the teachers was that laid out in the state standards: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. It appeared from both the interviews, the observations, and the lesson plans that these teachers not only understood the terms, but also the concepts behind the terms because they modeled every step of the process with the students. They did not simply assign, collect, and correct. The teachers scaffolded the learning by providing teacher created checklists, graphic organizers, and fill-in forms to help students navigate the different steps. Each of the teachers emphasized different aspects of the writing process depending on what step they felt was most important in helping students write a good final product.

For Greta, the emphasis was on revision particularly to bring the writing closer to a model she provided. This meant she had students reread drafts of paper looking for places to revise, both at the paragraph and the sentence level. For example, in one lesson

I observed she had students revise sentences by combining sentences. For Elise and Jocelyn, it was important to get a good start in the pre-writing step of the process. One lesson I observed in Jocelyn's class was spent solely on using a graphic organizer to prepare for writing to a prompt. She carefully walked students through each concept to help them think about what they were going to write. The students ended up with a web that would be used to guide the first written draft. For Kate, helping students understand and create correct final products was important. This included editing, proofreading, and polishing the final product, which she had them type at home sometimes and at others clean, handwritten final drafts. But no matter the emphasis, the teachers used the writing process to enhance student understanding and mastery of writing. Unlike the 6+1 Traits, which was not used much beyond practicing for the DWA, the writing process was used on all writing projects. The teachers expected that the students would have internalized the process by spring.

The last instructional practice was using and teaching writing strategies. Writing strategy instruction was any effort on the part of the teacher to help students process information in meaningful ways and become independent learners (Duffy, Roehler, & Duffy, 1986; Duffy, Roehler, Meloth, Vavrus, Book, Putnam, & Wesselman, 1986; Jones, 1986). When teaching writing or language usage, the teachers focused on how and why specific topics were to be mastered. They made an effort to connect specific topics into an overall framework of related topics and skills and extend learning to new situations. One example was when teachers taught daily oral language, they asked students to explain why an error should be corrected. If students had difficulty with

identification of an error or explaining why, the teachers would ask students to recall a prior lesson. When students wrote, the teachers would ask students to apply the skills from daily oral language exercises or model looking for grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors in a piece of writing by thinking aloud and correcting errors on an overhead example. Although some of these writing strategies seemed obvious on the surface, the teachers talked about them and modeled them in their lessons in an effort to help students understand how to use the strategy in new situations. Their instruction and materials were explicit and direct. This appeared to be part of the teachers' efforts to create lifelong learners or learners who could and would use skills beyond the current teaching situation.

Summary

To summarize question two, teachers in this study were consistent in their curriculum and instruction decisions in using the state language arts standards, the writing process to teach writing, daily language review exercises to teach writing components, and using the 6+1 Traits model to prepare students for the DWA. They also taught students how and what to think about their learning using cognitive instruction like modeling, scaffolded instruction, and explicit instruction and materials. The only common material evident was the DWA rubric. Each teacher used a variety of materials, some provided by the district in which they worked and some created by the teachers themselves. Teachers paced their instruction to best prepare students for the state assessments but overall spent roughly equal amounts time on writing and language usage objectives. Rubrics were used by all teachers to assess student writing and teachers often

provided written feedback on writing. Teachers also used multiple choice assessments, especially at the end of each semester. Overall, the materials used were quite different at each school site, but the main goals and objectives were taught using similar instructional methodologies.

Teacher Planning

Question three asked teachers about how they plan for a unit of writing. To answer this question, I asked the teachers to think aloud as they planned for a unit on research writing. During my second interview with the study participants, I provided the teachers with a scenario in which I asked them to plan for teaching a unit on writing a research report. This response to the scenario proved to be the most difficult for the teachers despite having the prompt provided before hand, but also where I found they were the most animated and reflective. The following offers first a summary of each teacher's process for planning this unit, and then the cross-case analysis explains the similarities that emerged from the data.

Elise

As stated above, Elise started with the state standards when planning a unit. The research report was required by both the state and district curricula. When she begins to plan, Elise first thinks about what she needs to teach her students and reviews what they already know. For example, Elise purposefully taught the research process in the spring because she wanted her students to have a foundation in expository writing. This foundation included knowing and understanding the writing process, writing good paragraphs, and writing to inform or explain.

Elise then selected activities that would best teach the skills and concepts she had identified to teach. Because Elise taught both reading and writing, she incorporated the reading and writing together for this unit. For example, she had assigned research reports in connection with trade books and "used the curriculum books that go with the book." Using the curriculum books and/or the internet, Elise selected or modified activities to teach the objectives of the unit. She carefully prepared each step from identifying the topic to publishing the paper and giving a presentation. She then created guidelines to give the students that included the project expectations and the points possible for each part of the project. These guidelines were designed to take the students through the project step-by-step.

Part of planning for writing was weaving the activities through and around the writing process. For example for this unit, Elise had students prewrite by choosing a topic to write about by working together in small groups to come to a consensus on a topic and each student signing up to write about some aspect of that topic. During the drafting stage, Elise combined learning to conduct research and writing. She had students proofread their paper looking for mistakes and she eventually read the papers as well offering suggests for improvement. From this oral and written feedback, students then wrote the final paper contributing their individual pieces to the final published paper.

Once Elise had designed the unit, she decided how she would organize for instruction. For this project, she had decided to have the students work in groups. She grouped the students into four students who would work well together. They completed the report as a group project but worked individually on assignments.

Elise also planned how best to teach each portion of the project. This could include materials she had created or modified from other sources, the textbook, and examples or models she created or used from previous student work.

Part of Elise's planning included how she would assess the project. The assessment was incorporated into the guidelines that stepped students through each portion of the project and was provided to students at the beginning of the assignment.

> "I'm doing assessment as we go so that … they are not going to get to the very end and totally bomb it. I have guided them a lot along the way and so their paper, illustration, and presentation are worth 500 points. We talk about spelling, capitalization, everything. I break it down so that this many points are going to this and this many points are going to that. So I've helped them a lot along the way, but they should not loose a lot of points on that final paper because we have re-evaluated, we've edited, and we've peer graded amongst their groups. They have looked at the paper as well and there are so many steps along the way that we should not lose a lot of points. But it talks about correct format and they can loose points if it isn't a 12 font. It has to be double space. If they haven't followed the format, they lose points. Spelling and punctuation in the final paper should not have hardly any of those errors because they will lose points for that. Like I said they should not lose a ton of points on the final because I've tried to really work with them along the way."

To extend learning and build comprehension, Elise expects students to apply what they have learned in previous lessons on writing process and language usage skills. She also plans an activity in which students apply what they have learned through the research. For the research project, she had students create an educational game with facts they had learned.

When I reviewed Elise's lesson plans, they mainly consisted of a list of planned activities including writing prompts for the journals. She had marked off what was done and noted what still needed to be done. She had made notes to herself of things she needed to do. For example, she had made a note about going to the library to look for books and noted that she needed to "call before I go" and to pick up "white paper/ruler/pencil" for another project. She had also written instructions to herself about how to best teach the activity. For example, "with row strategy break down box, fill out on overhead."

Jocelyn

When planning for a research report, Jocelyn starts with the objectives that will be assessed. She selects these objectives from the state standards. At the school where Jocelyn teaches, the research skills are taught as an elective class, but she has collaborated with the social studies teacher in the past. Because of this, Jocelyn had more difficulty in working through the planning process for this unit than did the other three teachers. Before beginning the project in the spring, she stated, "I would try to make it so it is not something separate from the expository essay we do at the beginning part of our curriculum. So we would cover the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusions."

After deciding what was to be taught, Jocelyn said she would then select activities and materials to teach the objectives she had worked out. These activities would include teaching students to use note cards, conduct research on the internet and/or the library, and writing clear paragraphs. She would carefully break down the objectives of the unit and create a rubric to assess them. Jocelyn said, "I would show kids examples of what I want and work through the rubric so they know that."

When planning for instruction, Jocelyn used several different sources for materials. She said she would use the *Step Up to Writing,* her language arts textbook, any number of teacher resources she has collected, and/or the internet. She would also use student examples or models to teach specific objectives and expectations for the final project.

As part of planning, Jocelyn determines the organization of instruction. For this project, she said she would have students work individually to complete the project. Jocelyn said she would also plan an extension activity in which students would present their findings from the research. The students would present their research in the social studies class using posters they made with the research report in the center and pictures to support their papers.

To assess the project, Jocelyn would use a rubric that would include the "pieces and parts, title page, outline, the essay, and the work cited page, and the presentation." She would integrate the grammar, spelling, and punctuation skills into the project.

Jocelyn added that an important part of planning for instruction would be how to incorporate and use the research vocabulary. She said, "I think it would be important to

teach the right vocabulary since it is on the ISAT. I might include a quiz on the key concepts, but it would depend on whether or not I thought they were getting it." Jocelyn would spend several weeks on a project this size.

When I reviewed Jocelyn's lesson plans, they mainly consisted of a list of planned activities and schedules. She had also drawn illustrations of what she wanted a particular project to look like. For example, she had drawn a picture of a shield next to the activity with the words "begin making student armors." She had included prompts for writing assignments, sources for materials such as her textbook, and instructions for how to complete activities, e.g., "just outlining, fold papers." She noted activities she had completed and those needing to be completed another day because of lack of time. She had sticky-notes with instructions to herself to remind students, e.g., "discuss conclusions – don't offend reader" and "avoid using <u>you</u> in the essay." Jocelyn had also included reflection notes to herself to improve instruction for the following year, e.g., "for next year – work more on figurative language" and "profession for dialogue was GREAT!"

<u>Kate</u>

Even though Kate was a new teacher, she was able to describe her planning clearly though she had more difficulty than the other three teachers defining exactly what she wanted students to know and be able to do. For the research project, she spoke in general terms like "work on an introduction," "write a first draft with transitions so their writing is not choppy," and "talk about plagiarizing."

Nevertheless, Kate did work through a process for planning. She stated that she would place the research project in the spring so that she had had time to teach the

students the necessary foundation skills like writing process, expository writing, and basic seventh-grade grammar, punctuation, and spelling to support this more difficult task. She said she would start with the state standards and district curriculum to determine what needed to be taught. For this particular unit, as with a poetry unit she taught with the reading teacher, Kate would teach the research report cross-curricular with the social studies teacher.

To help students learn what she considered a difficult task, Kate would carefully scaffold the learning. When she planned for the research paper, she selected activities that would start the students out with an easier project and move them to the more difficult written report. For example, she said, "…we do a mini-research process, which is a little bit more fun than writing the paper." Students picked a country, looked up six facts about it, and then created a mobile. The mobile had a map on one side and the flag on the other, with the facts with citations dangling from it.

Kate then organized the activities so that students moved toward selecting a new topic, researching, writing, and publishing a final research report. She designed these activities around the writing process. In the past, Kate had students write topics from WWI or WWII, but was rethinking that because she thought it would easier if students continued on writing about the country they had already researched for the mobile.

When planning, Kate used many sources for materials. For the research project, she used teacher created materials and rubric. She also used examples of student papers from the year before as models for students to emulate. For the actual research, Kate used both library resources and the internet to have students find information and taught

the students the MLA method of citing sources. She was working on creating materials to help students learn to summarize and paraphrase so they didn't plagiarize the materials they were researching.

To assess this project, Kate provided a rubric she had created specifically for this activity. She said, "I give them a rubric at the beginning. They are graded on a bunch of different aspects. The work cited page is a single grade. The in-text citations are another section of the rubric. And then, the basic writing process is another. The grammar, introduction, body, conclusion is a whole other part of the rubric." Kate didn't like the rubric that she used last year so planned to revise it.

When I reviewed Kate's lesson plans, they mainly consisted of a list of planned activities. She had noted page numbers of specific activities, but also her directions for how to instruct the activity. For example, for a writing assignments she had noted the instructions "model, class does, on own." Another example is when the activity was labeled "thesis statement game," and the instructions were "get into groups, draw a topic, as a group makes a thesis statement: 1st group wins." In the plans, Kate had noted activities which changed for the day's activity by crossing threw them and noting the new activity. Kate had also used sticky-notes to record pacing concerns, e.g. "concepts to introduce later – subject, predicate, complete sentences…" and additions to daily plans, e.g., "Part A: Recognizing how adverbs modify – add 1-5 sentences on chapter test."

Greta

When planning for instruction, Greta started with the objectives from the district curriculum. For example, when planning for a research report, she combined the report

with public speaking. She based the project on those countries the students studied in their world studies curriculum. The final product was a multimedia research report presented in PowerPoint about a country of their choice rather than a written report.

After deciding the objectives for the unit, Greta carefully selected activities that she believed would best teach the concepts. For the research project, she had students create a multimedia presentation about a country of their choice. "I like to call it a travel guide because it gives a little bit more interesting spin on it than just a country report like the kids might have done in the elementary school. So, I called it a travel guide and would have a little bit more of a practical bend if someone were to go travel there what should they bring, what should they be careful of -- like we joked about bringing a bullet-proof vest if they were traveling in Iraq rather than sun screen."

Greta next modified or created materials to teach the objectives. For the research project, she created a packet of useful information and project directions. Some of the skills that were included were note taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, using a variety of resources in the school library, books, on-line databases, books, encyclopedias, internet, organizing notes and outlining. A second item she created was a structured 20 items to-do list that kept students on track of what was finished and what was still left to do.

Greta selected learning experiences she felt would best teach the objectives she was teaching and organized instruction that supported those experiences. This often included having students work together though instruction was generally whole class. For example, when teaching the research project, she had student works through the activities in class so they did not become overwhelmed. This was a project that students

were all pretty successful on because most of it was done in class and the interest was high. Greta planned the research project in the spring so that foundation skills were in place.

Greta selected or designed the assessment when she planned the unit. She used many assessment formats, but for writing used rubrics. For the research project, she used a detailed rubric to assess the folder contents and presentation. At the end of the project, students reflected on what they enjoyed, what recommendations they had for changing the assignment, and what the biggest challenge was.

When I reviewed Greta's lesson plans, they mainly consisted of a list of planned activities with instructions on how to teach the activity. For example, "group discussion: 1) why do we write?, 2) what makes writing enjoyable to you? (use chart paper)," and "1. introduce/explain, 2. guided practice, 3. independent practice." She had noted resources and page numbers for some activities, e.g., "analyze student model, ML text, pg. 851" and "Paulsen ch. – drafting memoir." Some notes included instructions to herself, e.g. "write a body paragraph, practice adding transitions, (put poster up)." Greta had noted activities that were not completed and would need to be moved to other days. She included prompts for writing assignments, e.g., "I am …" Greta also provided a year plan that outlined the key concepts per month, which she created for pacing purposes.

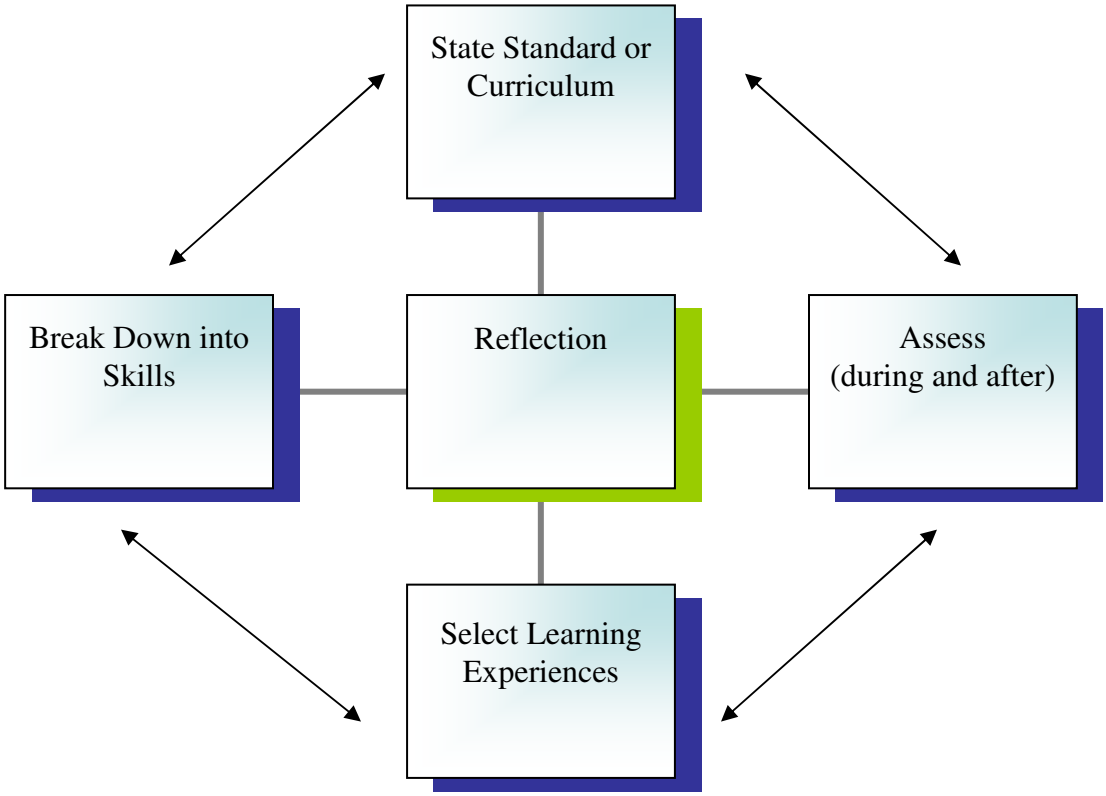
Cross-Case Analysis

For the cross-case analysis for this question, I looked for common planning, activities, and/or organizing strategies. The teachers in this study carefully selected or created learning experiences that they believed would best lead the students through the

writing process. Though the activities and materials were vastly different, ranging from Elise's group project to Greta's travel guide multimedia presentation, the planning itself took several steps that were similar for all teachers. Figure 4.1 shows the process the

Figure 4.1

Planning with a Purpose



teachers went through to design a unit on research writing. I found that planning much like writing was a recursive process. However, the teachers in this study did follow a general pattern when planning.

At the heart of the planning process for these teachers seems to be reflection. The teachers did not use the term reflection in their conversations with me, but they talked in reflective terms and had written reflection in their lesson plans. The teachers during the

interviews mentioned the things they had changed over time or planned to change this year in order to help students learn the material better. Reflective action is bound up with persistent and careful consideration of practice in the light of knowledge and beliefs (Noffke & Brennan, 1988; Zeichner, & Liston, 1996). An example of reflective thinking was given by Kate who had students do a mobile which emulates the research process before having them do the research paper. However, she had decided to have the mobile topic match the topic to be written about to both streamline the process and act as an advanced organizer. She also planned to rewrite the rubric because "I didn't like the rubric that I used last year at all. So I'll do a lot of revising this year."

As teachers talked about their planning, they talked about using the state standards to guide curriculum decisions, but also planned from where they thought students had been to where they needed to go. For example, the research project was started in the spring by all four teachers so that foundation concepts had been taught and learned. A check of lesson plans provided by each teacher supported this reflection process in either notes or post-it notes included in the plans. For example, Jocelyn had written a note that read, "Perfect Day (referring to a writing prompt) – Don't do next year – kids have been writing on it forever!" These reflective actions represent what Schon (1983) calls reflection-on-action, which is reflection bound with action. It appeared that reflection happened before, during, and after planning for a unit. To be clear, this analysis was based on teacher planning, not on implementation. Reflection can happen during a lesson, what Schon (1983) calls reflection-in-action, but I did not observe this

type of reflection in my observations. Reflection was connected to using the state standards, breaking the objectives down, selecting the activities, and assessing.

When planning, teachers started with the state language arts standards as a guide to what was to be taught, which in all cases were either the standards directly or through district curriculum documents. Tyler (1949) wrote, "The purpose of a statement of objectives is to indicate the kinds of changes in the student to be brought about so that the instructional activities can be planned and developed in a way likely to attain these objectives; that is, to bring about these changes in students" (p. 45). For example, from Jocelyn's curriculum the standard says *Goal 4.2: Acquire Expository (Informational/ Research) Writing Skills*, with objectives: *By the end of Grade 7, the student will be able to: 7.LA.4.2.1 Write technical text that identifies and sequence of activities or process and 7.LA.4.2.2 Write a research report that supports a main idea with details compiled through a formal research process.* This might imply rigidity in planning, but it didn't. Rather, it appeared to add professional rigor that led to successful learning as measured on the state assessments.

These teachers were familiar with the learning expectations of their students and connected them to the assignments and activities they used. Thus the next action these teachers took in their planning was to break down the standard and objectives into specific skills. For example, Elise broke down research writing into identifying topics, conducting research, using note cards, summarizing, outlining, using the writing process, and giving a presentation. Some other skills identified were how to cite sources, how to

avoid plagiarism, and how to give an effective presentation. These skills were then used to identify activities teachers thought would best meet the lesson objectives.

The third action was identifying or creating activities the teacher thought would best accomplish the goal or teach the skill. An important part of creating these activities was scaffolding learning for students. The teachers create charts or graphic organizers to help students gather and take notes and organize materials. They had students work in groups or provided models for the students to follow. The students were given checklists to guide them step to step in the process or the assessment rubric to know the final expectations for the project. Elise had the students write paragraphs that contributed to group papers. Kate had the students write a standard research report, but had them create a mobile of the material first as an advance organizer. Greta did not have students write a paper but rather had them create PowerPoint presentations from a carefully crafted teacher created packet that guided students through the research process. Jocelyn did not actually teach the research project as it was taught in a separate electives class; however, she did suggest that the project should be completed as a cross-curricular project to help make it relevant and interesting for students.

Another important action was creating the assessment. Even though this action appears last in this discussion, I do not mean to imply that assessment was last in the planning process. All four teachers used rubrics to assess writing projects. They created these as an integral part of the planning process, not as an afterthought. For Jocelyn and Greta, the assessment rubric was created when deciding what to teach. While for Elise and Kate, the rubric was written after the activities were selected. It wasn't clear if one

way or the other was more effective, but all four teachers provided the rubrics to students at the beginning of the projects. Beginning with the end in mind, Wiggins and McTighe (1998) suggests, is an effective strategy to improve student learning.

The teachers also provided written or oral feedback and points on individual activities leading to the finished product and then used a rubric for the final project. Elise gave them individual and group grades because her project was done collaboratively. The individual grade was based on participation and she "would actually sit down and talk with each of them individually and ask them if they felt like they contributed to the group today." She also gave students points at the completion at each step of the process. All the teachers talked about providing formative assessment along with the summative assessment so that students learned the skills and concepts leading to successful learning of the standards.

Summary

In summary, for question three about planning for instruction, the four teachers in this study took similar actions in planning a unit of writing. They started with the state standards, broke down the objectives to be learned into skills, looked for materials and activities to best teach the objectives of the unit, and created rubrics to assess both formative and summative activities. These materials were often teacher created (see Teacher Curriculum and Instruction Decisions for further discussion on materials). At the center of the planning process was reflection. Teachers thought about what skills had been taught before the unit, what skills should be used to meet the objectives of the unit, and what activities and materials would work to teach the objectives. If at any point in the

process, students were unsuccessful with one of the skills; further support was provided so that most students would find success in the project and learn the objectives. The standards were used by these teachers to guide what the teachers planned to teach, but they did not dictate how they taught the standards. How the standards were taught appeared to be very dynamic with teachers selecting or creating materials based on their beliefs and knowledge of the subject.

Affect of State Assessments

The last question asked how the state assessments affected teacher planning of writing and language usage in a seventh-grade language arts setting. To answer this question, I asked several questions during the first interview, and also reviewed lesson plans for pacing and objective placement. The teacher lessons plans I analyzed coordinated with the year of the results of the DWA and ISAT scores used to identify these sites for study (2005-2006). The teachers in this study were not required by administration to keep full lesson plans, but did sketch out plans by the week. Often a whole week's activity or objective would be introduced on a Monday with arrows flowing from day to day. However, I believe the data has value when looking for trends to confirm interview and observation data.

I asked the teachers how they negotiated the tensions between the writing and language usage needs of the DWA and ISAT. The answer was quite simple in that they really didn't see any tension between the two. They seemed to view them as assessing two different things. They modified the pacing of the curriculum to prepare for the tests and did some review of language usage skills before the ISAT, but talked about the test

requirements as separate entities. The following is a summary of each teacher's response to these questions about the influence of the state assessments on their planning.

Elise

For Elise the DWA and the ISAT influenced her planning and instruction. She believed the state and district standards were set up to teach student the things to know for those tests. She paced her instruction to align with the placement of the state standards. For example she emphasized the writing skills necessary to pass the DWA in the fall, and reviewed language usage skills in the spring. She said, "Your scores are out there and everyone can see them. You want your kids to be successful. And if they are going to have this to graduate, then I want them to know the information they need to know on that test. So it does influence what I teach and how I teach to an extent."

Jocelyn

For Jocelyn the assessments also influenced what she taught. They influenced the pacing, what concepts to focus on, and some language arts vocabulary to be taught. To prepare students for the Direct Writing Assessment, she started the month before the assessment. She taught the students the language of the Direct Writing Assessment rubric and would have them write and assess their papers based on the rubric. With the ISAT, she had a love/hate relationship. She thought it was good, but was frustrated when the test was changed or if new vocabulary came up that was confusing. She focused on helping students who would make gains, but tried to do her very best to teach the concepts and skills that were tested on the ISAT.

She said, "The DWA and ISAT don't show all the strengths of the student. It is frustrating sometimes because you know that the students have made gains and yet they don't show the gains on state assessments. I mean I think they are important. They do guide my teaching… and my curriculum. I am a teacher and I want my students to succeed and I want them to do their very best. So I need to do what I can do to prepare them."

Kate

For Kate the state assessments influenced her planning for instruction, especially the DWA. For the DWA, she photocopied the same sheet that they were going to be writing on so that students were used to seeing the format. On the other hand, Kate viewed the ISAT results as a tool to share with the students. Kate said, "I think that they give the students a goal. If nothing else, [the assessments] give them a goal or a reason as to why they need to learn how to do this. I don't know that it necessarily can transition that into passing the test, like just forget it after taking the test. I hope that they don't and that is why in the classroom that they understand the purpose in addition to taking a test or writing a paper for a grade." The placement of the DWA and the ISAT did influence when and how Kate planned for instruction. For example, she focused on the DWA at the beginning of the year by teaching and talking about expository writing. Then in the spring, she focused on grammar and mechanics because "everything is done with so we do a bunch of review before the ISAT."

Greta

Greta used the DWA and ISAT for planning and instruction, pacing of goals and objectives, and remediating teaching and learning. Greta wasn't sure she would teach quite as much of the writing process and 6+1 Traits if there was no DWA. But she felt as a conscientious teacher that she probably would because writing was the most important thing that she taught. She also tracked data in terms of the ISAT. She knew which students were weak or below proficient in each subcategory of the ISAT and targeted them with extra help.

To help prepare students for the DWA, she had implemented what she called a writing workshop. Prior to DWA, she looked at everyone who was scoring a 1 or 2 and paired them with the highest students. They become "best friends" for a week or two and had lunch together every day in her room. They brought their lunch and they worked side-by-side on improving their skills. Students were provided two copies of the essay, and the tutors (they were generally accelerated students who wanted to help) sat side-by-side with the struggling writer. They worked together and talked like writers. Some students stayed one or two weeks depending on their needs. It was unacceptable in Greta's mind to have a 2, so she and the students do everything they could too build those skills. For Greta, the assessments influenced her planning, assessments, and interventions.

Cross-Case Analysis

The state assessments impacted teacher planning and pacing. This was particularly true for instructional pacing when fall semesters tended to include more

writing to prepare for the DWA in early December and the winter and spring semesters tended to be more grammar based to prepare for the ISAT. The teachers, however, did not think this caused an imbalance in their programs. Though Elise tended to spend more time with grammar, and Greta more with writing, Kate and Jocelyn felt equal attention was given to both writing and language usage.

The DWA had the biggest impact on teachers as they prepared students specifically for the assessment by using the assessment rubric. They taught the vocabulary of the 6+1 Traits which form the foundation of the rubric and showed student models that exemplified the four levels of achievement on the rubric. Students practiced writing to a prompt and revised their writing to match student samples.

All four teachers had served as assessors of the DWA not only to help with the time consuming task, but as a staff-development opportunity. Yet of the two tests, the DWA provides the least amount of feedback. The performance-based data can inform decision making but without training in what proficient means can have little meaning for educators at either the district or classroom level (Firestone, Mayrowetz, & Fairman, 1998; Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991).

The ISAT had less obvious impact on the planning and pacing of instruction. However, Kate did say she specifically reviewed ISAT concepts in preparation for the test. The ISAT does provide a breakdown by student that suggests areas of need, but only Greta had begun to use the data for remediation purposes. The biggest evidence of the impact of the ISAT was the use of explicit instruction in grammar, punctuation, and spelling skills through grammar exercises and daily oral language exercises.

Because these state assessments impact teacher decision making, the alignment between what is taught and what is tested is important (English, 1999). Early studies conducted on the alignment of the ISAT with the state standards showed little alignment between the standards and the test (Robbins, 2004). However with the revision of the state language arts standards in 2005 and a new language arts ISAT test administered beginning in 2006, the misalignment appears to have improved (Idaho State Board of Education, 2008b). This is important as a synthesis of research findings conducted by Lauer, Snow, Martin-Glenn, Van Buhler, Stoutemyer, & Snow-Renner (2005) for the Mid-continental Research for Education and Learning, suggested that a standards-based curriculum alone did not influence instruction unless assessments and materials were aligned with that curriculum.

Summary

In summary, the findings on the final research question suggest that the state assessments played a part in teacher planning including pacing of objectives and material selection. The state standards had more weight, but the assessments played a role in teacher decision making. This was best exemplified when preparing students for the Direct Writing Assessment in the fall. Teachers selected materials that used the DWA rubric vocabulary extensively with examples to explain how to assess and improve their own writing to better meet the expectations of the assessment.

The ISAT had a less consistent influence on teacher instruction, though teachers were aware of the demands of this test. The teachers believed that following the state standards would adequately prepare the students for the ISAT and though they

encouraged students to learn particular concepts in anticipation of the ISAT they did not specifically prepare students for the taking the ISAT. The use of daily language review exercises appeared to be used to improve test taking skills such as those found on the ISAT. Though the teachers taught the skills in isolation, they made sincere attempts to tie the skills back to the writing.

Summary

Each of the teachers who participated in this study is unique, talented, and reflective. Elise, Jocelyn, Kate, and Greta used teaching practices with clear objectives and encouraged extensive interactions among students and teachers. They employed task-specific procedural knowledge approaches when planning and organizing for instruction. These teachers believed that in order to help students write effectively and successfully master the requirements of the DWA and ISAT, they needed to be explicit and purposeful in their teaching.

The school districts in which these practitioners teach identified specific standards and objectives to be taught, yet the teachers still had a great deal of flexibility in terms of how those units were structured. These teachers all valued the freedom and believed it contributed to their success in the classroom. They held their students to high expectations and the students appeared to rise to the challenge as shown on the state assessments.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

As a teacher of 7th grade language arts, I embarked on this study hoping to find the secrets of what successful language arts teachers do to help students achieve success on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. Given today's political context, this is a question that is important to not only me but to every language arts teacher in Idaho. I was concerned that the time I was spending preparing for the state-mandated assessments was also meeting my goal of teaching students to write. This is an ability the teachers in this study, research and policy makers such as NCTE (2007) and the National Commission on Writing (2003, 2004, 2005), and I believe is critical to students as they enter higher education and the workplace.

Writing is a complex process and so is the instruction a teacher must provide if students are to learn effectively. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) suggest that the way to improve instruction is by studying the lessons that successful teachers teach. So I decided to study what effective teachers in Idaho do to teach writing while meeting the requirements of the state assessments. What I discovered, like Dorothy peeking behind the curtain at the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, was that there were no magic methods or materials. The teachers identified for this study were just like me or my colleague next door when it came to teaching seventh-grade language arts. However, they did differ in that 75% or more of their students achieved *Proficient* or *Advanced* on the two state assessments. What did they do to achieve this success?

The purpose of this chapter is an attempt to answer that question by summarizing and explaining what Elise, Jocelyn, Greta, and Kate did to achieve the success they did. These teachers were as different individually as any two teachers would be. For example, Elise, Jocelyn, and Greta were experienced teachers and Kate was in her second year. Elise and Jocelyn worked in rural settings and Kate and Greta in urban schools. The rural school teachers taught both reading and language arts, while the urban school teachers taught language arts exclusively. Though there were differences, there were also similarities. The urban schools had more students, yet each teacher had about the same class size. All teachers were highly-qualified as defined by the NCLB Act of 2001 and were passionate about teaching students skills they believed could be used for a lifetime. There were also key methods and attitudes these four teachers shared that the data suggests made them successful at what they do as measured on the state assessments.

I begin with a summary of the findings gathered through interviews, observations, and classroom documents. The second section presents the implications of these findings. The third and fourth sections cover recommendations for further research and the limitations of the research. And finally, I make some concluding remarks.

Summary of the Findings

For this study, I examined three factors that influenced student outcomes in the four classrooms that I studied. These factors are teacher beliefs, teacher curriculum and instructional decisions, and teacher planning.

Beliefs

The first factor that was influential in what and how writing and language usage were taught by the teachers in this study was their beliefs. For the purposes of this study, I defined a belief as "an attitude consistently applied to an activity" (Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, & Cuthbert, 1988, p.54). Borg (2003) suggests, "teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs" (p. 81). Teacher beliefs were an important factor in the decisions they made about what, how, and why to teach in the ways that they chose to teach their curriculums.

Elise, Jocelyn, Kate, and Greta said that teaching students to write effectively was the most important function of the seventh-grade language arts curriculum. Writing, they said, was a life skill that students needed to learn to do well. A belief that both teens and their parents say is an essential skill for later success in life as well (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & Macgill, 2008). They also believed the most important skills the students learn were those grammar, punctuation, and spelling components taught as part of the curriculum but also as needed to support clear writing.

For these teachers, the best way to learn the writing and language concepts and skills they taught was to practice. This belief is supported by Donald Graves (1999) who suggested that if students don't write more than three days a week they won't become writers. All four teachers dedicated a great deal of class time to writing. Students were assigned several essays a year, wrote letters, and expository essays. They also assigned briefer writing assignments in journals, writer's notebooks, note taking, and reflection

paragraphs. Students wrote on an almost daily basis. The materials the teachers used for practicing writing were mostly teacher created.

For teaching the skills of language usage, however, the teachers used daily language review exercises they selected from various sources. These practice sessions were not necessarily intended to help students learn to write, and research suggests that indeed studying these skills in isolation will not improve writing (Hillocks, 1986; Weaver, 1996). The data suggests that these daily practice sessions were implemented to help students master the content to better perform on the ISAT. The materials for this practice came from textbooks, miscellaneous teacher resources, or materials created by the teachers themselves.

This autonomy to select activities, materials, and methods from a wide variety of sources teachers believed was what made their programs effective. There were no common textbooks used by all of the teachers, though three of the four did use some aspects of the *Step Up to Writing* program to teach expository writing. Their choices were influenced by their belief in the value of the state assessments in writing. They selected activities, materials, and methods they believed would best teach the lesson objectives but that would also support student achievement on the tests.

This belief in the value of the state assessments influenced both writing and language usage instruction, especially the Direct Writing Assessment. Langer (1999) asserted that preparation for tests such as those administered in Idaho should happen within the context of the everyday learning activities and not as separate test preparation activities. The teachers in this study prepared students for the state assessments in the

daily activities not in test preparation exercises. These educators believed in the value of the tests and so selected materials and activities that would support student achievement on them.

These core beliefs about what and how to best teach writing and language usage were a consistent influence on teacher curriculum and instruction decisions. This was not unexpected. Beliefs are said to form a structured set of principles that are derived from a teacher's prior experiences, school practices, and a teacher's individual personality (Borg, 2003), and they are generally stable and reflect the nature of the instruction the teacher provides to students (Hampton, 1994).

What made beliefs an important factor on student achievement was their influence on teacher curriculum and instruction decisions, especially the belief in the value of the state assessments. The tension I often felt when I started teaching seventh-grade language arts between teaching the curriculum and state test requirements did not exist for these teachers. By teaching how and what they believed to be important, these teachers affected student outcomes as measured on the state assessments through their curriculum and instruction decisions.

Curriculum and Instruction

The second factor that was influential in what and how writing and language usage were taught by the teachers in this study was their curriculum and instruction decisions. The only material used by all four teachers was the DWA rubric, but there were two instructional methods for teaching writing that all teachers used – writing process and 6+1 Traits, and one method for teaching language usage -- grammar

exercises and worksheets. Another instructional methods used that covered both writing and language usage was writing strategy instruction.

The first method used for teaching writing was the writing process. All study participants used the writing process as a procedure for writing extended pieces of work, though with the research project it was integrated with what teachers referred to as the research process. The writing process, i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing, is a research supported method for teaching students to write, which serves as a foundation for instruction (e.g., Atwell, 1998; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graves, 1994). The five-part writing process outlined in the state standards was displayed on posters in the classrooms, students were expected to work through the process when writing, and teachers used the vocabulary when talking about the writing.

Research has also shown that teaching students to use the writing process with instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together is effective in teaching adolescents to write effectively (Bakhtin, 1981; Graham & Perin, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). Elise, Jocelyn, Kate, and Greta all had students work collaboratively in groups to write and assess their work. This approach to teaching writing not only drew on the strengths of students this age, but also provided the students with ways to think about and apply what they were learning in meaningful ways.

The second method for teaching writing was the 6+1 Traits of writing. The 6+1 Traits vocabulary was used extensively when preparing for the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA). The six traits are not specifically addressed in the language arts standards for the seventh grade, but the rubric for the DWA is based on this model.

Teachers taught the rubric vocabulary with activities designed to help students not only learn the vocabulary and build a strong conceptual understanding of the vocabulary. The teachers also exposed students to models of writing both good and bad, so that they could learn the DWA rubric. They encouraged students to identify the characteristics of good writing and to imitate the critical elements in their own writing. The study of models does have an effect, though small, on adolescent writing (Graham & Perin, 2007). The use of scales or rubrics such as the 6+1 Traits also has been found to improve student writing (Hillocks, 1986). The data suggests that the use of this model is encouraged because of the Direct Writing Assessment rubric, but its use does not appear to extend beyond practicing for the assessment.

A practice common among these teachers when teaching the writing process and the 6+1 Traits was overlapping the two models. By overlapping the writing process and traits instruction, both models seemed to be enhanced. It appeared to add depth and understanding when students edited and revised their writing.

For teaching grammar, punctuation, and spelling, teachers used isolated drill and practice exercises and grammar worksheets. Teachers had students practice grammar and punctuation using daily oral language exercises and spelling on an introduce/practice/test format. All four teachers expressed concern with teaching these skills in isolation and with the drill-and-skill format. They described how they attempted to make the exercises fun by playing engaging activities. Both Kate and Greta talked of literally dreaming of ways to teach their students that would make it fun, engaging, and relevant for them. Nunan (2005) suggests that this strategy may be helpful because when a lesson involves

the emotions, it engages the mind. However, research suggests that there are more effective ways to improve student writing, such as sentence generating, combining, and manipulating than traditional grammar instruction (Hillocks & Smith, 2003; Graham & Perin, 2007).

Elise, Jocelyn, Kate, and Greta did attempt to connect the language usage skills to the writing process. But they did not teach language usage skills wholly within the context of student writing, which has long been considered best practice for learning the grammar, punctuation, and spelling skills (Hillocks, 1986; Noguchi, 1991; Weaver, 1996). Instead they attempted to bridge the conventions they taught in isolation to the current writing assignments by including them as part of the rubric.

So if there is little support for grammar exercises in improving writing, what purpose do they serve in these classrooms? The teachers in this study suggested that these methods do help prepare students for the ISAT because of the similarity in format, which is recognizing errors in prewritten sentences.

Along with these methods, the teachers selected activities that helped students use cognitive skills. This cognitive skill instruction helped students focus on how and why specific topics were to be mastered, especially on how the specific topic fit into an overall framework of related topics and skills. Instruction was generally direct to the extent that the teacher or material made explicit what was to be learned. The teachers helped students learn the lesson objectives by activating prior knowledge, providing advance organizers, and check lists of activities. Teachers modeled their thinking or provided models of expected final products and scaffolded learning by designing activities that

approximated the final expected outcome. The cognitive skills instruction was an integral part of the instructional design and the data suggested it helped assure student success in both learning the lesson objective and completion of the assignment.

What made curriculum and instruction decisions an important factor on student achievement was not only the use of research-based methods but also the use of instructional procedures such as modeling, thinking aloud, scaffolding, using engaging activities, and explicit, teacher-led cognitive skills instruction. Teachers made a specific effort to scaffold the learning for students through teacher created materials, teaching methods, or other students to provide temporary support to help students bridge the gap between their current abilities and the intended goal. What further made this factor influential on student outcomes was using methods that taught students how to think about and apply the skills measured by the state mandated assessments. So when planning for instruction, these teachers drew on several elements to help students to both learn to write effective and perform on state assessments.

Planning

The last factor that the data suggests influenced student achievement was teacher planning. Teacher planning has been documented as a significant area in which teachers make a wide variety of decisions (Clark & Peterson, 1986), and teacher behavior is substantially influenced and even determined by their thought processes (Smith, 1983). The teachers thought about where students had been and where they were headed. They thought about what concepts or skills they wanted taught. They thought about what methods worked or did not work with adolescents. And they thought about how to assess

the learning that supported student learning and the state assessments. The planning process for writing began with the state standards.

The standards–based curriculum had a consistent influence on teacher decisions. The standards have unified what these teachers expect students to know and be able to do in the language arts. The Idaho state language arts standards have three standards in writing – writing process, writing applications, and writing components (Idaho State Department of Education, 2007). It was important for these teachers to follow and use the standards-based curriculum because of the perceived alignment to the state assessments.

Not only did the standards serve to unify what these teachers expected students to know and be able to do, but they also provided a focus for the teachers when planning for instruction. The four teachers who participated in this study used a common pattern when planning for a unit of study. They all started with a clear goal of what they wanted to achieve. They then broke the goals and objectives into discrete skills and concepts and selected or created activities and materials to meet those goals and objectives. Finally, they moved on to how they would organize the instruction, and how they would assess the learning. The teachers talked about the importance of the assessment aligning with the lesson objectives, and they provided the assessment at the beginning of the unit as a guideline for students as part of their cognitive skills instruction.

The state assessments were taken into consideration by all teachers when planning for instruction, though Greta was the only teacher who said she used the results of the tests to change or modify instruction. The state assessment with the most impact was the

DWA, as teachers paced their instruction to coincide with the fall test and selected activities and materials that mimicked the DWA assessment. The ISAT had less direct impact on writing instruction, but was a major impetus for using skill-and-drill exercises and worksheets to teach grammar, punctuation, and spelling. To pull all these elements together, the teachers had to be very reflective in their planning process.

I believe all teachers reflect in some form. However, the difference in these classrooms seemed to be the *intentional* use of reflection to both improve instruction and improve student learning. They reflected on what happened in previous lessons and they reflect on students' performance as they assessed their work. They reflected on the content and the best pedagogy available to teach that content to their students. They reflected on how to organize instruction so that interactions between students and between them and the students contributed to learning.

What made teacher planning an important factor on student achievement was the thoughtful and purposeful planning by teachers who understood their content thoroughly, knew the relationships among parts of the curriculum, and designed what Marzano (2007) calls "critical-input experiences." The teachers were careful to plan experiences that scaffolded the learning, provided step-by-step procedural knowledge support, and built conceptual understandings. Student achievement was impacted by planning activities that supported student learning and aligned with state assessments requirements. These same characteristics held when teachers planned for both writing and language usage portions of the curriculum.

Summary

In summary, I didn't see what I expected to see in these classrooms. I expected to see a research-based model for writing where language usage was fully integrated into the teaching and learning of writing. After all, that was what the books I had read said was best practice, e.g., Routman, 2005; Graves, 1994; Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1991. I also expected to talk to teachers who were troubled by pressures of the state assessments, and who like me had difficulty finding balance between the writing demands of the DWA and the language usage requirements of the ISAT. The pressure to get high scores on these tests lead me to a much more direct approach to my teaching and planning than I believed good instruction entailed and that I thought was best for students.

However, what I found were an eclectic assortment of methods and materials for teaching writing and language usage that worked despite what at first seemed very random. Yet on closer inspection, I found there were three important factors that unified what and how these teachers taught writing and language usage. Teachers held common beliefs in the importance of teaching writing effectively as a lifelong skill. They planned learning experiences based on state standards that taught students both procedural and conceptual knowledge and taught them how and when to apply this knowledge independently. These approaches to teaching writing and language usage appeared to impact student learning to the extent that satisfied state-mandated assessments. I found teachers were reflective in their planning looking carefully at where students were and where they were headed to make sure foundational skills and concepts were in place.

This intentional reflection in the planning assured tested concepts were taught and learned by the students.

The influence of the state assessments was apparent in all classrooms studied. The teachers believed the results had value in that they provided useful feedback to parents, students, teachers, school districts, and governing agencies. The DWA influenced not only curriculum and instructional decisions but also pacing as teachers sought to prepare students for the state assessment. However, there was a stated understanding that the results were a one-time snapshot of a student's ability to write. The ISAT had a less consistent influence on teacher instruction in writing, though it was quite influential when teaching language usage. The teachers believed that by following the state standards students would be adequately prepared for the ISAT and though they encouraged students to learn particular concepts in anticipation of the ISAT they did not specifically prepare students for taking the ISAT in a test preparation format.

This study suggests that teachers can teach seventh-grade students to write effectively, which is what we all want, while adequately preparing them for state-mandated assessments. It is not an either or proposition. The following section provides some implications for practice I believe are suggested by this research data.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study lead to several implications for practice related to teaching seventh-grade students to both write effectively and perform capably on the Idaho state assessments in writing and language usage.

- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers use a process-writing approach to teaching writing.* All four teachers used the writing process as a foundation to their writing programs. They also used the techniques associated with this approach to teaching writing, like creating extended opportunities to write, encouraging cycles of planning, translating and reviewing, and facilitating high levels of student interactions. This approach is also supported by the research literature.
- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers use the state standards either as their curriculum or as a guideline to supplement their curriculum.* Historically, seventh-grade language arts curriculum has been grammar based (Squire, 2003). The introduction of the standards along with state assessments to Idaho language arts classrooms has caused teachers to follow those goals and objectives in the belief that they will improve student achievement by doing so. All four teachers started with the state standards when they began to plan for a unit, even going so far as to check the standards off as they were addressed. The standards helped to unify what was being taught in the seventh-grade classrooms. This is important as the state standards have been revised to better align to the state assessments. These state assessments are important to many people, especially teachers. As long as teachers and administrators are held accountable for students' test scores, we have an obligation to make sure our students know the material being tested.
- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers use the 6+1 Traits model to teach students to write effectively.* There is a great deal of literature, though not

all researched based, on this instruction and assessment model. It is however the foundation of the rubric for the DWA and as such should be taught. In order to reinforce the benefits of learning this vocabulary and studying the models, teachers should build a conceptual understanding of the vocabulary and also extend its use beyond the test preparation mode. There is support for the use of teaching students to use scales or criteria such as the 6+1 Traits to apply to their own or others' writing (Hillocks, 1986). By combining this model with the writing process, student depth and understanding of writing appeared to be enhanced.

- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers tap the potential of the cognitive and social aspects of writing to improve student writing.* Writing is a complicated activity that requires an assortment of cognitive processes and is dependent on the social context of the writer (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Hayes, 1996). The teachers in this study talked to and with students about how to think about their writing through discussion and modeling. They also encouraged student collaboration in writing group pieces of writing, some peer conferencing, and small group work.
- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers use cognitive skills instruction when teaching writing and language usage.* This approach emphasizes the development of thinking skills and processes as a means to enhance learning. Research suggests that though devoting time to help students know how, when, and why to use what they are learning takes time it is worth the effort as student

who are actively involved in the education process have better retention, motivation, and overall attitudes towards learning (Reid, 2005). By teaching students to think about their use of specific methods such as using the writing process, they are more likely to carry that learning to other settings and become independent learners.

- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers become aware of and take into account the requirements of both state assessments when planning for instruction.* In the past the state assessments, particularly the ISAT, has not been aligned to the state standards (Robbins, 2004). This alignment has improved (Idaho State Board of Education, 2008a) and research suggests that curriculum, instructional guidelines, and assessment should be aligned to obtain favorable student outcomes (English, 1999; Lauer, et al., 2005). There is potential for all teachers to improve student writing and student outcomes on the state assessments by being aware of the expectations of each test and making sure they have covered that material. The work by Langer (1999) suggests that this instruction should happen within the regular teaching and learning activities and not as a separate test preparation activity.
- *Student learning can be impacted when teachers engage in an intentional cycle of reflection in their planning process.* This reflection process allows teacher to not only think about what they are going to teach and why, but also how their teaching impacts student learning. I believe teachers do this naturally, especially after finishing a unit. However, the reflection that I observed in these teachers

extended beyond that to checking and rechecking what was to be taught, what was learned, and what should be retaught or changed.

In summary, there are a number of implications for practice. This study supports many of the techniques for teaching writing to most students, e.g., use the writing process, tap the social and cognitive aspects of learning to write, and teach students writing strategies that can be transferred to new situations. But as I think about seventh-grade students in particular, the study findings suggest student learning can be improved in writing by making explicit and systematic instruction an integral part of the writing program. Explicitly teaching seventh-graders how to carry out the writing process, use the 6+1 traits to edit and revise their writing, plan their writing with a goal or product in mind will impact their writing. These skills will enhance learning, which in turn will impact student achievement on the state assessments.

Recommendations for Further Research

There are several recommendations I would make to further this research. The first is to follow up this descriptive study with carefully designed studies to validate, verify, and extend the findings discussed here. I would also suggest spending much more time in the classrooms of these teachers. I believe there is still much to learn by observing, describing, and analyzing the practices of these highly-effective teachers.

I would also recommend that classrooms where teachers are less successful be studied much as Langer (1999) did in her research to see if these practices could be found there and to what degree. In addition, I believe it would be worthwhile to follow a cohort of students from seventh grade through high school to see if the success these students

enjoyed in the seventh grade stayed true over time. Were they better writers in the long run? Did the skills transfer from the expository writing to other genre emphasized in later grades?

The sites were identified by percentages of student performing at *Proficient* or *Advanced*, but I did not study any student work. It would be interesting to see if the findings of this study extended to all groups of students. If the implications for practice were replicated in lower performing schools, would student achievement improve?

Further research needs to be conducted in middle school settings on whether or not students truly learn to write well using the current model of standards-based curriculum and state assessments. Student outcomes as measured on the state assessments for these four classrooms suggest that the standards-based curriculum, research-based instructional strategies, and teacher-created materials used in these programs are effective. But a question still remains if competent student writers are being produced The results of the NAEP 2007 in writing suggest this may not be the case.

Conclusions

I had hoped to find the magic promised to Dorothy when she sought out the wizard when I started my journey to learn how best to teach my students to write well while preparing them to do well on state assessments.

I chose as my companions four highly-qualified teachers experienced in traveling the road. The results of this study support and extend the knowledge base of writing and language usage programs by answering the question of how seventh-grade language arts teachers effectively prepare them to perform capably on state assessments in Idaho. It

supports the understanding of what teachers of adolescents believe about how to best teach writing and language usage. It also extends our understanding of how seventh-grade language arts teachers plan for instruction that is supported by research. And finally, it extends our understanding of the influence of state assessments on the teaching of writing and language usage in Idaho classrooms.

I believe that seventh-grade student learning can be improved by emulating the planning and organizing techniques used by these teachers. The study participants not only planned purposefully, but taught explicitly the skills of language usage, the process of writing, and the vocabulary of the 6+1 Traits. They also taught students thinking skills so that they could apply what they learned in different settings. The achievement of students in lower performing schools might improve on the state assessments by using the methodologies suggested in this study.

As I step back now that the study is done, I have to ask myself if we are creating writers who can compete for college scholarships and/or jobs in a global market. Is preparing students to write to the level that will satisfy a state assessment enough? If the ultimate goal of learning to write as the National Commission on Writing (2003) suggests is to create a populace that is able to compete in a global economy, the answer may well be no. This is especially true when only 29% of Idaho students perform at the *Proficient* and *Advanced* levels on the rigorous NAEP assessment (Idaho State Board of Education, 2008). When the seventh-grade language-arts program only addresses state-assessment requirements, it may move us forward from the grammar/literature dominated past, but it

will not move us toward using writing as a tool for learning to learn or to use writing as a tool to communicate in a meaningful and thoughtful way.

The bright spot for me as a researcher was witnessing the enthusiasm and commitment of the study participants. Vygotsky wrote, "Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p. 88). The air of high expectations for student performance and an understanding of how adolescents learn exhibited by these teachers may well have been factors I didn't study that could have been as important as any of the questions I asked or the observations I made.

Dorothy always had the means to return to Kansas by wearing the ruby slippers. She just had to know what to do -- click the slippers together three times. This is true of all teachers of seventh-grade students; we just need to know what to do. This study hopefully will help all teachers find success in teaching their students to write well and successfully negotiate the state assessments.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Consent Forms

PRINCIPAL CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Jolene Dockstader, M.Ed., College of Education at Boise State University is conducting a research study entitled *Writing in the Middle: A Qualitative Look at Seventh Grade High Achieving Language Arts Classrooms*. The purpose of this study is to exam how effective language arts teachers in four seventh-grade classes in four districts in southern Idaho plan and organize instruction to prepare students to write well while at the same time prepare them to perform capably on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. Our program is being asked to participate in this research because of the effective 7th grade program.

B. PROCEDURES

If I agree to be in the study, I understand the following will occur during mutually agreed upon times:

1. I will agree to be interviewed by Miss Dockstader to provide an overall picture of the school and provide my impression of the language arts program.
2. I will introduce Miss Dockstader to the 7th grade language arts teachers so Miss Dockstader can learn about the planning and organizing procedures used at the school.
3. I agree to read the written descriptions of the interview provided by Miss Dockstader and provide confirmation and clarification of the content.

These procedures will be done at my school.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. If any of the questions make me uncomfortable, I am free to decline to answer the questions I do not wish to answer.

2. For this research project, the researchers are requesting demographic information. Due to the make-up of Idaho's population, the combined answers to these questions may make an individual person identifiable. The researchers will make every effort to protect my confidentiality. However, if I am uncomfortable answering any of these questions, I may leave them blank.

3. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, my records will be handled as confidentially as possible. Only Miss Dockstader will have access to my study records. After the discussion has been transcribed from the tapes, the tapes will be destroyed. No individual identities will be used

in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

4. Each teacher/principal/school will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used during data analysis and reporting.

D. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. However, the information that I provide may help seventh grade language arts teachers in Idaho improve their classroom instruction so that more students are successful on the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho State Achievement Test.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to me as a result of taking part in this study, other than the time spent to participate.

F. PAYMENT

There will be no payment to me as a result of taking part in this study.

G. QUESTIONS

If I have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, I should first talk with the investigator Jolene Dockstader at 208/324-6569 (h) or 208/324-8134 ext 3024 (w). If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-1574 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Administration, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1135.

H. CONSENT

I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as an employee of the district.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

Signature of Study Participant Date

I give my consent to be audio taped in this study:

Signature of Study Participant Date

I give my consent to use my words in research reports and presentations:

Signature of Study participant Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

THE BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY INTSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICPANTS IN RESEARCH.

Please return to: Jolene Dockstader; 218 W. Ave. I #100, Jerome, ID 83338

TEACHER CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

Jolene Dockstader, M.Ed., College of Education at Boise State University is conducting a research study entitled *Writing in the Middle: A Qualitative Look at Seventh Grade High Achieving Language Arts Classrooms*. The purpose of this study is to exam how effective language arts teachers in four seventh-grade classes in four districts in southern Idaho plan and organize instruction to prepare students to write well while at the same time prepare them to perform capably on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. I am being asked to participate in this study because I am a highly qualified 7th grade language arts teacher in a district in southern Idaho that has achieved success in student writing and language usage.

B. PROCEDURES

If I agree to be in the study, I understand the following will occur during mutually agreed upon times:

1. I agree to three interviews by Miss Dockstader to determine how I plan and organize for teaching writing and language usage.
2. I agree to two observations of my classroom so Miss Dockstader can record characteristics of the class, teaching materials, assignments, books carried by students, purpose and features of lesson, pupil involvement, and content.
3. I agree to read the written descriptions of the language arts program provided by Miss Dockstader and provide confirmation and clarification of the descriptions.
4. I agree to provide copies of monthly lesson plans.

These procedures will be done at my school or in my classroom.

C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

1. I am free to decline to answer the questions that make me feel uncomfortable or I do not wish to answer.

2. For this research project, the researcher is requesting teacher background information. The researchers will make every effort to protect my identity. However, if I am uncomfortable answering any of these questions, I may decline to answer them.

3. Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, only Miss Dockstader will have access to my study records. After the discussion has been transcribed from the tapes, the tapes will be destroyed. No individual identities

will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study.

4. Each teacher/principal/school will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used during data analysis and reporting.

E. BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. However, the information that I provide may help seventh grade language arts teachers in Idaho improve their classroom instruction so that more students are successful on the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho State Achievement Test.

E. COSTS

There will be no costs to me as a result of taking part in this study, other than the time spent to participate.

F. PAYMENT

There will be no payment to me as a result of taking part in this study, but I will receive a gift certification for $50.00 to Barnes and Noble.

G. QUESTIONS

If I have any questions or concerns about participation in this study, I should first talk with the investigator Jolene Dockstader at 208/324-6569 (h) or 208/324-8134 ext 3024 (w). If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the board office between 8:00 AM and 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday, by calling (208) 426-1574 or by writing: Institutional Review Board, Office of Research Administration, Boise State University, 1910 University Dr., Boise, ID 83725-1135.

H. CONSENT

I will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as an employee of the district.

I give my consent to participate in this study:

_____ _____
Signature of Study Participant Date

I give my consent to be audio taped in this study:

_____ _____
Signature of Study Participant Date

I give my consent to use my words in research reports and presentations:

_____ _____
Signature of Study participant Date

_____ _____
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date

THE BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY INTSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN PARTICPANTS IN RESEARCH.

Please return to: Jolene Dockstader; 218 W. Ave. I #100, Jerome, ID 83338

APPENDIX B

Initial Contact Scripts

INITIAL PRINCIPAL TELEPHONE CONTACT SCRIPT

Good morning. My name is Jolene Dockstader. I am a doctoral student at Boise State University, and I am working on my dissertation on highly effective 7th grade language arts programs such as yours. Is this a convenient time to visit about your school's possible participation in the study?

If not, schedule a time to call back.

If so, then say:

Over the last few months, I've studied the DWA and ISAT data of many schools in southern Idaho, and I'd like to take a closer look at your program so that I can see how seventh-grade language arts teachers effectively prepare students to write well while at the same time preparing them to perform capably on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

It is not my intention to interrupt the language arts classes, so no special planning needs to be done. However, I would like to observe on days when the lessons are ones the teacher feels are effective in teaching his/her students to write well, as well as prepare them for the DWA and/or ISAT.

I'd like to schedule a time to meet with you to go over the details of the study and see about your schools participation.

Do you have any questions?

I look forward to meeting you, seeing your language arts program in operation, and discussing my study further.

INITIAL TEACHER CONTACT SCRIPT

Hi! My name is Jolene Dockstader. I am a doctoral student at Boise State University, and I am working on my dissertation on effective 7th grade language arts programs such as yours. I want to thank you for agreeing to work with me while I gather data about your program

You were selected because you are an effective 7th grade teacher who exemplifies not only the planning and organizing that makes your students successful, but who has experience teaching the 7th grade curriculum, are intimately familiar with the program, and are willing to work with me while I gather data about what you do.

Over the last few months, I've studied the DWA and ISAT data of many schools in southern Idaho, and I've identified your program because more than 75% of your students perform well on both assessments. I'm interested in seeing how you effectively prepare students to write well while at the same time prepare them to perform capably on both the Direct Writing Assessment and the Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

It is not my intention to interrupt the language arts classes, so no special planning needs to be done. However, I would like to observe on days when the lessons are ones you feel are effective in teaching your students to write well, as well as prepare them for the DWA and/or ISAT.

I'd like to schedule a time to meet with you to go over the details of the study, and see about setting up an interview.

Do you have any questions?

I look forward to working with you and appreciate your time and efforts. As a token of my appreciation you will receive a $50.00 Barnes and Noble gift certification.

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW

Are there any questions you have about the process before we begin the interview?

1. Tell me about your seventh grade language arts program.

2. Please describe how students are assigned to seventh-grade language arts classes (e.g., achievement or aptitude tests, ISAT scores, grades, judgment of teachers, guidance counselor, student or parent choice).

3. What do you feel is the most important function of seventh grade writing and language usage program (e.g., support other learning across the curriculum, teach language usage, teach writing through the writing process, prepare for state assessments, prepare students for life)?

4. Please identify the characteristics of your school that contribute most to its successful writing and language usage program.

5. Describe any experimental programs or innovations your school has used during the last three years in writing and language usage classes.

6. Is there anything else you would like to add that you think contributes to the success of your language arts programs that we have not discussed here?

7. How are the test results from DWA and ISAT used in your school?

Thank you. This has been very helpful. I will transcribe this interview and send you a copy via email within the next few days. Would you mind reading the transcript to make sure I have accurately and completely captured our interview today?

LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER INTERVIEW

Are there any questions you have about the process before we begin the interview?

Beliefs

1. What do you feel is the most important function of the seventh-grade writing and language usage program (e.g., support other learning across the curriculum, teach language usage, teach writing through the writing process, prepare for state assessments, prepare students for life)?

2. What do you think are the most important concepts or skills that students should learn by the end of the seventh grade?

3. How do you think writing is best learned?

4. How do you think language usage is best learned?

5. What part do you think state assessments play in the teaching and learning of writing and language usage?

6. What do you see as your main role in the classroom?

Program

7. Describe your language arts writing and language usage program. How much of it did you develop? How much were you constrained by the school, standards, etc.?

8. What are your basic responsibilities as a language arts teacher? How many classes of writing do you teach? Are you assigned a study hall or flex class in addition to regular classes? Are you assigned a period of preparation in addition to regular classes?

9. What strengths do you see in your present program?

10. If you could change anything in your present language arts program, what would it be?

11. In what ways do you believe the writing and language usage program at this school is unique?

Planning and Organizing

12. What part does the district curriculum play in your planning? What additional materials do you use? *Secure a copy of the written curriculum.*

13. Tell me about how you teach writing (e.g., what text, writing conferences, one-on-one).

14. Tell me about how you teach the language usage components (e.g., grammar, spelling, and mechanics)? Are they integrated with writing? How do you tie these together?

15. Please tell me about any models you use to teach writing (e.g., 6 traits, writing process, self-regulated strategy instruction).

16. How do the DWA and the ISAT influence your planning for instruction?

17. During the last month, about how much time did you spend teaching writing? Language usage?

18. During the whole year, about how much time do you spend teaching writing? Language Usage?

19. How do you feel about the balance between writing and language usage currently in your program?

20. Tell me about how you motivate students to write (or use independent writing time productively).

21. How do you use assessment? Give feedback to kids? Oral assessment? Student self-assessment? 6-traits assessment?

22. How much do the DWA or ISAT influence your thinking when planning and organizing your teaching?

23. On what teaching resources do you tend to rely the most heavily in your writing and language usage teaching (e.g., audio/visual aids, books, teacher created materials)?

Please make any final comments concerning your writing and language usage program.

Could I have a copy of your overview for the year with monthly plans for writing and language usage? (Secure a copy.)

TEACHER SCENARIO FOR SECOND INTERVIEW

Given the following scenario, please describe how you would plan and organize learning experiences for effective instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

SCENARIO: The state curriculum requires 7th grade students to write a research report. How would you plan and organize your curriculum and instruction to accomplish this requirement?

APPENDIX D

Interim Case Studies Used for Member Checks

Junior High School #1

Junior High School #1 is a rural school located in [redacted] County and is part of the [redacted] County School District. The classes average 20 students per teacher. The percentage of economically disadvantaged is 44%. Junior High School #1 serves grades 6-8. In 2006-07, 58% of the 7th grade class were proficient or advanced on the Direct Writing Assessment, down from 77% in 2005-06 and 77% were proficient or advanced on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test, down from 82% in 2005-06. In 2007-08, the 7th grade class had 82 students, 47 females and 35 female with 1 Black/African American, 1 Pacific Islander, 77 White, and 14 Hispanic. Junior High School #1 is part of a large school complex and sits to the west of the high school. Trees line the school in front and athletic fields in the back.

JHS #1 takes a whole school approach to school improvement. Several staff members attended the middle school conference in Houston, Texas, last November. This was so all staff members had a common understanding of middle school structure and purpose and to build unity within the staff for school improvement. The model currently being implemented at the school is suggested by Rebecca Dufour in *Whatever it Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don't Learn.* There are total of 82 students in the 7th grade at JHS #1 – 47 boys and 35 girls. There is one Black/African American, 66 white and 14 Hispanic or Latino. JHS #1 has a growing Hispanic and low SES population – 30% Hispanic and 47% low SES (as measured by free and reduced lunch). This has been on-going for the last 10 years.

Because JHS #1 is a small, rural school, students are assigned to the one reading/language arts teacher -- Elise. JHS #1 is concerned with addressing all issues that might arise for students, like in Maslow's hierarchy (physiological, safety, love-belonging, esteem, and self-actualization), if student needs are not addressed, then it is difficult to educate them. The following characteristics contribute most to the successful writing and language usage program: aligned curriculum, quality instruction, caring environment, and research-based interventions.

JHS #1 does not have any experimental or innovative programs specific to language arts; however, this year they have implemented a results based intervention (3 tiered) based on ISAT results. The ISAT has become the assessment of choice for reviewing results because of the strands information provided for each student. The DWA would be helpful if it had some more information rather than just a score. Goals are set for each student and each student is talked with individually about ISAT scores. Students are receptive to this concept because it gets them personally involved with the goals.

Once a goal is set and an intervention planned, teachers/aides chart results of interventions. Aides help with interventions every other day since they have an A/B schedule with 90 minute classes. They hold a weekly intervention team meeting and twice per month grade level team meetings to discuss results of interventions. The student support team meets bi- weekly for training, data review/tracking, and discipline issues.

The principal at JHS #1 views himself as an educational leader versus a manager. This is important if there is to be educational change and thus success for all students and in all subjects.

The Teacher

Elise is an elementary trained veteran teacher with a master's degree. She has several years of experience teaching seventh-grade language arts both here in other small towns in South Central Idaho. She is bright and articulate. Her rapport with students is obvious and shows in her interactions with students. She teaches on an A/B schedule, with four periods of 82 minutes and a 30-minute advisory at the end of the day. She has a preparation period, but not every day, as she also teaches an art class for the district one day a week.

Elise believes the most important function of the 7th grade language arts program is to teach students writing and language usage skills "that they can use later in life." Students need to know "how to write properly, including correct punctuation, grammar, and spelling." She believes writing is best learned by "practicing." She has her students write in her class every day, including journaling and genre writing. She believes language usage skills are best learned by practicing them as well. She assigns a daily language review (DLR) exercise each day. When the students correct the DLR, she asks them why the answers are correct so that they "know the rules as to why we do things." The state assessments play an important role in her teaching of writing and language usage, especially in focusing the instruction for the Direct Writing Assessment. Elise believes learning needs to be enjoyable and fun.

Elise views herself as the teacher in the classroom. She plans what is to be taught and then teaches that concept or skill. There is some flexibility in what is covered each day, but "we don't get too far off the path because we have certain things that we have to learn."

Elise uses the state standards to teach both reading and writing. They are separate classes, but frequently overlap so she can make connections between concepts. See for example the research project described below. The standards are divided by quarter and she adheres to that closely because of end of quarter assessments. She has several textbook sources from which she selects activities.

The strength Elise sees in her current program is the rigor of it. "Every day we are learning something." Whatever the context might be, every day she plans to teach them something or review something. It might be in a fun game or a practice exercise, but students are learning. "They are practicing the skills that are important and that [she] knows they need to know." Even though Elise wishes at times that she had a "a bag of tricks that could wow" students, especially when they are practicing the language usage portions of the curriculum, she feels that the program at JHS #1 is unique because she creates it as she goes. This allows her to best address the standards and the needs of her students. She likes that she teaches both reading and writing because she has the freedom to overlap concepts so students make connections and deepen their learning.

Classroom Environment

Elise's room is like most classrooms you walk into. The walls are richly covered with vocabulary, punctuation rules, posters, and white boards. Her student desks form a

V in rows facing the front of the room, like geese flying in formation. One computer sits at her desk which is stationed at the front corner of the room, and the other computer sits in the back corner where students take reading tests.

The objectives for the day are written on the back white board. Light from the large windows shines in and draws your eyes to the cold, wintry scene outside. Inside it is warm and inviting. Elise greets her students at the door, and each student enters quickly and immediately gets a book out and sits to read for the 30 minutes of reading practice. It is clear they understand the classroom routines and expectations.

Once the class begins, Elise monitors the students, seldom sitting during the 82 minutes of class. The class runs like a well-oiled machine. She often asks students to explain their thinking or why the answer is correct or not using humor to engage them in the lesson.

Curriculum

Elise uses a district curriculum that is based on the state standards. Her curriculum map is divided into quarters, which she adheres to "to make sure that what I teach in the quarter is actually taught." She reviews often and across quarters "to make sure that [students] actually continue to use that skill as we go." The following chart summarizes the number of essential skills in writing and language usage covered per quarter as per the district curriculum map.

Objectives by Quarter

Quarter	1	2	3	4
Writing	6	2	17	5
Language Usage	3	8	7	8

Much of the seventh-grade language arts program, Elise has created herself. She has a classroom set of grammar books that she uses for practice. She also uses the Daily Language Review (DLR) program to practice mechanics, punctuation, and grammar. The district curriculum is her foundation but she pulls from several resources, like the textbook, to select activities that best teach the concepts.

Instruction

Elise teaches writing using the 6 Traits, but does not adhere strictly to the program. She uses the traits particularly for practicing for the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA). She shows student examples of essays and uses the DWA rubric to have students assess and emulate the samples.

She uses journals to give students opportunities to write to a prompt and to teach the skills of writing like using voice and audience. She will often comment on their entries and write back to them to give them ideas for the next journal entry. Students keep a notebook in which ½ of the notebook has their spelling words and all the rules they've applied or whatever they've talked about in regards to the spelling. The second half are key terms or vocabulary that the students need to know.

Elise uses the five-step writing process, brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising, and publishing to teach the process of writing. She uses peer editing on major pieces of

writing, like expository and research papers, but not on practice writing like in the journals. Though not on a regular basis, she also conferences with students who are struggling with the writing.

Elise teaches language usage components of mechanics, grammar, and capitalization through the daily language review. The students have a couple of minutes to work on it and then they correct it on the overhead at the head of the class. The spelling she teaches using words that support the ISAT skills such as syllabication or the prefixes and suffixes and base words. She teaches the rules of spelling so that they cannot only spell the words, but "also apply it to any other words they come across." She gives students a spelling list on Monday, they practice the words during the week, and have a spelling test on Friday. The skills are taught separately, but she "includes a lot of skills that they will actually include throughout writing or even looking up a word in science."

Assessment

Elise uses several forms of assessment. She assesses the journal entries based on length – ½ page is worth 5 points. She is always "giving feedback orally or written." She does some of the assessments from the textbook when she does the grammar, but when she assesses writing she uses rubrics. Mostly she does all the assessing, but there are times when she would have some peer editing. When she is teaching the expository paper, she uses the DWA rubric.

The DWA and the ISAT are huge influences on her planning and instruction. The state and district standards are set up to teach student the things to know for those tests.

So she looks to make sure students are learning every day the things "that will help them on the tests and then in life as well." To negotiate the tensions between writing and language usage, she tries to find a balance. The assessments change the focus of instruction as Elise prepares them for the test. She starts students at the beginning of the year just writing to a prompt, but as the DWA approaches that will change as she assigns more writing. And then it will slack off a bit after the DWA to focus more on the language usage skills. But once she has taught "all those skills and students have really practiced those skills," then she brings more writing into play. As she looks at the whole year, Elise tries to balance the writing and the language usage, but thinks perhaps the scales tip a bit towards grammar.

Motivation

Elise motivates students by talking about something that is interesting or if she knows something about them from their journals or knows what interests them like the football game from the night before, she'll ask them to tell her about it. She knows the interests of her students and always keeps tabs on what is going on with them. She makes connections with kids by sharing personal experiences and then has them extend that idea to their own experience.

Example of Planning a Writing Unit

Per the state and district curriculum, Elise has her students do a research report. She incorporates the report with the reading. For example, she has assigned research reports in connection *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and *The Red Pony*. She groups the students into four students who will work well together. They complete the

report as a group project but work individually on "assignments as they go." The students will slowly work through the writing process.

She gives students choices in the topics they choose. The group works together to come to a consensus on the topic and each then takes some aspect of that topic. After the group has selected a topic, she'll go over the guide lines she expects of them. Then they conduct the research using the Internet and library resources. She carefully prepares each step from key terms to search to final presentation to ensure students "don't get to the end and bomb." Once students have found an article to summarize, she teaches students how to summarize and use a note card to get it down to the really precise details. Using examples, she then teaches students how to create an outline. Students then write the final paper contributing their individual pieces of the outline. The final step is preparing the final paper for publishing. Each member of the group has a job to do, like one student will type the paper, while others prepare a poster with information that pertains to their topic.

Elise has students proof their paper looking for mistakes and she eventually reads it as well. After the report is done, groups present the report with each student presenting their portion of the final report. Elise assesses the project as they go, and students have checked for spelling, capitalization, etc. and they have re-evaluated and peer edited the final product, so students seldom loose very many points.

Elise grades the group on participation, and uses a rubric to assess each student's research, their article, summary, and their 5 x 7 note cards. After the project is completed, Elise extends the learning by having the students create games out of the facts

of the report. This project takes quite a bit of time because they continue with the other things they do in class like spelling, journals, and DLR, so with the A/B schedule it might take a month or a month and half to complete.

Summary

Elise is an intelligent and conscientious teacher. She adheres closely to the district curriculum and makes sure that students know and understand the concepts she is teaching to make sure students actually continue to use the skills as they go and become life skills. She has established clear routines and expectations that she and the students follow each day so that concepts build steadily throughout the year. Her classroom is vocabulary rich with word walls and rules easily accessible and she uses the material to reinforce concepts when there is a spare five minutes. It is important to Elise to make connections with her students so she can help them to become better writers. She uses humor to build those connections to motivate them. Elise is careful to scaffold the learning by breaking down the pieces so students are successful and don't feel overwhelmed by the processes of writing. It is important to her that students are successful and she "likes to see them grown as they see they can do this."

Middle School #2

Middle School #2 is a rural school located in [redacted] County and is part of the [redacted] School District. The classes average 19 students per teacher. The percentage of economically disadvantaged is 35%. Middle School #2 serves students in grades 6-8. It is a newer, brick school surrounded by grass and athletic fields. The high school sits on a site west of the Middle School. In 2007-08, there are 110 students, 49 males and 61 females with 1 American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1 Asian, 104 White, and 4 Hispanic. In 2006-07, 88% of 7th grade students earned a proficient or advanced on the Direct Writing Assessment and 71% earned proficient or advanced on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test.

The students attend two periods of language arts on an A/B schedule. Eighty-five minutes of core and 40 minutes of applied English. It is taught by Jocelyn. All seven-grade students take these classes. The language arts curriculum includes real life experiences and projects with real life applications. Students are taught the writing process, which includes discussion first (brainstorming) and then writing. Jocelyn uses humor to engage the students and is very animated and uses projects to teach concepts and skills.

Students are assigned randomly and are not leveled. Special Education students are mainstreamed with an aide in the classroom who helps with accommodations.

At Middle School #2, the most important function of the language arts programs is to prepare students for high school, college, and life. Students should learn to read and understand forms and applications accurately. It should prepare students for college and

have clear expectations that students will attend college. There are no experimental programs in writing and language usage at Middle School #2.

The characteristics of the school that contribute most to its successful writing and language usage program is the daily planning time, as well as writing across the curriculum. All teachers hold students accountable for spelling and writing skills. Middle School #2 has strong programs like Accelerated Reader. Master teachers are also an important factor, e.g., Jocelyn presents at conferences and participates in the DWA scoring. The school district offers effective professional development of staff. The teachers look at data to best so they can best help students and hold high expectations for all students. They also have connected, strong parent involvement and support.

The Direct Writing Assessment and Idaho Standards Achievement Tests results are looked at by teachers so they can best help students. The scores are used to help determine interventions and teachers work toward helping students improve in the areas they need work. There is not a concern with test preparation, but applying knowledge students learn to the testing situation. All teachers work to help improve student skills in language arts, e.g., reading time is provided in all classes and language arts skills are corrected in all classes.

In the principal's view, there are a few things that contribute to the success of the language arts programs at Middle School #2. The teachers model good reading and writing skills and keep students actively engaged and apply the knowledge learned. The parents are supportive, and there are very few discipline problems.

Middle School #2 has a mixed staff of experienced teachers with six with less than 3 years experience. The staff development is strong and the teachers go out of their way to improve their professional development. The district provides $300 for teachers to use for staff development. It also provides one-time money to help teachers seek a master's degree. The school board is supportive, and there is a strong administrative team that backs the programs. For example, the curriculum director coordinates on-going professional development with students needs.

The Teacher

Jocelyn is a petite, bubbly blond. Her enthusiasm for her students and her profession are evident and contagious. She is elementary trained. She serves about 112 students a day on a schedule that includes an advisory, a preparation period, four 85-minute language arts/reading classes, and a 30-minute applied English class on an A/B schedule. In the core classes, she teaches reading and writing, and in the applied English class vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. Jocelyn sees the strength of her program is the relationships that she builds with students. She gets to know them and then has the flexibility to exercise her "own professional judgment for the programs that [she] uses" to help students learn the concepts and skills she teaches. She feels that this is unique at her school because she has created the program that fits her seventh graders and her own personality, too.

The most important function of the seventh-grade writing and language usage curriculum to Jocelyn is to support learning across the curriculum, teach language usage, writing, prepare for state assessments, and prepare students for life. She does focus on

non-fiction reading and writing. Jocelyn thinks the most important concept or skills that students should learn by the end of the 7th grade is to "write because that is a skill that they can use their entire life." She also thinks grammar and language usage are important so students "are writing correct sentences."

The best way to learn to write is by practice Jocelyn believes, especially different kinds of writing. She uses the *Step-up to Writing* program to teach expository writing because it helps her give students a "pattern to go by." For language usage, Jocelyn has traditionally taught the skills through worksheet practice, but is trying to "work on using it more in the writing process" in the hopes that it will stick with kids. She uses a new program she purchased last year called *Grammar Punk*, which she is excited about and hopes students learn the skills better. It is fun and the students are enthusiastic to play the grammar games.

Jocelyn feels the state assessments give her a picture of what a student can do on a given day. "It is just one little piece of the puzzle of the whole child." She does believe that the assessments are important because they are good for parents and they do guide the curriculum. She wants students to succeed, so she does what she needs to in order to prepare them to do well on the assessments.

Jocelyn sees her role as a coach or mentor, "someone who inspires kids." She feels it is important to "come along beside them and take them from where they are to another place, and make them believe in themselves."

Jocelyn also believes the terminology or vocabulary of writing and language usage are important because they are used on the state assessments, so she uses them in

her instruction and assessments. She uses the vocabulary in her rubrics when assessing writing. In the past, she has given end of quarter tests, but has been working towards using "more assessments that are smaller chunks rather than big chunks."

Jocelyn uses mostly teacher created materials, but very little of the textbook. She finds activities from "books on certain topics." Spelling and mechanics are mostly incorporated into student writing. She focuses on easily confused words like homophones and homographs when teaching spelling.

Classroom Environment

Jocelyn's room is bright and warm and energetic. The students enter enthusiastically as Jocelyn greets them at the door and then hang out after class to chat. The walls are covered with posters and student work. Tables with four chairs, two on each side, sit neatly surrounding the teacher's desk, which is stationed in the middle of the room. One computer sits on the teacher's desk and a LCD project hangs from the ceiling. But it is the overhead project that Jocelyn uses most days.

The objectives for the day are written on the front white board. Students eagerly tell Jocelyn bits and pieces of their lives while she takes roll. Then quickly switch to the lesson when she begins by studiously taking notes on the day's topic. Once students begin working, Jocelyn diligently monitors and assists students. Even while working, the energy in the room is high. It is interesting that whether in the longer 85-minute core class or the shorter 40-minute applied English class, the time passes quickly with little down time.

Curriculum

The district that Jocelyn works for does not have a district curriculum. In stead, they use the state curriculum or standards as the foundation to their curriculum. The teachers in the language arts department did get together to work out what each grade level at the Middle School would focus on. For example, the seventh-grade language arts program focuses on non-fiction. Jocelyn does have a district adopted textbook, which she uses occasionally for teaching small concepts and skills of the writing and language usage portion of her curriculum because it "too hard for 7th graders." For the most part, Jocelyn uses teacher created materials and the *Step-up to Writing* program. She has "tons of resources" from which she selects activities and/or sections based upon what concept she is teaching. This allows her to "balance between [her] highest kids and lowest."

During the year, although Jocelyn teaches both reading and writing, she spends more time with the writing because she feels more confidence in teaching it than teaching the reading. To negotiate the tensions between writing and language usage, she tries to find a balance. For the first and last quarters, she focuses on reading with language usage. The second and third quarters, she focuses on writing with the language usage because of the Direct Writing Assessment. The chart below maps out the number of writing and language usage objectives per quarter Jocelyn covered last year per her lesson plans.

Objectives by Quarter

Quarter	1	2	3	4
Writing	5	7	5	4
Language Usage	9	3	1	2

Instruction

Jocelyn uses two main models for teaching writing – 6 Traits and the five-step writing process. She uses writer's notebooks to have the student write about writing and have them write to little prompts that she gives them. To teach the language usage portion of the curriculum, she has had the students practice using skill sheets and their own writing, especially with spelling and mechanics. She does use a new program she purchased last spring called *Grammar Punk* she is using this year to teach grammar. However, Jocelyn tries to integrate the skills and concepts with the writing and is working toward creating a writer's workshop in her classroom. Teaching the students the terminology of the writing is important to Jocelyn, and so she uses it and models it for the students.

Assessment

To assess the learning, Jocelyn gives lots of feedback, especially on essays. She comments on "what they are missing and what they need to fix." She will also meet one-on-one with the student to help them improve their writing. She uses rubrics to assess writing assignments.

To prepare students for the Direct Writing Assessment, she starts preparing the students the month before the assessment. She will teach the students the language of the

Direct Writing Assessment rubric and will have them write and assess their papers based on the rubric. With the ISAT she has a love/hate relationship. She thinks it is good, but is frustrated when the test is changed or if new vocabulary comes up that is confusing. She focuses on students that will make gains, but tries to do her very best to teach the concepts and skills that will be tested on the ISAT. The assessments have a huge influence on the vocabulary and what she teaches, the pacing, and what concepts to focus on.

Motivation

Jocelyn motivates students to write by trying to make connections to the students. She encourages them and will target the reluctant writers to help them towards proficiency. To her motivation comes from looking at kids individually and trying different things. She tries to find topics that are interesting and that helps motivate the students to write. The following is an example of how Jocelyn would plan and teach a research project, which is required in the state standards for seventh grade.

Example of Planning a Writing Unit

When planning for a research report, Jocelyn starts with the objectives that will be assessed. At Middle School #2, the research skills are taught as an elective class, but she has collaborated with the social studies in the past. Before beginning the project in the spring, she would have first worked with students building a foundation in expository writing.

Jocelyn uses the *Step-up to Writing* program to teach the students how to write expository essays and would use it again to teach students how to use note cards – color

coding for the topics and facts gathered. She would have students research using the Internet and the library. She would show students examples and work through the rubric so they understand the expectations. Then she would break the parts of the essay down into sections starting with the introductions. She would use the textbook to teach how to do a work cited page because it has a good section on teaching work cited. And finally, she would have them word process their final products. The students would present their research in the social studies class using posters they made with the research report in the center and pictures to support their papers.

To assess the project, Jocelyn would use a rubric that would include the "pieces and parts, title page, outline, the essay, and the work cited page, and the presentation." She would integrate the grammar, spelling, and punctuation skills into the project. An important part of the instruction would be to use the proper language that was on the ISAT. So she might also include a quiz on the key vocabulary and research concepts. Jocelyn would spend several weeks on this size project.

Summary

Jocelyn is a very thoughtful and reflective teacher. She starts with the curriculum and then builds the program around what she wants the students to learn while taking into account the differences in ability and personality of her students. In her planning, she takes the big project and breaks it down into smaller pieces to scaffold the learning for the students. The state assessments play a part of her planning, and she is careful to use the terminology students will find on the assessments so that they will recognize and be able to use it when taking the tests. She does plan the instruction so that it best supports

when the state assessments are given. For example, she focuses on writing expository essays in the 2nd quarter so students are prepared for the Direct Writing Assessment. She prepares less for the ISAT, but is conscientious about using the terminology of the assessment and does her best to prepare students to succeed on the test. She loves to teach writing and to see "what the kids write and what they create and what they say and to get some kids who don't write so well to add things to their writing that makes it spectacular."

Middle School #3

Middle School #3 is an urban school located in [redacted] County and is part of the [redacted] School District. The classes average 21 students per teacher. The percentage of economically disadvantaged is 20%. Middle School #3 serves grades 6-8. There are 305 students in the 2007-08 7th grade -- 138 female and 167 male. The 7th grade class has 2 American Indian, 5 Asian, 12 African American, 2 Native Hawaiian, 263 White, and 21 Hispanic students. In 2006-07, 77% of students were proficient or advanced or a 3 or 4 on the Direct Writing Assessment and 73% were proficient or advanced on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. Middle School #3 is located in the country side surrounded by large subdivisions of new homes and older 70's style neighborhoods. Originally, Lake Hazel was built as a high school, but was never used as such because it was decided a middle school was necessary at completion.

The seventh-grade language arts teacher is part of a five member team – literature, writing, science, social studies, and math. Each team works closely together and has a team prep time. Each teacher also has an individual prep scheduled each day. Students are assigned randomly to teams, though some consideration is given to personality of student and teachers and the rare request from parents.

According to the principal, the most important function of the seventh-grade writing and language usage program is the focus on reading/writing. The teams plan projects together and support other areas of the curriculum. The seventh-grade writing and language usage program also prepares students for state exams. The language arts

teachers score the DWA so they understand how best to help students do well on the assessment.

One characteristic that contribute to Middle School #3's successful writing and language usage program is the block scheduling (90 minutes). It provides creative scheduling that best prepares students. Another characteristic is the foundation the sixth grade provides. In the sixth grade, the reading and writing subjects are integrated. They also have an advance program for students in 1st period. The G/T program has 90 minutes with LA component with the study of civilizations. This front-loads the learning. There are no experimental programs or innovations that have been used during the last three years in regular writing and language usage classes.

The test results from DWA and ISAT are provided to teachers, though not much analysis is done. Students are not placed in classes based on the results of these tests.

The principal believes the key to the success of the language arts program is really the teams and excellent teachers. Teachers are allowed and encouraged to be the best they can be. Middle School #3 partners with Boise State University for professional development and so the student teachers receive better training. The teacher in the seventh-grade language arts class did her student teaching at Middle School #3 with , who is the reading/literature teacher, and then was hired to fill the vacated language arts/English position. The use of block scheduling also helps.

The Teacher

Kate is a young, second year teacher trained as a secondary English teacher. She completed her student training at Middle School #3 and now works side-by-side with her

mentor teacher. She teaches five 45-minute periods of language arts per day with a 15-minute advisory and two preparation periods – one personal and one team per day.

Kate believes the most important function of the seventh-grade language arts program is to teach students "how to write well and speak well because they will use it in every aspect of their lives." The most important skills or concepts that students should learn are the basics like "how to form a sentence, use semicolons and commas, and capitalization and end marks." But above and beyond the basics, students need to know "how to write well."

She believes the best way to learn to write is "a lot of practice, repetition, getting used to being comfortable with writing." She gives her students a lot of freedom on the choice of topics to write about. Practice is again the best way to learn language usage she believes. This practice comes in the form of a daily oral language exercise. It is important to her to "explain" the need for proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling. She teaches the subjects separately, but then builds a bridge between the two by integrating the skills into the writing. The state assessments serve in giving her "students a goal or a reason as to why they need to learn how to do this."

Kate views herself in a traditional teacher role in the classroom. She plans what will be taught and when, but uses more student-centered instruction when they write. She is a new teacher so isn't familiar with what other schools do, but she feels that at Middle School #3 the teachers have a lot freedom. She feels this helps because it is up to the teacher to best serve her students by learning "who the students are and find what works best for this guy over here or that guy over there." This is important because she has an

average of 30 students per class. Overall, she really likes the program as it is set out. It has elements of "poetry, which an artsy person would like and the research, which a logical person might like."

Kate sees the strength of the program as the combined efforts of the staff – school wide. For example, in advisory every Monday the students read silently to help improve reading scores.

Curriculum

Kate has a district curriculum, which is built around the state standards. However, the district curriculum is mostly geared towards the reading portion of the state standards. She adheres to the state standards in her planning for instruction. Kate has a student handbook she makes use of, but for the most part utilizes materials and activities she has created or found on the Internet.

Kate uses the writing process and the 6+1 Traits as a foundation to her writing program.

She has students study the rubrics to teach the traits of writing, which students convert to their own language so they understand what it actually means. They pull out the elements of good writing. Then they look at examples to judge if the examples are good or bad based on their rubrics. Kate assigns four big writing units a year and two or three small ones.

She then has the students write an expository paper and the students score it based on the 6 Traits rubric. After the paper has been scored by several of their peers, she holds

a one-on-one conference with each student. The students then go "back and make a separate copy that is actually graded."

Kate plans a couple weeks of writing and then a couple weeks of language usage. Then she integrates the language usage and writing by emphasizing the recently learned skills in the writing. She assesses the conventions as part of the rubric.

When she plans for the grammar and mechanics units, she introduces a different lesson each day. She has the students take notes on the grammar skills, then work on a practice set. Sometimes the handbook has a game to play, which she has the students play for fun and practice. She also assigns daily oral language exercises to practice the language usage skills. For spelling, she follows the Monday – pretest, Wednesday – homework, and Friday – spelling test model.

For pacing, Kate spends 5-6 weeks on writing and rest of the time on grammar in the first semester. In the second semester, she spends 2 ½ months on writing and the rest of the time on grammar. The big writing project usually comes at the end of the year, except for the practice time spent for the DWA. The following chart summarizes the number of skills in writing and language usage covered per quarter based on her lesson plans.

Objectives by Quarter

Quarter	1	2	3	4
Writing	18	16	9	19
Language Usage	7	15	7	2

Kate feels the balance between writing and language usage is about right for time and for concepts.

Motivation

It is important to Kate that her students understand how important the skill of writing is and how students will use it in their futures. She gives them freedom to choose their topics or something they are interested in to write about. And "their grade is obviously" a motivation.

Assessment

Kate uses rubrics to assess the writing. She has the students peer assess the papers using both ones she has created and ones they have created. She provides students with feedback by noting editing errors and gives an average of three sentences of comments on things "they have done well and things they need to work on."

The DWA does influence Kate's planning for instruction. For the DWA, she photocopies the same sheet that they are going to be writing on so that students are used to seeing that form. The ISAT on the other had does not influence her planning "by any means," but it is a tool for her to determine and share with the students what the important concepts tested on the ISAT are. The placement of the DWA and the ISAT does influence when and how Kate plans for instruction. For example, she focuses on the DWA at the beginning of the year by teaching and talking about expository writing. Then in the spring, most of the concepts and skills have been taught so they "do a bunch of review before the ISAT."

Resources

Kate relies on teacher created materials for the writing. She has tried the *Step-up to Writing* program and uses some elements of it, but not many. She also uses the new school issued grammar handbook, which she really likes.

Planning

Kate carefully scaffolds the learning when planning to teach a new unit. When she teaches the students how to write a research paper, she starts with examples, and the rubric to teach the expectations. Then she has them complete a mini-research project, which takes them through the research process but instead of paper the end project is a mobile. The mobile has a map on one side and the flag on the other, with the facts with citations dangling from it.

Next, she works with the history teacher to research topics from WWI or WWII. Though this year she is thinking of changing to have the students continue through with the country they selected for the mini-project, so students bridge the concepts a little easier.

Kate uses both the library and the Internet to research and teaches the students the MLA method of citing sources. The rubric would include the formatting of the essay, the work cited, and the conventions. The focus on this project would be the research process so she would not use as much of the 6 Traits in the rubric.

Classroom Environment

Kate's classroom is warm and inviting. Fluorescent lights illuminate every corner and show walls covered with motivational and instructional posters. The desks sit in

rows facing the front white board. Her desk is stationed at the side near the classroom door. One computer sites near her desk. The objectives for the day are written neatly on the board.

Kate greets students as they come in jostling and kidding each other like seventh-grade students everywhere. As soon as they are seated, students get out their notebook paper and begin working on the DOL exercise on the board as Kate turns the overhead projector on and the lights off. Class has begun. Through the 45-minute class period, students work studiously as Kate monitors and helps students as they work on assignments. The classroom is controlled and disciplined. Students work independently at times and with partners at other times. Students participate by raising their hands in response to Kate's queries. She often asks them to explain why they have answered the way they have. She continues to prod students to think and dig deeper to make sure students understand new concepts.

From beginning to end, the class is structured and objectives are met. Students work to the bell and then are dismissed.

Summary

Kate is a bright and reflective teacher. She works in the school where she student taught and with her mentor teacher. She follows the state and district curriculum, but uses many of her own teacher created materials. She often comes up with ideas "at night before [she] falls asleep." She likes where she works and what she teaches and that shows in her interactions with her peers and with her students. Her classroom is typical of many language arts classrooms with motivation as well as education posters on the

walls hanging beside student work. At Middle School #3, teachers are not required to keep lesson plans, but she makes notes to herself looking over the semesters to make sure she covers the concepts and skills needed to assure success for her students both on the state assessments and for life skills.

Junior High School #4

Junior High #4 is an urban school located in [redacted], Idaho, and is part of the [redacted] Independent School District. The classes average 18 students per teacher. The percentage of economically disadvantaged is 27%. Junior High #4 serves students in grades 7-9. In the 2007-08 7th grade class, there are 258 students with 116 female, and 142 male: 6 Asian, 10 Black/African American, 1 Pacific Islander, 230 White, and 11 Hispanic. The 2006-07 7th grade class had 92% proficient or advanced on the Direct Writing Assessment and 81% proficient or advanced on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test. It is located in the heavily populated, yet picturesque [redacted] and is a red brick building surrounded by mature trees.

At Junior High #4 there are 258 seventh grade students, 116 Female, 142 Male, 6 - Asian, 10 - Black/African American, 1 - Pacific Islander, 230 - White, 11 – Hispanic. There are two English teachers, one with 15 yrs experience and one with 8. Students are randomly assigned to teams, though they are placed in accelerated classes through ISAT Scores, DWA, grades, and teacher recommendation.

The most important function of seventh grade writing and language usage program is to support other learning across the curriculum, teach language usage, teach writing through the writing process, prepare for state assessments, and prepare students for life. The primary focus of the seventh-grade program is teaching writing through the writing process, which then is able to go across other curriculum areas. Staff tries to be consistent with writing expectations throughout the grades.

The characteristics of the school that contribute most to its successful writing and language usage program are quality teachers, a culture of high expectations, consistent writing process throughout the grade levels, students that work hard, and teachers who hold them accountable. One innovative program begun in the last three years in writing and language usage classes is a peer tutor program created by Greta. Every class has teaching assistants (TA) who help during lunch every day. The TA will help during class but also during lunch and after school. The student is trained by Greta. They have to work one shift of lunch study hall a week. Any student with missing work or anybody that needs help in any area attends. These TAs are trained on how to be effective peer tutors, not do it for them but guide them through it or share their notes and be encouraging. So there is that support system. The lunch study hall is very active with up to 20 kids in there every day. It holds students accountable.

The DWA and ISAT results are given to teams, who use the scores while problem solving. It helps answer the question - is that student working to their ability or not? It also helps identify students who need extra help or students who are accelerated.

Another thing that contributes to the success of students at Junior High #4 is teachers who work together not only with their team of teachers, but also with their mirrored teaching partner (teacher on the other team who teaches the same thing.) Breaking our student body into smaller teams helps us connect with kids and reduces those that fall through the cracks because there isn't enough time in the day to talk about problem solving for these students.

The Teacher

Greta teaches language arts at Junior High #4 who is elementary trained. She is a veteran teacher who teaches an advisory, four 45-minute periods, and has a team preparation and a personal prep each day. She is an articulate and thoughtful educator. She thinks the most important function of the seventh-grade language arts program is teaching "writing through the writing process." The most important thing an English teacher does it "prepare the kids for life, for college, and even high school with practical types of writing."

The most important concept or skill that students should learn according to Greta is the ability to work through the writing process, especially revising. Another important skill is vocabulary building. And a third skill is public speaking because it is so critical in high school and college.

She believes the best way to learn to write is by studying models of writing, both published and unpublished. She often models her own writing, especially the struggle of many revised drafts. She thinks aloud as she models the writing process. Greta believes the best way to learn language usage is practice, but she tries to make it fun by getting the kids to the white board and using colored highlighters.

Greta believes the state assessments are excellent tools to focus teaching, and validate what she is doing, especially the DWA. She focuses less on the ISAT, but feels by teaching the best she can, her kids will do okay on it.

Greta sees her role in the classroom as a motivator and a supporter, because writing is building a trust with students. She respects and encourages her students and allows them to evaluate her each quarter.

If Greta could change anything in her present program, it would be the amount of time she has to teach them the things she feels they need to learn. She and the students work to the bell every day. She would also like a bit more parental involvement. At times, she has asked parents to read student essays, but some parents didn't want to do it. They said they were too busy, and that bothered her that they were too busy to read their child's essay.

Greta sees one of the strengths of her current program is the balance between structured writing and creative writing. Structured is when they write a specific piece of writing and then go through the writing process and focus on varying sentence structures. Creative writing is where they write more creative pieces like poetry. Both ways, Kathy holds students to the highest standard. She "loves what she does and cares lot about it."

Curriculum

Greta writes an annual plan based on the district curriculum that she writes during the summer, which guides her through the year. The district curriculum is based on the state achievement standards. There is a textbook for the seventh-grade language arts classes, but she doesn't use it because it is too elementary and "reading a short story from a book is not how you teach writing." This is particularly true since fiction isn't in the curriculum at this grade level. The chart below maps out the number of writing and language usage objectives per quarter Greta teaches based on the district curriculum.

Objectives by Quarter

Quarter	1	2	3	4
Writing	2	7	7	3
Language Usage	1	10	6	2

The curriculum is set up so that the entire first semester is writing with just a little bit of other things thrown in. This helps prepare students for the DWA. And the 2nd semester is predominately language usage and public speaking, which prepares students for the ISAT. She strives to not drop the writing because she wants students write all year. So she has students write a persuasive and a compare/contrast essay in the 2nd semester.

Greta spends about 75% of the year on teaching writing and 25% teaching the skills of language usage. She feels this is a good balance between these two areas because her students do well on the district-wide EOC that is a multiple choice test, as well as the ISAT. She negotiates the tensions between the writing and language usage by holding students to accountable for their learning.

Instruction

Writing

To teach writing, Greta uses teacher created materials. She uses the writing process and the 6 Traits as the foundation for teaching writing. She also uses a few parts of the *Step-up to Writing* program. She would first introduce the genre of the piece and provide examples from which students would take notes in a writer's notebook on the characteristics.

She gives students lots of choices on topics when they start. "They pick what works for them." Then she has them draft and self-edit. A key element of the writing is the revision step of the writing process. She has the students revise over time working on one trait and perhaps language-usage skill like sentence structure at a time. Each step is carefully structured so "they can't not do it."

She doesn't use peer editing because that "does not seem to work very well." Editing is a difficult process, so she "spoon feeds them a little bit" at a time. Next, they write a final draft that must meet standardized appearance requirements. Finally, they share the writing in teams or whole class.

Language Usage

Greta teaches language usage mostly within the writing, but the parts of speech, spelling, and vocabulary are taught separately. She selects activities that are creative; for example, while teaching spelling of words with Latin roots the students made a collage. She does a daily oral language of language usage concepts.

Greta has "created 100% of [her] program." She has gathered from lots of different places and searches the Internet to find good ideas. She uses materials she has made and examples from previous years.

<u>Assessment</u>

Greta uses the state DWA rubric to assess student writing. Students use her comments to set goals on what to improve for their next writing assignment. She also uses quizzes and tests on the characteristics of writing. Students will also reflect in writing on what "they wrote about and that went well [and] what could have gone better."

She also tracks data in terms of the ISAT, so she knows who is weak and below proficient in each subcategory of the ISAT. She targets kids who need help and differentiates their work.

Greta isn't sure she would teach quite as much of the writing process and 6 traits if there was no DWA. But she feels as a conscientious teacher that she probably would because writing is the most important thing that she teaches.

To help prepare students for the DWA, she has implemented what she calls writing workshop. Prior to DWA, she looks at everyone who is scoring a 1 or 2 and pairs them with the highest students and they become "best friends" for a week or two and they have lunch together every day in her room. They bring their lunch and they work side-by-side on improving their skills. Students are provided two copies of the essay, and the tutors or writers (they are generally accelerated students that want to help) who sit side-by-side. They work together and talk like writers and they bring them along. It makes a huge difference in their writing. It holds students accountable also, because it is not alright to score a 1 or a 2. Some students stay two weeks or some stay one week and pop out then. Students may need to come back in or stay in working with another writer or their writer to get their skills up if they still score at a 2 or below. It is unacceptable in Greta's mind to have a 2, so she and the students do everything they can do build those skills.

Motivation

Greta motivates students to write by using a number of options: choices, brainstorm topics, talk to them, help write the first sentence, honors what they do as

important, tries to help them see the value, and tries to eliminate the stress. She makes due dates flexible.

Students are also motivated by because her students will say that this is where they say they have fun. They love it. For some reason, writing is fun for them the way Greta does it. She thinks that is important. What makes it different at this school is about a third of the population are on permission to attend. Meaning that this is not their school, but they choose to be here. This is an academic school and Greta is always saying that to the kids. "This is an academic school. You must work hard here."

Classroom Environment

Greta's room is like all language arts classrooms with walls covered with posters and rich with vocabulary and student work. The student desks sit in rows facing the front white board and the teacher's desk is stationed at the back of the room. The objectives for the day are neatly printed on the front white board. Students come in eagerly and immediately start bell work. Greta monitors and helps students and when the topic of presidential caucuses and primaries comes up one day, she participates in a lively discussion but then smoothly transitions students into correcting the daily oral language exercise.

Students are attentive and participate in the activities outlined on the white board as Greta transitions through them. Students work individually as well as in small groups during the 45 minutes of class. Humor plays a part in the instruction and interactions with and between students. She teaches two regular and two accelerated classes. Though the curriculum is the same, she differentiates the assignments and expectations.

Color seems to be used everywhere -- on the walls, on the board, on the stick notes. The environment is also vocabulary rich. Words cover the walls, in Greta's instruction, and in the student language.

Planning

When planning for instruction, Greta starts with the objectives from the district curriculum. For example, when planning for a research report, she combines the report with public speaking. She bases the project on those countries the students study in their world studies curriculum. The final project is a travel guide. It is a multimedia research report presented in PowerPoint about a country of their choice.

She then carefully scaffolds the learning by providing students with a packet of useful information and project directions. Some of the skills that are included there are note taking, summarizing, paraphrasing, using a variety of resources in the school library, books, on-line databases, books, encyclopedias, Internet, organizing notes and outlining. One of main focuses is to teach them how to give an effective oral presentation. Students are not allowed to read the PowerPoint slides to the class, so they'll have speaker notes in their hands. She expects them to face forward and project their voice. She discusses body language and they practice that.

Everything is organized into a project folder. The folder is decorated on the front with the topic, and then inside are all the components. There is an area for statement of purpose, KWL with inquiry questions, an outline, the vocabulary terms that they learn, and a small bibliography where they cite one of each of the types of resources in MLA format that they are using. They have to have 5 vocabulary terms that they come across

in their research and they define those. The project has six subtopics about their country: history, geography, culture, tourism, events like festivals and holidays, and advice for travelers. The students are able to add any other subtopics that they are interested in, dance, architecture, sports.

Then she teaches the research process by providing them with a detailed planning sheet on how to work through the research process. It is very, very structured and the students work through the 20 items almost like a to-do list. To keep students from becoming overwhelmed, she has them go through the items quickly in the beginning. All of this is done in class except for the refining. Some of the kids do additional research at the public library or on the Internet, but the bulk is done in class. This is a project that they are all pretty successful on because most of it is done in class and the interest is high. Greta would take about four weeks to complete this project and will use a detailed rubric to assess the project. At the very end students will reflect on what they enjoyed, what recommendations they for changing it, what was the biggest challenge.

Summary

Greta is a high energy, funny, and dedicated teacher. She creates activities that will stimulate and build understanding for her students when she is at home at night – often while she is in bed. Greta's room is filled with color and her interactions with students are colorful as well. She cares that the students learn to write and makes sure her students learn to write by carefully scaffolding their learning. She holds high expectations for students and most rise to the challenge as evidenced by the scores on the

DWA and ISAT. Greta loves writing and the written word. She is academic oriented and likes to work at a school where there is a push for excellence.