Writing workshop and creativity despite standardization: An exploration of elementary teachers' practices

Darcie Kay Kress
University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©2019 Darcie Kay Kress
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd

Part of the Elementary Education Commons, and the Language and Literacy Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Kress, Darcie Kay, "Writing workshop and creativity despite standardization: An exploration of elementary teachers' practices" (2019). Dissertations and Theses @ UNI. 996.
https://scholarworks.uni.edu/etd/996

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations and Theses @ UNI by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.
WRITING WORKSHOP AND CREATIVITY DESPITE STANDARDIZATION:
AN EXPLORATION OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS’ PRACTICES

An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

____________________________________________
Dr. Sarah Montgomery, Co-Chair

____________________________________________
Dr. Linda Fitzgerald, Co-Chair

____________________________________________
Dr. Jennifer Waldron
Dean of the Graduate College

Darcie Kay Kress
University of Northern Iowa

December 2019
ABSTRACT

Writing instruction in today’s classrooms is often structured with “formulaic, sterile writing instruction” (Brown, Morrell, and Rowlands, 2011, p. 17). The focus on formulaic approaches can be problematic, for it may inadvertently cause the quality of students’ writing to decline (Brown, Morrell, & Rowlands, 2011; Gillespie, Olinghouse, & Graham, 2013). The National Writing Project (NWP) provides teachers with professional development to strengthen their own skills as writers, and also to learn how to effectively incorporate evidence-based practices into their writing instruction.

The aim of this study was to explore the practices of three elementary classroom teachers (second, fifth, and sixth grades), who had received professional development training from the National Writing Project (NWP). Data was collected using observations, a teacher questionnaire, teacher interviews, and a creativity rubric for evaluating samples of student work. Specifically, the questions that guided this study were:

1) How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?

2) What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints or catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making?

3) What resources are teachers using to support their writing instruction?

4) How do teachers identify and support creativity in writing?
The first result of the study indicated that the participants appeared to be navigating the standardization of writing curriculum in various ways, from a student-centered workshop approach to more structured writing assignments. The second theme was the discovery of teachers’ use of autonomy in aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. While all teachers adhered to district standards, their instructional resources and strategies varied. The third theme was student engagement and opportunities for creativity during writing instruction. During this study, student engagement was more apparent when students were given freedom for including creativity. The implications for teaching practices in schools and for future research are included.
WRITING WORKSHOP AND CREATIVITY DESPITE STANDARDIZATION:
AN EXPLORATION OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS’ PRACTICES

A Dissertation
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
Approved:

____________________________________________
Dr. Sarah Montgomery, Co-Chair

___________________________________________
Dr. Linda Fitzgerald, Co-Chair

______________________________
Dr. Sarah Vander Zanden, Committee Member

___________________________
Dr. Irenea Walker, Committee Member

___________________________
Dr. Matt Townsley, Committee Member

Darcie Kay Kress
University of Northern Iowa
December 2019
DEDICATION

For my family,
whose unwavering support gave me strength
when I needed it most.

Lauren and Carolyn -
Always remember how much I love you.
You can do it all!

To my husband, Bryan -
Thank you for believing in me and supporting me every step of the way.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Montgomery, Dr. Fitzgerald, Dr. Vander Zanden, Dr. Walker, and Dr. Townsley, for offering their expertise and providing valuable insights to strengthen my work. I appreciate their support and encouragement!

Dr. Montgomery and Dr. Fitzgerald, I am especially grateful for the numerous hours that you dedicated to editing my work and guiding me through this process.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>vii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing Standardization of Writing Instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual &amp; Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Theories of Writing</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Approach versus Writing Workshop</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity in the Context of Writing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Study</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Writing Project</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Context of the National Writing Project</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Writing Project Funding and Research</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Teacher Professional Development for Writing Instruction</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on Writing Workshop</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on Creativity in the Context of Writing</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Realities in Writing Instruction</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4 RESULTS</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Instructional Practices</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella - Second Grade</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace – Fifth Grade</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie - Sixth Grade</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Expectations</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Grade District Expectations</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Grade District Expectations</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Grade District Expectations</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Resources</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella - Second Grade</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace – Fifth Grade</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie – Sixth Grade</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity in Writing Instruction</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella – Second Grade</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace – Fifth Grade</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie – Sixth Grade</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Common NWP Experience, Divergent Application............................................118
Connections to the Literature...........................................................................119
Implications for Research and Practice.............................................................126
Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.................................127
Connections to the Literature...........................................................................128
Implications for Research and Practice.............................................................131
Creativity and Student Engagement.................................................................131
Connections to the Literature...........................................................................132
Implications for Research and Practice.............................................................135
Conclusion ...........................................................................................................136
REFERENCES .....................................................................................................141
APPENDIX A TEACHER SURVEY QUESTIONS .............................................148
APPENDIX B FIELD NOTES ............................................................................149
APPENDIX C TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ........................................150
APPENDIX D RUBRIC FOR SCORING STUDENTS’ WRITING......................151
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Teacher Questionnaire, adapted from Brindle et al. (2015).......................... 61
Table 2 Teacher Beliefs Regarding Creativity.......................................................... 104
Table 3 Questions for Student Reflection................................................................... 122
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Writing instruction in America's schools has undergone many stages of reform. Most notably, the introduction of the process approach and the writing workshop in the 1980s brought about a collaborative, recursive interpretation to classroom writing (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983). Lucy Calkins (2001), Donald Murray (1996), Donald Graves (1994), and Ralph Fletcher (1993) are often known as the pioneers of the writing workshop and have written numerous books that have guided professional practice for more than 30 years. The workshop model aligns with the social cognitive theory, which incorporates the theory of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) regarding the emphasis on learning as a social endeavor, as students construct their own meaning (Kaplan, 2008; Martin, 2004).

In today’s era of high-stakes testing and Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGA/CCSSO, 2010), teachers may feel pressured to adhere to a more structured program in lieu of the workshop approach in order to satisfy district demands rooted in federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the CCSS.

The CCSS offers standardization in the goals of writing instruction and raises expectations for student performance (Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, & Olinghouse, 2014). The standards offer guidance for the English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics curriculum of every grade level K-12, yet the elucidation and achievement of the standards are open for interpretation by states and local school districts. The expectations of the CCSS have allowed for some variations among teachers regarding the priorities and progression for implementation in classrooms. The standards outlined in the
Common Core provide teachers the topics for instructional plans, yet school districts have freedom within this framework to decide how the standards will be taught (NGA/CCSSO, 2010). Researchers are discovering that maneuvering this paradigm shift can be tricky for educators. "The juxtaposition of teachers' beliefs and histories onto mandates at the school and classroom levels can create tensions that have an impact on their approaches to instruction" (McCarthey, Woodard, & Kang, 2014, p. 59). However, teachers are now charged with a set of English Language Arts (ELA) standards that they must address in such a manner that will result in high test scores while preserving students' motivation to write.

The research for this study is designed to explore how three elementary teachers who have participated in professional development training through the National Writing Project’s Summer Institute teach writing given increasing standardization of curriculum and pedagogical approaches.

**Increasing Standardization of Writing Instruction**

Brown, Morrell, and Rowlands (2011) claimed that “the testing tail has been wagging our instructional dog” since No Child Left Behind was signed into law in 2002 (p. 17). Since then, evidence-based practices of writing instruction such as student choice, developing a writer’s craft, having blocks of time to write, and authentic assessment have abated. Writing instruction often favors strong results on state or district assessments, yet offers students “formulaic, sterile writing instruction” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 17). The focus on formulaic approaches for writing instruction can be problematic for as Gillespie, Olinghouse, and Graham (2013) wrote:
If students conceptualize writing in terms of production procedures, they are more likely to place undue emphasis on form versus process or meaning. As with genre knowledge, students’ knowledge about the writing process is positively related to writing performance…and increasing such knowledge through instruction enhances students’ writing. (p. 567)

Therefore, instruction that focuses heavily on formulas or frameworks may inadvertently cause the quality of students’ writing to decline. The more that students are taught to write for expressing meaning, the more likely they will be prepared to write high quality, meaningful pieces in the future.

Kelly Gallagher (2015), veteran educator in Anaheim, California, and former co-director of the South Basin Writing Project (National Writing Project) at California State University, Long Beach, as well as author of several educational professional books, analyzed the current status of standards-based ELA instruction in our country. He recalled:

I can remember conducting workshops for the various schools in my district where teachers spent hours discussing, breaking down, and prioritizing newly adopted state standards. We spent inordinate amounts of time sifting the new standards into categories: Which of these standards should be designated as “power standards”? Which of these standards were most likely to be tested? Which of these standards should receive less attention? We felt a need to prioritize the standards because we realized immediately that there were too many of them, that it was impossible to meaningfully teach all of them…To make sure
students were ready for tests in the spring, schools rushed to develop a series of benchmark exams. We began testing students to see if they were ready to take even more tests. School benchmarks. District benchmarks. State benchmarks…And in the middle of this madness we lost sight of what was in the best interest of our students. (p. 2)

Here Gallagher (2015) described the ways that the increasing standardization of writing instruction shifted the focus of educators to benchmarks and assessment, rather than the writing process. Gallagher (2015) noted that a prime limitation of implementing the ELA standards has been the separation and emphasis of three big writing genres: narrative, inform and explain, and argument. When educators have narrowed instruction to focus only on these three genres, opportunities for creativity and real-world writing practice have been sacrificed. This is problematic because “in the real world, writing is not artificially separated into specific discourses” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 107). Gallagher (2015) instead argued for an inquiry-based approach to teaching writing that offers student choice and ownership.

During an interview that was conducted by this researcher for a pilot study in 2018, Jamie, a second-grade teacher, echoed similar concerns over the constraints she faced with ELA standards. She admitted that she stayed true to the non-negotiable instructional expectations that were communicated to teachers in her district, but sometimes designed her writing instruction in a format that was different from her colleagues when the data was not being collected for a particular unit. Although she
preferred to structure her classroom as a workshop format, the required district tasks were not always conducive to a writing workshop format. As Jamie shared,

I hope the pendulum swings to get away from all of the required and technical writing, to allowing kids voice and choice…I’m not sure that many of our curriculum directors and curriculum coordinators understand just how important writing is; and not just research writing. Not just opinion writing, and not just how to…[writing] helps kids be thinkers and problem solvers. It helps them be heard, and it helps them go on an adventure…it just feels like the focus is so structured and in a box right now. And that’s hard. (Interview, 2018)

Jamie expressed her frustrations with her district’s requirements for teaching the writing standards. She felt that the expectations placed a constraint on her ability to successfully implement a writing workshop in her classroom. Jamie’s comments exhibit her perception of the tension that teachers may discover when attempting to maintain a writing workshop approach while meeting the expectations for teaching writing standards.

**Conceptual & Theoretical Framework**

**Social Theories of Writing**

Many theorists and experts agree that writing is both a social and cognitive endeavor that is influenced by several factors. While cognitive development certainly contributes to the student’s composition, the purpose, context, and audience are also factors that will assist the development of writing. Teachers play an important role in
establishing the classroom culture and expectations. The following sources explain the social cognitive theory and its relationship to writing instruction.

An extensive review of literature has revealed the importance of discourse within the writing workshop, supporting social cognitive theory (Cave, 2010; Gillespie et al., 2013; Laman, 2011; Martin, 2004; Yilmaz, 2011). Flower and Hayes (1981) contributed to the cognitive process theory of writing when they suggested that writing is a non-linear process where writers are continually planning, revising, and editing their work as they compose their thoughts on paper (Flower & Hayes, 1981). As Flower (1994) described the application of the social cognitive theory to the area of writing, “it uses text, talk, thinking, drawing, and even the silence of pauses to understand how the mind of a writer works in context to make sense of its world and to take action in it” (p. 106). Students simultaneously process their situation and assess their purpose and audience as they determine their goals and consider their schemas to create their written text. In this regard, meaningful communication becomes the primary goal, while spelling, syntax, and grammar are secondary objectives. However, audience and purpose determine the importance that is placed on these secondary skills. Langer and Applebee (1987) agreed that learning is a social, interactive process. They explained three tenets of the social cognitive theory to include 1) learning as a social act, 2) interaction with others to determine social cues of when and how to use literacy skills, and 3) meaning that is constructed by the learner and is influenced by the social context.

Martin (2004) posited that social cognitive theory is rooted in the realm of Vygotsky’s work in constructivism. However, Albert Bandura has also offered
contributes in social cognitive theory through his theory of agency. According to Bandura (2001), “social cognitive theory subscribes to a model of emergent interactive agency” (p. 4). Bandura believed that agency emerges through efficacious beliefs in a generative, not reactive, manner. Self-regulation is manifested as a result of combined biophysical and socially constructed factors.

Historically, teaching methods and examples within the social cognitive theory that relate to agentic self-regulation tend to be more structured and teacher-directed in nature. Martin’s (2004) work evidenced the overlap of some aspects between constructivism and behaviorism, as he stated “the acquisition of the cognitive and metacognitive strategies connotes both a constructivist instrumentalism and an ontological commitment to procedural and strategic knowledge structures possessed by the learner” (p. 136). Martin (2004) reminded the readers that there is nothing stated in the social cognitive theory that would restrict the implementation of a more open-ended, learner-directed approach. Therefore, one recommendation from Martin (2004) is to extend Bandura’s theory to include student risk-taking and “self-directed experimentation with alternative possibilities available in these settings” (p. 142).

Process Approach versus Writing Workshop

There are many different pedagogical approaches to writing instruction. This section will explore the process approach versus writing workshop framework. Prior to the Writing Process Movement in the 1980s, teachers commonly used a formulaic approach to teaching students how to write that included a specific step-by-step process of writing (such as a five-paragraph essay), with only the teacher as the audience, and an
emphasis on marking mistakes. By conducting and publishing his research with teachers and young writers, Graves (1984/2013) began to attract proponents who agreed with Graves that students should identify themselves as writers, and therefore experience the complex process that writers go through. This process included rehearsal, drafting, and publication. The process approach initially was a stark contrast from the assign-and-assess approach that was standard in American classrooms in the early 1980s, with one of the greatest shifts in educational practice being the role of the teacher. The Writing Process Movement advocated for teachers to listen and learn about their students’ writing before being responsive to their needs. Graves (1984/2013) wrote a response to his observation of others attempting to impose rigid steps in the writing process he had proposed:

The Writing Process Movement has been responsible for a new vitality in both writing and education. But orthodoxies are creeping in…These orthodoxies are substitutes for thinking. They clog our ears. We cease to listen to each other, clouding the issues with jargon in place of simple, direct prose about actual children. (p. 204)

The orthodoxies that Graves referred to include ideas such as requiring children to revise and publish everything they write. The ideas proposed by Graves through establishing an interactive classroom writing community began to branch off into a different connotation of the process approach. Those who used this alternative method misunderstood Graves’ message, and interpreted the process to mean linear stages of writing. Wood (2000) identified “each stage of the writing process” (p. 4). Those stages included:
brainstorming and pre-writing, researching a topic, composing a draft, sharing and peer editing, revising, and publishing.

It is unrealistic for students to always choose their own writing topic, yet it is important for students to have voice and choice in what they write. Graves suggested that “about 20 percent of a writer’s diet ought to be assigned,” and he explained what these assignments should look like:

Assigned topics mean that the teacher participates in the process of gathering data. Students see the teacher go through the process of doing the assignment with them. Modeling is never more important than in assigned writing, particularly writing in the content areas. Modeling means that the teacher demonstrates topic discovery, brainstorming, reading and note-taking, drafting, and final copy. Assigned topics can also be the short, ten- or twenty-minute discovery of a new area in reading…Teachers are not afraid to assign topics as long as they understand the need of the writer to discover the material demanded by it. (p. 213)

The linear stage approach was not what Graves had envisioned. The work of Graves (1984/2013) challenged a writing process approach and instead offered examples of an open-ended, learner-directed approach to writing. Over the past few decades the process approach has shifted and become more focused on student choice and voice (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). Graham and Perin (2007) defined the process approach in this way:

The process writing approach involves a number of interwoven activities, including creating extended opportunities for writing; emphasizing writing for
real audiences; encouraging cycles of planning, translating, and reviewing; 
stressing personal responsibility and ownership of writing projects; facilitating 
high levels of student interactions; developing supportive writing environments; 
encouraging self-reflection and evaluation; and offering personalized individual 
assistance, brief instructional lessons to meet students’ individual needs, and, in 
some instances, more extended and systematic instruction. (p. 19)

Graham and Sandmel (2011) proceeded to offer a disclaimer of their interpretation, by 
adding that “definitions of process writing have changed over time, and there is presently 
some disagreement as to what constitutes a process approach” (p. 403). Overall, Graham 
and Perin’s (2007) definition of the writing process approach is very similar to what 
many currently refer to as a writing workshop.

Katie Wood Ray (2001) challenged the writing process approach and insisted that 
there is a clear difference between “doing the writing process” and participating in a 
writing workshop. According to Ray, students who do the writing process are primarily 
focused on the completion of writing pieces through procedural steps of prewriting, 
drafting, revision, editing, and publication. These classrooms sometimes offer strong 
instructional techniques that guide students’ growth in various areas of writing, but 
sometimes there is very little instruction with the different parts of the process. However, 
the ultimate goal of these classrooms is to take an idea and “move it down the line” to 
complete pieces of writing (Ray, 2001, p. 4). In contrast, the goal of a writing workshop 
is to “help students find good reasons to write,” where the emphasis is on “developing 
writers” rather than implementing a process that leads to finished pieces (p. 4). Ray
added that the role of the teacher during a writing workshop is to provide rich instruction around the writing process for students “to use when rocking the world, not just as something to learn to do” (Ray, 2001, p. 4). According to Ray, the essential characteristics of a writing workshop include choice of content, time for writing, explicit teaching, talking, periods of focused study, publication rituals, high expectations and safety, and structured management (Ray, 2001).

The social component of a writing workshop is perhaps one of the most prevalent differences between a classroom that simply assigns writing pieces and a classroom that is committed to growing students as writers. The role of the teacher is also very different in the process approach vs. writing workshop. For example, Laman (2011) explored the role of talk within an upper elementary writing workshop, claiming that “through talk, teachers raise writing to metadiscursive levels by making explicit connections between writing processes, practices, and products” (Laman, 2011, p. 134). One of the most critical, and also the most challenging, components of writing workshop where discussion is of paramount importance is the writing conference, where teachers meet with students one-on-one to talk about what the child has written and personalize instruction based on the student’s demonstrated needs, curiosities, and motivation. Donald Graves (1994) explained that “the purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you about what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing” (p. 59). He suggested that teachers first ask the child to explain what their topic is about, and then ask the child to describe where the ideas came from and what they know about the topic. Finally, the teacher should end the conference with a clear
understanding of what the child needs to do next for moving their writing forward. Some experts believe that the writing conference is the heart of the writing workshop (Anderson, 2000; Calkins, 1994; Laman, 2011). Through peer conferencing, teacher conferencing, and sharing writing, students have plentiful opportunities to engage with the world around them.

As opposed to a process approach, writing workshop explicitly promotes the social context of writing. For example, Katie Wood Ray (2001) described the social context of writing workshop in this way:

Even though the specific act of writing might be a mostly silent activity, the life of a writer around that activity is often filled with talk, and because writing workshops nurture writing lives, they need to have lots of talk. (p. 12)

Thus, the role of a teacher promoting the social nature of writing is key to writing workshop for as Graves (1983) and Langer and Applebee (1987) agreed that “depending on what is emphasized in the classroom, children learn either broad skills (related to metacognition and metalinguistics) or narrow (discrete) skills” (Cave, 2010, p. 6).

Current standardized approaches to writing instruction and assessment do not align with the social nature of writing workshop and instead often promote skill-based teaching, creating tension for educators who aim to honor this approach.

**Creativity in the Context of Writing**

A standardized approach to writing may stifle creativity within writing workshop. This section aims to outline current research on creativity to frame the need for creativity within the context of writing workshop. There is a current need to promote creativity in
classrooms for research has shown that creativity declined from 1990-2008 in the United States, creating what some have labeled as a Creativity Crisis (Beghetto, 2013; Beghetto, Kaufman, & Baer, 2015; Bronson & Merryman, 2010; Kim, 2011; Robinson, & Aronica, 2015). Kim (2011 attributed this decline to the emphasis placed on standardized testing and measurable outcomes.

Beghetto offered a simple definition for creativity: “anything that is determined to be both original and task-appropriate as defined within a particular context,” (Beghetto, 2013, p. 4). When determining whether something is creative, Beghetto referenced Plucker, Beghetto, and Dow (2004), suggesting that one must consider the context: “creative for whom and in what context?” (Beghetto, 2013, p. 9). Furthermore, it is possible to have high achievement but be devoid of creativity. “Motivation, perseverance, mindsets, personality traits, and other relevant factors can impact productive outcomes” (Paik, 2013, p. 106). Subotnik et al. (2012) explained that “flexible thinking, or the ability to apply information from a different area to a new problem when needed, may be the key to creative productivity in general and to being creative in multiple domains” (p. 178).

The ways that creativity is fostered or celebrated in classroom contexts are important to explore given the role of the teacher and overall social context of writing workshop. As Pfeiffer and Thompson (2013) wrote, the classroom environment “can facilitate or obstruct the development of creativity…classroom environments vary in terms of the degree to which they are conducive or favorable to the development of creativity” (p. 232). The authors stated that “people will show more creative behavior in
their work if they understand that imagination or innovation is expected” (p. 245). The authors deferred to J. P. Guilford’s APA presidential address in 1950, where “Guilford advanced the position that all people have the potential to be creative to varying degrees, and that creative development depends on strengthening pre-existing abilities and resources within the individual” (Pfeiffer & Thompson, 2013, p. 237). They were careful to point out that textbook intelligence is not necessarily an indicator of creativity.

Beghetto et al. (2015) introduced a 4-C model of creativity, which built upon the common “little-c” (everyday creativity) and “Big-C” creativity (genius). The 4-C model incorporates the conceptions of “mini-c” (personal creativity) and “Pro-c” (professional creativity) (Beghetto et al., 2015, p. 27). They noted that teachers often have a common goal for helping students to develop their little-c creativity in the classroom. However, sometimes good intentions were thwarted by inadvertently sabotaging students’ intrinsic motivation. “Increasing motivation through the use of rewards therefore tends to decrease creativity, and it can have long-term negative consequences for student interest, engagement, and learning” (Beghetto et al., 2015, p. 42). The researchers claimed that one of the greatest ways to increase intrinsic motivation is to incorporate students’ interests in the learning activities. Teachers were advised to create a learning environment that fosters learning through creativity in order to allow students to feel safe in taking risks. According to Beghetto et al. (2015), “what matters most is not what teachers intended by any particular classroom practice, policy, or procedure, but rather how students experience those features of the classroom environment” (p. 53).
The inclusion of originality, or novelty, within a task or product has often been associated with being creative. However, Beghetto (2013) introduced the term “inattentional blindness” to explain teachers’ oversight of unpredictable, original ideas that students may offer in the classroom. Beghetto (2013) claimed that these “micromoments” of creativity occur frequently during planned instruction, and teachers must make professional decisions of whether or not to pursue them. With curricular demands and limited time, teachers must determine if the sacrifice of instructional time is worth the risk. Although the uncertainty may be intimidating (especially for inexperienced teachers), deviating from the lesson plan can prove to be beneficial. According to Beghetto (2013), these moments may very well enhance instruction and “help students develop their mini-c insights into meaningful little-c contributions” (p. 24).

Berliner (2011) coined the term “creaticide” to describe the narrowing curriculum and assessments in today’s schools (p. 79). As Beghetto (2013) pointed out, “If teachers continue to be pressured to focus on increasingly narrow curricular goals, then creativity stands little chance to flourish in schools and classrooms” (p. 54). Through a writing workshop approach, students develop their creativity by experimentation of language, and expand their creativity as they engage in writing conferences. Beghetto (2013), Plucker et al. (2004) and Sawyer (2012) supported the idea that the act of constructing one’s own learning is a creative endeavor that is influenced by the social and cultural context.
In this way, constructivism is an intrapersonal, subjective process that is reciprocally influenced and shaped by the interpersonal environment…If students are not given the opportunity to share, clarify, and refine the surplus of their personal understandings, they can come away with a problematic message. Specifically, one’s own interpretation is not what matters in school…One’s personally meaningful understanding takes a back seat to the appearance of understanding, and learning is equated with the production of correct responses. (Beghetto, 2013, p. 36)

Burvall and Ryder (2017) acknowledged the challenges that educators today face with increasing standardization of instruction, yet they insisted that “unpacking standards opens new pathways to understanding” (p. 67). The authors suggested that teachers reconsider classroom experiences where the creative activities are disconnected activities for the purpose of entertainment and delight. For example, they invited educators to embrace rigorous whimsy, a term that they defined as using “greater intentionality with creative expression, to challenge students to leverage the seemingly trivial into the substantially meaningful” (Burvall & Ryder, 2017, p. 26). Consider a classroom example shared by Ralph Fletcher (1993):

I watched a teacher read The Lorax by Dr. Seuss to her students… they were riveted. She had them. “Now, I want you to write a letter to Mr. Onesler,” she told the students. “Tell him how you feel about the way he’s been chopping down all the trees.” That broke the spell. The kids sighed, slumped. They knew only
too well Mr. Onesler was a fictitious character. No one would read the letters.

The exercise lacked any authentic purpose. (p. 4)

By altering the purpose, outcome, and audience, this trivial exercise could easily be transformed into rigorous whimsy. For example, inviting children to use creative expression to take the deeper meaning from a picture book and write a script for a public service announcement to share with their community may be more meaningful to the students.

Idea amplification is a strong tenet for developing rigorous whimsy in classroom practice. Rather than being satisfied with expecting learning to end with a strong command of content knowledge, Burvall and Ryder (2017) asked teachers to “challenge students to develop ideas that have a scope that reaches far beyond the classroom” (p. 34). They wrote:

It is only through the ability to think creatively that we can begin to tackle the challenges in an unpredictable future world. The rate of change has proven to be exponential – there is no way to foresee what kind of work we will be doing in the years to come and how we will need to do it. A major responsibility of education is to cultivate creative thinkers and makers. (p. 86)

Rather than defying the expectations of the CCSS, Burvall and Ryder (2017) encouraged educators to realize that creativity and content learning are not mutually exclusive concepts. They insisted that creative exploration and content learning “inform one another and share a rather glorious symbiotic relationship” (p. 58). Given the ways that writing workshop can potentially be a space for promoting creativity, this researcher
seeks to understand how elementary teachers who have participated in the National Writing Project (NWP) are teaching writing and viewing or promoting creativity within writing workshop.

**Present Study**

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of elementary classroom teachers, seeking to understand the residual components from the National Writing Project (NWP) professional development that were evident in participants’ classrooms through their current practices in writing instruction as they navigate the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Specifically, the questions that guided this study were:

1) How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?

2) What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints or catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making?

3) What resources are teachers using to support their writing instruction?

4) How do teachers identify and support creativity in writing?

Given the juxtaposition of the push for creativity and innovation in 21st Century Skills and the lack of attention to creativity in the standards, this study will provide valuable information for helping practitioners, administrators, scholars, and policymakers consider the realities of our current educational system. The results from this investigation will invite productive dialogue that will inform, and perhaps transform, the
writing workshop into an opportunity for students to cultivate their creativity and innovation in an age of standards-based instruction.

Conclusion

This study of writing will contribute to the knowledge of elementary school teachers, as well as teachers and students involved in the college of education at the tertiary level, as it pertains to the current conundrum of incorporating best practice while aligning to the Common Core in order to maximize student achievement. Analysis of the voices and experiences of the elementary teachers participating in this study will provide insights into current practices in writing instruction, how they have evolved, and how they are continuing to morph into a structure that is not only manageable, but an enjoyable and meaningful experience for students and teachers alike.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of elementary teachers who have participated in the National Writing Project (NWP). The ways in which these educators teach writing given their rich background knowledge and experience, in light of increasing curriculum standardization, is the primary focus of the study. As noted above, the following questions will be explored during this study: 1) How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?; 2) What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints or catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making?; 3) What resources are teachers using to support their writing instruction?; and, 4) How do teachers identify and support creativity in writing? This chapter will provide a review of literature pertinent to the present study. First, since the teachers in the present study all participated in the NWP, historical context of the NWP and research regarding this professional development opportunity are explored. Second, research on the impact of professional development opportunities for teaching writing, like the NWP, is outlined, with an emphasis on how these experiences can potentially position educators to critique and challenge standardized curriculum. Third, the research around writing workshop approach is addressed, which is the basis of the Being a Writer curriculum used by the district of the participants in this study. Finally, the connection between recent research on creativity
and the current realities in writing instruction is investigated through qualitative data. The goal of this section is to draw from research in writing instruction in order to build an understanding of the historical context of the writing workshop model and the professional development from the National Writing Project, as well as the current reality of the role of creativity within standardization of writing instruction.

**National Writing Project**

**Historical Context of the National Writing Project**

The National Writing Project (NWP) is the most well-known organization for offering professional development for teachers in the area of writing instruction (McCarthey & Geoghegan, 2016). The NWP began in 1974 with 24 teachers assembling to participate in the first Summer Institute, under the direction of James Gray and his colleagues from the University of California at Berkeley. Since then, the NWP had grown to include a network of over 200 sites in 2008-2009 and maintains 180 sites today. Each site is positioned on the campus of a college or university, offering a partnership to area schools in order to support and develop teachers as leaders within their learning communities.

The philosophy of the NWP is to educate, support, and empower teachers to help them educate, support, and empower colleagues and students (McCarthey & Geoghegan, 2016). The NWP believes that writing is an essential skill across the curriculum, not simply in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Furthermore, NWP believes that writing “should be taught, not assigned,” and there is no single way to teach writing, but some approaches have been proven to be more effective than others (McCarthey &
Geoghegan, 2016, p. 331). Using the process approach and workshop model of teaching writing, the professional development model of teachers-teaching-teachers has continued to leave teachers feeling supported in their classroom instruction (McCarthey & Geoghegan, 2016; National Writing Project, 2001). Despite the decline in the number of NWP sites, the dedication toward NWP professional development has not been stymied.

National Writing Project Funding and Research

There have been a small number of studies that have investigated the impact of the NWP in the past 10 years (Brown et al., 2011; McCarthey et al., 2014; Troia & Graham, 2016). In 2001, a small group of teachers, administrators, parents, and community members participated in a hearing before the subcommittee of the appropriations committee for the U.S. Senate to represent the infrastructure that NWP had built. The purpose of the meeting was to review the impact of NWP as a federally funded teacher training program. Senators met with leaders of NWP affiliates in Mississippi, classroom teachers who have participated in the NWP professional development, parents, and businessmen. The teachers shared testimonials from their involvement in the opportunities that NWP offers to educators, and the impact it has on professionals and families in their community. Parents and businessmen were present to share their support of NWP. Stacey Gorum, an elementary teacher at North Bay Elementary School who shared her experiences, expressed her pride in the learning community she developed in her classroom as a result of her participation with the NWP. Ms. Gorum worked earnestly “to provide a picture of the whole child, the social, physical, intelligent, creative and emotional being” through the use of portfolio
assessments, which she learned through the PD offered through NWP (Scholar’s Choice, 2015, p. 24). Sharon McKenna Ladner, a Curriculum Instruction Specialist who shared her experiences as well, described feeling “things get piled on me with standards and curriculum,” but the NWP has helped her to make sense of the standards, and now help other teachers, as well. “Knowing your subject matter is one thing, being able to teach it to students in this manner is quite another” (p. 31).

Dr. Huntley Biggs, the Executive Director of the Mississippi Power Foundation, claimed that 70 to 75 percent of applicants for their service jobs were unable to pass the initial screening test. Dr. Biggs believed that the professional development that NWP provided was important for educating students who would be joining the workforce, stating:

Business needs employees who are literate in language arts and math, who can think and solve problems and who can behave ethically. Writing is a basic literacy skill, and there is also a clear connection between writing and thinking. When writing is emphasized in school, students will develop their abilities to think, which is an essential workplace skill. (Scholar’s Choice, 2015, p. 11)

As Dr. Biggs stated, the value of building a strong foundation of writing skills extends beyond classroom performance.

A decade after the Congressional hearing, Inverness Research (Stokes, Hirabayashi, Murray, & Senauke, 2011) reported the results from a 2011 survey with over 3,000 NWP teachers, which showed that nearly all of the participants (96%) believed that the quality of the NWP Summer Institutes (intense professional
development to support writing instruction for teachers of all grades, in all disciplines) was better than other professional development they had recently received, and that they would apply what they learned to their own classrooms. The participants believed their learnings from the Summer Institute would result in improved writing skills for their students. The Inverness Research report clearly described what makes the NWP Summer Institutes so unique:

Usually these are 3-5-week summer programs with follow-up activities during the school year. Sites seek out and invite local teachers who can demonstrate accomplished teaching, who are open to continuing the studying of teaching, and who have potential to serve as leaders in their profession. The summer institute builds on this base of professional experience. Participants work on their own written pieces as members of working groups of writers, they examine the teaching of writing through demonstrations of effective classroom practice and analyses of student work, and they inform themselves about theory and research by reading and discussion of professional literature… NWP institutes combine teachers from kindergarten through college/university, working from the principle that responsibility for improving writing instruction resides at all levels…writing is a mode of thinking and learning that is integral to students’ achievement across all subjects. (Stokes et al., 2011, p. 4)

As the Inverness report described, the unique nature of the NWP Summer Institute is that the message of students as writers is transferable across all levels of education and all subject areas. Therefore, teachers who participate in this professional development see
the connectedness of their profession through the collegial dialogue that typically does not occur in regular educational settings.

NWP has relied on both private and federal funds to sustain the organization. As the NWP began to gain interest from educators who wanted to learn more about the theories, research, and best practices in writing instruction, the government also became interested in supporting its efforts. In 1990, Senator Thad Cochran began to enlist legislative support for the allocation of federal funds dedicated to assist the continued work of the National Writing Project. Congress approved the appropriation of $2 million in 1991, and by 2001 the amount had grown to $10 million (Scholar’s Choice, 2015). According to the annual reports from the past ten years that are available on the NWP website (National Writing Project, 2019), the strongest federal support for NWP was in 2010, where NWP was given $24,291,000 in federal grants, supporting 200 NWP sites. As the federal funding has steadily declined over the past decade, so has the number of NWP sites. By 2017, federal funds for NWP amounted to $8,710,671, and the number of NWP sites had declined to 180.

The lack of allocated federal funds to support educational programs such as the National Writing Project has threatened the sustainability of certain sites that lack access to generous private donors to supplement the funding for teacher training and outreach programs. The fiscal year of 2011 resulted in drastic cuts to nonprofit educational programs in the budget that was approved by Congress. The NWP was among those most deeply affected, experiencing a $25.6 million cut in federal aid (Klein, 2011).
The benefits that are gained through NWP experiences are not always measurable by standardized assessments. Brown et al. (2011) explored the attitudes that students in grades 4-12 had toward writing, and discovered the evidence-based strategies of writing instruction that were used in a NWP Young Writer’s Camp (student choice, revision, writer’s craft, publication, and authentic assessment) led to positive effects on students’ attitudes toward writing. The researchers were able to match 27 pre- and post- surveys for unidentified campers, using items from Daly and Miller’s Writing Apprehension Test (WAT). Using a Likert scale on the survey, the results showed positive changes in participants’ attitudes toward writing. The scores supported the belief of researchers that “writing needs to be purposeful as well as fun” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 16). Paraphrasing Donald Graves (1983), a pioneer in the writing workshop movement, the researchers posited that “the way writing is taught in schools…not only denies these young writers their identities as authors, it kills the pleasure of self-expression” (Brown et al., p. 15). Brown et al. (2011) claimed that “the testing tail has been wagging our instructional dog” since our nation began scrutinizing test scores with No Child Left Behind (p. 17).

Brindle, Graham, Harris, and Hebert (2015) investigated teachers’ practices of third and fourth grade writing instruction from across the country. A national survey of a random sample of third- and fourth-grade teachers (N=157) examined teachers’ use of evidence-based strategies for teaching writing, as well as their own confidence and attitudes toward writing. Only 12% of the teachers surveyed reported receiving professional development through the National Writing Project. Almost ¾ of the teachers surveyed reported that they had been trained in a process approach and strategy
instruction, and about ½ of the teachers were trained with the 6+1 Traits for writing. Created by Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, the 6+1 Trait Model (sometimes simply referred to as “6 Traits”) is a compilation of six components that make up effective writing (ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions), plus presentation (Culham, 2003). The components of the model are intended to help teachers provide more targeted feedback to students, as well as inform classroom instruction.

When asked to compare their preparation to teach other subject areas, the teachers reported feeling that they had less college preparation to teach writing than reading. Participants in this study reported spending only 15 minutes per day teaching writing, and their students spending 25 minutes per day writing. The researchers noted that the structure of writing instruction varied among the participants, but overall the teachers in the study felt positive toward writing and held a strong self-efficacy for teaching writing. This finding is important because teachers who possess a strong self-efficacy for their own writing and feel more positive about writing are more likely to use evidence-based practices (Brindle et al., 2015), which indicates the need for research on the writing instruction practices of teachers who have participated in the National Writing Project.

The Impact of Teacher Professional Development for Writing Instruction

The professional development that teachers experience regarding writing instruction may position them to challenge or re-envision standardized curriculum approaches. The work of McCarthey, Woodard, and Kang (2014) highlighted how professional development may empower educators as they teach writing. Specifically,
McCarthey et al. (2014) identified that the CCSS have brought more attention to writing instruction but have also brought to light many challenges that teachers face when they are required to teach writing from a standardized curriculum. Factors such as teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and professional development affect writing instruction. As McCarthey et al. (2014) wrote:

The juxtaposition of teachers’ beliefs and histories onto mandates at the school and classroom levels can create tensions that have an impact on their approaches to instruction. Yet, we do not understand how elementary teachers negotiate these tensions, especially in their writing instruction. Examining how teachers negotiate these tensions is crucial to understanding their instruction, and ultimately students learning to write. (p. 59)

McCarthey et al. (2014) researched the writing instruction of 20 elementary teachers using observations and semi-structured interviews, followed by in-depth case studies of three of the participants. The researchers discovered that the pedagogy for instruction varied, depending on the district-adopted curricula. For example, two of the districts who utilized a basal curriculum (Districts 3 and 4) focused more on skills, and the district that utilized the Write Traits curriculum (District 2) emphasized genre through the 6 Traits organizational structure. The final district (District 1), which had adopted the Units of Study curriculum, instructed writing using a process approach.

The professional development (PD) opportunities that were provided by each district varied as well. Districts 1 and 2 provided PD through a partnership with a local university that was an affiliate with the National Writing Project (NWP). Their PD
approach included “individual writing time, peer writing groups, demonstrations of
teaching lessons, literature discussion groups, and a focus on technology to create digital
portfolios” (McCarthey et al., 2014, p. 63).

The results of the study showed the importance of ongoing professional
development and support for teachers in the area of writing instruction, like that provided
by the NWP. For example, one of the participants named Beth held personal beliefs for
writing instruction that included the importance of social practice. However, with a lack
of professional development in this area to allow her to expand this desire, Beth followed
the skills-based curriculum that was adopted by her district (McCarthey et al., 2014).
Conversely, Jackson, another teacher from the study, said that his school district provided
support from the NWP university affiliation, which helped to shape his ability to include
process, genre, and creativity in meaningful contexts. This finding suggests that specific
professional development opportunities like those provided via the NWP can impact
teacher’s approaches to writing instruction. Such professional development may
challenge the pressure teachers feel to fully implement all aspects of a standardized
writing curriculum and instead teach writing in authentic and student-centered ways. The
findings from this research indicate that the reliance on curriculum that assures alignment
to the CCSS may not be in the best interest of all students, yet many teachers are
unprepared to make curricular decisions that challenge the dominant discourses,
specifically:

In our overall analysis, we found that the curricular influence was so strong –
whether it was Write Traits, Units of Study, or the basal curriculum – that it was
very difficult for teachers to counteract the dominant discourses….As districts are under increasing pressure to adopt specific curricula to adhere to the Common Core Standards, it will become even more important for educators to identify and challenge dominant discourses to offer diverse students writing instruction that will open up opportunities for them. (pp. 86-87)

It is therefore very important that teachers experience rich professional development like the National Writing Project, which may help them critique, challenge, and improve upon district-level standardized curriculum.

Troia and Graham (2016) recognized the need for increased professional development opportunities for teachers regarding writing instruction. They surveyed a national random sample of 482 third- through eighth-grade teachers to explore teacher self-efficacy and preparation for teaching writing, as well as teachers’ perceptions of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) writing and language standards and their state’s writing assessment. Teachers’ responses indicated that most (75%) participants believed they were good writers, but only 55% enjoyed teaching writing. Regardless of the grade level taught, teachers were generally positive about the writing and language standards that are included in the CCSS. The teachers involved in the study shared that while they felt adequate support from their administrators for teaching the writing standards, “they do not feel that professional development efforts have been sufficient to achieve successful implementation” (Troia & Graham, 2016, p. 1738). Troia and Graham concluded that professional development for current and pre-service teachers must focus more on educating and supporting writing pedagogy in order to build teachers’
knowledge and self-efficacy for helping their students to become stronger writers and
using assessment data to help guide instruction. The findings of McCarthey et al. (2014)
and Troia and Graham (2016) illustrate the need for more research on how educators are
navigating pressures to teach a standardized writing curriculum in light of their
professional development experiences on how to best teach writing.

Research on Writing Workshop

Given the impact and influence of writing curriculum programs, it is important to
explore the writing workshop approach, which is the basis of the Being a Writer
curriculum used by the district of the participants in this study. One of the widely used
curricula based on the writing workshop approach is Being a Writer, which emerged in
response to the Graham and Perin study. In 2007, Graham and Perin authored Writing
Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools,
a report to the Carnegie Corporation. According to Google Scholar, on February 2, 2019,
this frequently referenced document has been cited by researchers over 1,000 times. The
report included conclusions drawn from a meta-analysis of 176 studies on writing
instruction over a 20-year time period that targeted low-achieving students in grades 4-
12. From their research they identified eleven recommendations for how to improve
writing instruction: writing strategies, summarization, collaborative writing, specific
product goals, word processing (“using computers for instructional support”), sentence-
combining, prewriting, inquiry activities, process writing approach, study of models, and
their interpretation of the process writing approach to mean instruction that “interweaves
a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing” (p. 4). This definition is contrary to the interpretation of the differences between writing process and writing workshop that are provided by Graves (1984/2013) and Ray (2001), as mentioned in chapter 1.

Although the authors pointed out that these strategies are interconnected, they do not constitute a curriculum. They suggested that teachers and administrators select the strategies that best fit the needs of their students. However, they proceeded to calculate effect sizes (ES) for each strategy individually. For example, writing strategies (steps that are necessary for planning, revising, and/or editing) were reported to have an ES of 0.82. Collaborative writing showed an ES of 0.75. The ES for setting specific product goals was 0.70, and sentence combining was 0.50. However, when they examined the effect size of the process writing approach as described above, the ES = 0.32. The authors cautioned their readers in drawing conclusions from this, because “only three studies specifically examined the impact of the process writing approach with low-achieving writers, making it difficult to draw any conclusions about its efficacy for these students” (p. 19). Furthermore, their findings reported the importance of teacher professional development for writing instruction, such as support that is provided by the NWP. Graham and Perin (2007) reported that:

Explicit teacher training was a major factor in the success of the process writing approach. When teachers had such training, the effect size was moderate (0.46), but in the absence of training the effect size was negligible, except for students in
grades four through six, where the effect size was small (0.27)….It is interesting to note that many of the components included in a recent description of the NWP model (peers working together, inquiry, and sentence-combining) were found by this meta-analysis to enhance the quality of adolescents’ writing. (p. 20)

Despite the clear differences between the terms “writing process approach” and “writing workshop,” it is evident that Graham and Perin (2007) have discovered the characteristics of the writing workshop (described above) to improve students’ writing. Graham continued with his definition of writing process as containing characteristics of a writing workshop in a study he co-authored with Sandmel. Graham and Sandmel (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of the process writing approach, a term that they used synonymously with the writing workshop. When considering the effectiveness of the process writing approach, Graham and Sandmel admitted that it “depends on who is assessed and on what outcome” (p. 404). Across 24 studies that they analyzed, they discovered that students using the process approach “were better writers” at the conclusion of the experiment, with an average weighted effect size of 0.34 for writing quality (p. 404). Several considerations are warranted when reviewing the conclusions of this study. First of all, the definition that was employed for a writing process is very obtuse, increasing the likelihood of variability in implementation between studies. A second consideration is that the meta-analysis included studies of writing instruction for grades 4-12, which is a wide consideration of grade levels, and makes the findings difficult to generalize or apply to the early childhood students. Another consideration is that it is problematic to claim that evaluating students’ writing through quantitative
analysis of numerical scores indicates that students are “better writers,” rather than simply better at hitting the marks that have been identified as indicators for success. The study did not measure whether the skills and knowledge obtained by the students were internalized to be routinely transferred to new situations, which would be evidence that they had grown as writers. The quantitative measures that are commonly used to evaluate students’ writing as shown in this study seem to work at odds with the overall pedagogy of a writing workshop.

Graham and Sandmel (2011) concluded that the process approach does in fact “improve the overall quality of writing produced by students in general education classes” (p. 403), with an average weighted effect size of 0.34 within the 24 studies that were included in the analysis. Their study included an analysis of a subgroup of what they refer to as “struggling writers,” “at-risk writers,” or “weaker writers,” which they identified as “students with learning disabilities (LD) and English language learners (ELL)” (p. 398), and found that the average effect size for these students was 0.29, which was not as strong as general education students (p. 404). The authors mentioned that this result opposes several other case studies that found the process approach to writing improved the quality of the work composed by struggling writers and suggested that further research is necessary. The authors noted that in an earlier study done by the first author and another colleague (Graham & Perin, 2007) isolated grammar instruction showed a negative effect size (-0.32). This finding supports the philosophy of a writing workshop approach, which provides authentic purposes for writing and responsive guidance by the teacher, rather than teaching skills in isolation.
Laman (2011) conducted a study that took a close look at the functions of talk within a writing workshop. Through her year-long qualitative study of seventeen 4th-grade students, Laman (2011) “found that conferences often became a shared thinking space where writers and their writing teachers came to new understandings” (p. 136). Laman explained that through writing conferences, students convey their writing strategies and intentions, allowing them to become more “in touch” with their writing maneuvers and strengthen their abilities (Laman, 2011, p. 141). The conferences also allow teachers to develop a deeper understanding of their students’ writing intentions, which helps to inform instruction. Laman (2011) also noted the challenges of teaching students to be writers and to learn the craft of writing, which is at odds with current assessment approaches:

Many state-standardized writing tests begin in 4th grade. These tests hold student writing stagnant and judge qualities of writing with a rubric that looks for conventions, voice, development, and so on. If we held these student samples of writing against a rubric, their scores may not reflect all that they had come to know about themselves as writers and the craft of writing. (p. 141)

Accountability and assessments are at the forefront of policies and curriculum that are expected in today’s classrooms. Some packaged writing curriculum programs offer guidance and support for teachers to help their students grow as writers through the development of their writing craft. The Being a Writer (BAW) curriculum is the only commercially-available curriculum that is endorsed by the NWP, due to the shared principles of social skills and writing development through time that is regularly devoted
for writing, allowing students choice in their writing topics, and building a community of writers that includes using mentor texts and the teacher as writer. The BAW curriculum uses a writing workshop framework, to explore the genres of informational, opinion/argument, and narrative writing. This includes opportunities for collaboration with peers, conferences for providing and receiving feedback, and time for independent writing practice (Center for the Collaborative Classroom, 2019).

Davis (2012) conducted a case study of four elementary teachers, with experience ranging from 5-33 years, to investigate how teachers responded to the school district adoption of the BAW curriculum. The work of Davis (2012) provided a model for the present study. Davis’s research methods included interviews, classroom observations, and related documentation. He applied a constant comparative method to search for themes between sources within the comparative data. Davis noticed that the teachers viewed the role of the published program in different ways. For participants Rachel (5 years teaching experience) and Marilyn (9 years teaching experience), the Being a Writer program drove their classroom instruction. The program dictated their instructional decisions. Rachel and Marilyn felt that it was more important to follow the steps of the program rather than allow time for independent writing, again supporting the findings of McCarthey et al. (2014).

In contrast, the more experienced teachers, Jen (33 years teaching experience) and Laurie (24 years teaching experience), emphasized the process approach in their writing instruction. They felt that the curriculum assisted them with their writing instruction by providing the students with opportunities to write, but they felt comfortable
supplementing and differentiating the program as necessary. Davis (2012) summarized his findings in this way:

It appears that the teachers’ beliefs about how children learn to write may define the extent to which the program is used in a specific, prescriptive manner or is used to provide a sense of direction…The adoption of a published program is not enough to develop teachers’ professional thinking; teachers need opportunities to reflect upon their beliefs, consider their practices, and continue to grow as professionals. (p. 86)

The findings of McCarty et al. (2014) and Davis (2012) illustrate the need for more research on how educators are navigating pressures to teach a mandated writing curriculum in light of their professional development experiences on how to best teach writing.

Research on Creativity in the Context of Writing

Writing workshop can be a space to promote student creativity within the classroom. However, little research has explored how educators view or promote creativity within their writing instruction. This section will provide further background on creativity and research on how teachers respond to or support creativity in the classroom.

As noted in the Introduction, writing workshop can be a space where teachers can honor and promote creativity. There is a continued need to promote creativity in schools. Beghetto (2013) backed up his claim that creativity, especially divergent thinking, has been suppressed in classrooms by citing the work of Dr. Kyung Hee Kim (2011), who
analyzed 272,599 results from the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) in grades K-12 and adults from a geographically balanced sample within the Central, Northeast, Southeast, and Western regions of the United States. Kim utilized the data that was available from the norms over a 40-year period to examine how creative thinking has changed during that time. He also wanted to find out whether certain age groups reflected a difference in these changes. Kim focused his analysis specifically on the TTCT-Figural, given that it “measures more than divergent thinking and is used eight to 10 times more than TTCT-Verbal” (Kim, 2011, p. 287). He conducted independent t-tests and reported effect sizes. The categories that were considered from the TTCT included: fluency, originality, elaboration, abstractness of titles, and resistance to premature closure. He discovered that the creativity scores began to steadily decline starting in 1990, with the greatest decline in the primary grades (K-3). Kim (2011) summarized the implications of his findings in this way:

The results indicate creative thinking is declining over time among Americans of all ages, especially in kindergarten through third grade. The decline is steady and persistent, from 1990 to present, and ranges across the various components tested by the TTCT….Homes and schools should provide opportunities for students to develop teamwork skills, methods for fairly evaluating peer and self performance, and mechanisms to accept and incorporate criticism…to provide a range of perspectives and to encourage development of creative thinking in children. (p. 293)
The conclusions and suggestions offered by Kim (2011) may be addressed through a writing workshop approach. The components of writing conferences, editing, revising, and sharing support opportunities for divergent thinking, metacognition, and providing and incorporating constructive criticism of one’s work.

Despite the need to promote creativity in schools, there is limited scholarship on teaching creativity within the context of writing workshop. The work of Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, and Harris (2012) offers insights into the impact that creativity promotion can have on student writing. Specifically, Graham et al. (2012) published a meta-analysis of 115 true and quasi-experiments that were conducted with elementary students. The purpose of the study was to identify effective instructional practices for teaching writing in the elementary grades. The researchers determined several approaches that resulted in a strong effect size (ES), such as strategy instruction (ES=1.02) and setting clear and specific goals (ES=0.70). Peer assistance, allowing students to work together when revising or throughout the writing process, was evident in four of the studies and resulted with a positive impact (ES of 0.89). These findings support the claims of Graves (1994), Kaplan (2008), Laman (2011), and Stokes et al. (2011) that students become strong writers through non-linear activities of drafting, revising, and sharing their writing within a collaborative community of writers, while receiving responsive instruction and support from their teacher through writing conferences. Most notably for the purposes of the present study, Graham et al. (2012) located four studies within their meta-analysis that evaluated the effectiveness of creativity and imagery instruction. These studies were conducted among grades 3-6, and
three out of four of them focused on high-achieving students. Explicit instruction of how to improve creativity or visual imagery was proven to positively influence the quality of writing (ES=0.70).

Weinstein, Clark, DiBartolomeo, and Davis (2014) explored creativity in the context of writing by conducting a qualitative investigation to extend the previous psychometric tests that have reported declines in creativity. They studied the question “How have the style, content and form of adolescents’ art-making and creative writing changed over the last 20 years?” (p. 176). The researchers analyzed 354 pieces of artwork and 50 fiction stories that were produced at the high school level between 1990-2011. The artifacts that were evaluated were authentic pieces that were created outside of a laboratory setting, which had been curated by two different teen publications in the United States. During the coding process, “raters were blind to the year of publication of each piece and to hypotheses about what was considered creative and why…without judgment about the overall quality or degree of creativity” (p. 178). Two separate teams were used for coding, with backgrounds in visual arts or writing and English teaching, using a primary coder/shadow coder approach.

The results from the researchers’ analyses align with the findings from Kim’s (2011) study of creativity. “The analysis of the creative writing stories indicates a significant increase in young authors’ adherence to conventional writing practices related to genre and a trend toward more formulaic narrative style, though language is significantly more conversational, casual and invented” (p. 182). Weinstein et al. (2014) wrote:
The investigation uncovers several domain-specific changes. Contemporary adolescents’ visual artworks deviate significantly from more basic, or default, formulae in several capacities…these trends reveal a shift between 1990 and 2011 toward more complexity in visual artworks and a wider variety of divergent approaches ostensibly indicative of increased originality. Conversely, in adolescents’ creative writing, contemporary works shift to greater adherence to traditional formulae, and less technical proficiency…This analysis of creative writing products generated during the same period of interest (1990-2011) appears to align with Kim’s findings: The significant increase in and adherence to strict realism evinces more bounded fiction realities, as compared to those of the stories generated in the early 1990’s. (p. 182)

The researchers concur with Kim’s (2011) observation that two societal changes may be relevant in understanding the change in creativity: “the increase in digital media technologies and the rise of standardized testing in schools” (p. 182). In the area of visual art, access to technology is advantageous. The Internet allows artists of any ability to search examples of art to inspire and inform an artist’s work. The digital art software offers a variety of tools to aid in the creation of artwork. However, standardized assessments may influence a decline of creativity in students’ writing. Weinstein et al. (2014) related the influence of assessment criteria on students’ approaches to composing their writing:

In the context of writing, standardized assessment metrics are increasingly common in the era of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. On these
rubrics, clear, linear structures are frequently rewarded, and less direct organizational approaches are penalized. Consider the five paragraph essay: In preparation for testing and evaluation, many students are taught – in no uncertain terms – that the word essay is synonymous with composing a paper with a “first, next and last” linear structure. (p. 183)

The findings of this study provided the basis for the research questions for the present study, which aims to explore teacher practices given current realities in writing instruction.

Current Realities in Writing Instruction

The potential shifts in creativity in student writing may be related to the increased standardization of schooling. Educators today are faced with the task of adhering to local, state, and national standards, including preparing their students to demonstrate their mastery of concepts and skills through myriad assessments. However, teaching is more than marching through a series of lessons. Some researchers are beginning to explore how teachers’ instruction has changed in response to the shifts in writing standards and assessments. In particular, research is emerging on evidence-based practices for teaching writing and the tension teachers experience when trying to follow the standards and also promote creativity. After examining “the extant meta-analyses and research syntheses related to writing instruction and assessment,” Troia and Olinghouse (2013) identified 36 practices that were associated with varying degrees of research evidence (p. 348). They defined evidence-based practices (EBP) as “methods, programs, or procedures that integrate the best available research evidence with practice-based professional expertise
in the context of student and family characteristics, values, and preferences” (p. 344).

The exact number of studies and methods that were analyzed were unclear. Some of the EBP with a strong evidence base, such as process writing instruction, strategy instruction (explicit instruction for strategies during planning, drafting, revising, and/or editing), free choice writing (student-selected topics without receiving a grade), comprehensive writing instruction (focusing instruction on the writing process, while including strategy instruction, skill instruction, and/or text structure), using assistive technology, and setting product goals were not included in the CCSS. Their analysis revealed that between 36% and 47% of the 36 identified EBP were signaled by the CCSS. The researchers believed that this evidence verified that the standards alone are not enough to guide teachers with knowing how to effectively teach writing. Educators must consult other resources “if they are to be informed about what works in the teaching and assessment of writing” (p. 353).

According to Troia and Olinghouse (2013), integration of EBP is dependent upon several factors, including: teachers’ experiences, values, and beliefs in the area of writing, varying degrees of support through professional development, and the amount of “clear, coherent, and consistent learning standards and associated research-based curriculum materials to guide teachers’ writing instruction” (p. 345). Furthermore, standards may be used to effectively guide curriculum and instruction “only if they are well articulated, comprehensive, and derived from theoretical models of learning specific to the content being taught” (p. 346).
In a follow up study to Troia and Olinghouse (2013), Wilcox, Jeffery, and Gardner-Bixler (2015) conducted a mixed-methods study of nine elementary schools that were a combination of urban, suburban, and rural schools. The schools were categorized as being either “odds-beating” (populated by a large number of students from disadvantaged homes, and overall performance on CCSS ELA assessments is above predicted outcome) and “typically performing” (data represents predicted outcome) (p. 909). Data collection included 30 transcripts from teacher interviews and focus groups, 24 observations, and a variety of data collected from documents. They looked at evidence-based practices (EBP) that were identified by Troia and Olinghouse (2013) and noted that peer collaboration, rubrics, writing to learn, and prewriting/drafting/planning were the most common instructional strategies in the classrooms they observed. These strategies were found in five out of the nine schools. Creative imagery instruction, text structure instruction, and transcription skill instruction were observed in four out of nine schools. Several EBP were not observed during the study in the typically-performing schools: comprehensive writing instruction, freewriting, goal setting, process writing, transcription skill instruction, and word processing/using the computer. In the “odds-beating school classrooms,” they did not observe sentence structure instruction or note taking instruction (p. 913). The researchers noted a “preponderance of lessons where teachers tasked students with comparing and contrasting texts…and writing based on research” (p. 915).

During the teacher interviews, teachers from both categories of schools in the study noticed a decline of narrative and creative writing since the implementation of
CCSS. Teachers from the typically-performing schools revealed more concerns that students are struggling with imaginative writing because “in their view, the focus of the Common Core has shifted their attention to non-fiction reading and writing and a stronger emphasis on the use of text-based evidence in writing” (p. 917). The teachers from the odds-beating schools pointed out that students are doing more writing, but it is mostly more essay writing, research, and citing text evidence, with an increase of critical evaluations for their own arguments. Wilcox et al. (2015) concluded with the ways that some of the demands from the CCSS impact student creativity in their writing:

Notably, a lack of student independence or what some teachers referred to as opportunities to be “creative” in their writing was a concern identified in this study. This issue bore out in what was observed in some classrooms: heavily scripted lessons accompanied by formulaic writing activities that resemble fill-in-the-blank exercises. This concern was also evidenced in teachers’ expressions that they have reduced the amount of imaginative and narrative writing in their classrooms as well as reading of fictional texts to focus more closely on text-dependent information writing and the reading of non-fiction texts….This finding suggests that at least in some educational settings attempts to align to the CCSS may ultimately work against recommended practices identified in the research such as the use of creativity/imagery to prompt writing, and self-regulation and metacognitive reflection as teachers focus on the use of rubrics to align students’ writing to the CCSS tests. (p. 920)
Teachers have responded to the implementation of CCSS in different ways. Wilcox et al. (2015) explained that students’ opportunities for creativity are likely to be more limited in some ELA classrooms. Due to the essence of human interaction, many view teaching as an art, as well as a science. Calkins (1994) described the art of teaching as a comparison to artists themselves:

> If our teaching is to be an art, we must draw from all we know, feel, and believe in order to create something beautiful. To teach well, we do not need more techniques and strategies as much as we need a vision of what is essential. It is not the number of good ideas that turns our work into art but the selection, balance, and design of those ideas. Artists know this. Artistry does not come from the quantity of red and yellow paint or from the amount of clay or marble but from the organizing vision that shapes the use of these materials. It comes from a sense of priority and design. (p. 3)

Calkins reminded the educational community of the importance of maintaining a clear vision within our classrooms and schools. When considering the purpose of teaching, it is not about the highest data points; it is about preparing humans to contribute to our society with understanding and empathy, able to communicate and creatively solve complex issues in our society outside of school.

Steele (2015) explored the artistic approach to writing instruction as she conducted a study of 6 elementary teachers in a workshop in Honolulu to explore the question “How do elementary teachers grapple with creative strategies for teaching writing?” (p. 76). Through her study, Steele examined “how elementary teachers develop
capacity as creative practitioners, along with constraints that hold them back” (p. 76). Her exploratory case study included ethnographic observations, interviews, and portfolio analyses. The background of the teachers included a range of 2-25 years of experience, with their positions ranging from grades K-3 and two special education teachers. Steele cited the “creativity crisis” that was illuminated by Kim’s (2011) study and Sir Ken Robinson’s (2006) popular TED Talk “Do Schools Kill Creativity?” as indicators of a large-scale concern for the status of creativity in the United States (Steele, 2015, p. 72).

The location of Steele’s study occurred as part of a workshop offered by the Honolulu Theatre for Youth (HTY), “built on the premise that imagery feeds the writing process, and drama strategies help students brandish skills essential to writing even before pencil touches the paper” (p. 75). The workshop participants met for a total of 20 hours over the course of three months, engaging in prewriting strategies and crafting lessons that incorporated the traits of writing (Culham, 2003) as a reference point. One of the teacher participants, Drucilla, reflected on her experience:

I am always having a difficult time fitting in the writing strategies into my schedule. There are so many things to teach. There are common core standards to focus on. There is a curriculum for reading and math that WE NEED to use and follow. It makes it difficult for me to have the freedom to teach all of this. (Steele, 2015, p. 83)

Steele (2015) concluded that “teachers like Drucilla needed help seeing how creative teaching is not a proposition to teach one thing more, but a way to teach required curriculum differently” (p. 83). The teachers found the workshop strategies such as
questioning and constructing snapshots through feedback to be useful in supporting students’ creativity, but some teachers struggled with not having “right answers” to guide instruction. The teachers “worked to become comfortable with expressive modes of communication, sometimes taking risks to facilitate their students’ own risk taking, but other times succumbing to the need for controlled outcomes” (p. 78). In summation, Steele posited that teachers such as the participants in the study would benefit from further professional development and support to understand that “it is possible to meet standards without sacrificing the spirit of creation,” and to realize that “teachers should not have to choose between readiness, achievement, and creativity” (p. 84).

Conclusion

In the past thirty years, writing instruction has evolved from the “assign and assess” habits that were predominant prior to the mid-1980s. A handful of pioneers in The Writing Process Movement began to lead the way in creating a writing workshop. They began viewing students as writers, and adopting practices, such as writing conferences, that invited students to embrace the messiness of creating, revising, and sharing their writing in a classroom community of writers. Donald Graves, one of the writing process pioneers, noticed that some teachers seemed to misunderstand the intentions of the writing workshop as a nonlinear, recursive process. He and others felt these new orthodoxies of writing instruction were stifling students’ enjoyment of writing, and turned writing into skills-driven drudgery.

The debate of defining The Writing Process remains unresolved today. However, many studies have been conducted to validate evidence-based practices that have been
found to strengthen students’ writing abilities (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). Researchers have also found that professional development for teachers in the area of writing is a significant factor in providing high quality instruction that will help students grow as writers.

Currently little research has been conducted on the ways that elementary teachers who have participated in the National Writing Project teach writing in light of standardized writing curriculum. This dissertation study was guided by the following questions:

1) How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?

2) What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints or catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making?

3) What resources are teachers using to support their writing instruction?

4) How do teachers identify and support creativity in writing?

The following chapter will provide details on the methods for the present study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers who have participated in the National Writing Project Summer Institute have attempted to navigate their pedagogy for writing workshop while satisfying the state and local teaching requirements in a more structured framework. Using data sources such as a questionnaire, classroom observations, and interviews that included analysis of creativity in student writing samples, this study examined the experiences and insights of the teachers and their instructional practices. This study was designed to research the following questions:

1) How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?

2) What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints or catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making?

3) What resources are teachers using to support their writing instruction?

4) How do teachers identify and support creativity in writing?

It is hoped that the study provides insights for other educators, teacher educators, and school leaders on how teachers with rich professional development experiences navigate standardized approaches to writing pedagogy and curriculum.
Research Design

Using qualitative methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012) the researcher explored the experiences and perceptions of the elementary teacher participants regarding how they navigated writing instruction in their classrooms. The study, as will be discussed in the upcoming Data Collection section of this chapter, included the teachers completing an online questionnaire, the researcher conducting four observations of writing instruction in each classroom, and individual interviews with each of the teachers. During the interview the researcher talked with the teacher about writing samples they had collected from their students to analyze how these pieces of writing supported creativity, using a creativity rubric that was modified from a study by Kress and Rule (2017). The primary goal of the study was to learn from the voices and insights of the teachers regarding their instructional decision making in light of the increasing standardization and district-level practices for teaching writing.

Participants

The participants in this study were from the same school district in a midwestern suburb and were selected using a purposeful sampling method. They shared the common experience of professional development from the National Writing Project (NWP), as Fellows of the Summer Institute in their local community, although the dates that they attended the institute varied. The names of the school district, the participants, and their schools have been given pseudonyms for this study. The three participants were employed to teach a general classroom at the elementary level between grades 2-6 in the same New Hope school district. The second and sixth grade teachers teach at Oak Ridge
Elementary school, and the fifth-grade teacher teaches at Clark Elementary School. Teachers’ years of experience varied, ranging from 23-40 years. The three teachers were selected for participation, given their experience of teaching at the elementary level, as well as their affiliation with NWP. This study followed the research design and approach of Davis (2012) who sought to explore teachers’ responses to the adoption and implementation of the Being a Writer curriculum through in-depth analysis of the practices of four teachers.

Data Collection

This study used a Google Forms questionnaire with a few open-ended questions and a series of questions using a Likert scale of 1-4 for teachers to complete at the start of data collection. The questions were derived from Brindle et al. (2015) (see Appendix A for an example of the questionnaire). The goal of the questionnaire was to understand more about each teacher’s pedagogy for writing instruction. Rubin and Rubin (2015) reminded researchers of the importance of remaining flexible, arranging data collection “around the interviewees’ availability and need for privacy” (p. 8). An electronic format allowed the researcher to respect teachers’ time, enabling the participants to complete the questionnaire when it was convenient for them. The questionnaire also provided an opportunity for teachers to carefully consider their responses before sharing their perspectives. This tool was helpful in supporting data collection that answered the first research question: How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy? The questionnaire also
revealed information about how the district-level practices influence the teachers’ instructional decisions.

Much of the literature on writing workshop is derived from teachers self-reporting through interviews and surveys. For this reason, the present study included classroom observations in an attempt to verify what was reported. “Observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects) in the social settings…In the early stages of qualitative inquiry, the emphasis is on discovery” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 143). While the observations also helped answer the first research question, they provided further insight into the influence of district expectations, the resources that were utilized, and the opportunities for creativity.

In order to attempt to gain an understanding of typical instructional routines, the researcher conducted observations for each participant on four separate occasions. The first and fourth observations were live, and the second and third observations were recorded using a Swivl device. The Swivl follows the movement of the teacher during recording, allowing the researcher to feel present during classroom instruction. One benefit of using the Swivl is that the camera may be less intrusive in the classroom environment than adding another adult in the room, which increases the likelihood of preserving the natural classroom environment. A second benefit is that the recorded format allows the researcher to later pause and rewind particular moments for further review. Field notes were recorded by the researcher using the same template for all four observations (see Appendix B for the field notes template). These field notes were used to support the interview process.
Each teacher also participated in a follow-up interview after data from the questionnaires and observations were collected. The interviews took place at a location of the teacher’s choosing and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The interview protocol is provided in Appendix C. The interview questions helped the researcher to understand how the district-level practices influenced teachers’ instructional decision making, as well as to learn more about the resources that teachers used in their instruction and to explore teachers’ views and practices regarding creativity. The questions were largely derived from Davis (2012). The interviews were semistructured, allowing opportunities for the researcher to ask probing questions to clarify teachers’ responses. During the interviews, teachers were able to address all of the research questions, expanding to probes where more information was desired by the researcher. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the participants’ permission, and will be kept in a secure electronic file for three years for the purpose of future publications.

In an effort to better understand how each teacher viewed and promoted creativity within her writing instruction, the interview session included the teacher and researcher discussing and evaluating student writing samples. At the beginning of the study the researcher asked each participating teacher to collect several samples of student writing that they believed showcased creativity. Together, the researcher and teacher used a creativity rubric that was modified from a study by Kress and Rule (2017) to evaluate the students’ work samples for their use of various creative components (see Appendix D for the creativity rubric). The process of evaluating students’ writing samples and discussing
the creativity rubric provided insights into how the teachers viewed and promoted creativity within their approaches to writing instruction and assessment.

**Data Analysis**

For my data analysis, I used a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), whereby the researcher interacts with and interprets the data by making comparisons and asking questions. Analysis of the data included the process of open coding, deductive coding, and in vivo coding, and clustering. Open coding is “the process of identifying and naming the data” by looking carefully at each line, each sentence (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 19). Deductive coding is using a “start list” of codes that have come from the research (p. 81). For this study, I used the Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) that were identified by Troia and Olinghouse (2013) for my deductive codes. In vivo coding is the act of using “words or short phrases from the participant’s own language in the data record as codes” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 74). Clustering the data allowed me to group similar patterns or characteristics.

I began by coding the data using the terms of evidence-based practices that were referenced in the literature (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013), as well as the concepts and themes that were explicitly addressed through the questionnaires and the transcripts of the observations and interviews. I also deduced less obvious themes through participants’ responses by summarizing and labeling similarities, as well as contradictions, that were found in the transcripts. I then labeled and organized the codes I discovered from the transcripts in order to place them into categories.
My final step in analyzing the data was clustering, where I determined prevalent themes that answered my research questions. Throughout the coding process, I highlighted “notable quotables” that I recognized as providing evidence or connections to the data and suggested important concepts and themes, as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012, p. 95). Memoing was utilized throughout the analysis, which assisted me in completing a plausible explanation for my conclusions in response to my research questions.

I triangulated the data by reviewing each piece of evidence that pertained to each participant, searching for connections or discrepancies. For example, after completing the observations with the sixth-grade teacher, Sophie, I found it interesting that she had included a strong emphasis on the five-paragraph essay format. This was different from the other teachers, and contrast to the ideas that were emphasized in the NWP training from our local site. After reviewing Sophie’s questionnaire, I noticed that she had indicated that she had indicated that her continued participation in follow-up training “to stay in touch with members and enhance my own writing” (Personal Communication, May 1, 2019). She also responded that she “strongly agrees” with the statement “I enjoy learning about becoming a better writer,” and responded “somewhat agree” with the statement “I like to teach writing” (Personal Communication, May 1, 2019). These responses supported the notion that Sophie was more motivated by learning how to improve her own writing, and less interested in improving instruction of writing. Sophie’s own passion for writing was also conveyed in her interview.
After I had gathered and analyzed all of my data, I met with each teacher separately to conduct a member check of the data and findings. I shared the data with them, highlighting the powerful quotes that I had pulled from the research and verifying that I had interpreted them correctly. I also asked each teacher if she would like to correct or add anything. All three participants said that they were completely fine with the information and did not feel it was necessary to make any adjustments.

Through the use of various data collection processes among several different classrooms, patterns emerged that provided rich insights on the instructional practices and experiences of these elementary teachers. The findings can contribute to the existing literature of how teachers are navigating the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy. The following chapter will address the main themes that emerged from the data analysis, including teachers’ instructional practices, district expectations, instructional resources, and creativity in writing instruction.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This chapter will examine the data that was collected in three classrooms (second grade, fifth grade, and sixth grade), using a questionnaire, four observations per classroom, and one follow-up interview per teacher. The results from these instruments are organized by addressing each of the research questions separately. The data will be described for each classroom teacher to explain how the findings from the questionnaires, observations, and interviews answer the research questions.

Teachers’ Instructional Practices

The first question for this study considered teachers’ practices of writing instruction in an era of Common Core State Standards. Specifically, how do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy? To address this question, teachers’ responses to the questionnaire will be first presented, followed by descriptions from the classroom observations and relationships constructed between the observations and evidence-based practices (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). The interviews that were conducted with each individual teacher will be reported with identified themes and patterns that emerged from the researcher’s codes.

The three teachers who participated in the study were first given an online questionnaire that asked about their beliefs and personal experiences with writing instruction and creativity. The first and second questions of the questionnaire asked
teachers to describe their teaching experiences, as well as their experiences with NWP. Ella, the second-grade teacher, has taught over 20 years, divided between special education and second grade. She was a participant in the NWP Summer Institute in 2004, followed by being a co-facilitator of the Summer Institute in 2005, as well as a participant in the follow-up seminar course. Ella attended the NWP Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. 2009-2012, and was an instructor in the Young Writers Camp in 2018 and 2019. Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, has 40 years of teaching experience. She has taught grades 1, 3, 4, and 5 in the same district. Grace participated in the Summer Institute around 1995 and continued to meet with participants for many years following that summer, as a self-organized study group. She taught in the Young Writers Camp for many years, but was not sure of the dates of those camps. Sophie, the sixth-grade teacher, has taught sixth grade for over 20 years. She participated in the Summer Institute approximately 10-15 years ago and has taken three follow-up classes to stay connected with members and enhance her own writing.

The third item on the questionnaire asked the teachers to explain their classroom routines for teaching writing. Ella, the second-grade teacher, stated that she designs her lessons based on the needs that are evident in her students’ writing or the district focus for a particular English Language Arts (ELA) unit. Students are given the choice of topic and genre, as well as the option to collaborate with a classmate. Ella described her system for providing feedback, either using sticky notes on work that students turn in to request her feedback, or in person through writing conferences with her. Students may
also ask their peers for feedback on their writing. The students in Ella’s class have regular opportunities for sharing their writing with the class.

Grace responded to the third item in her questionnaire by stating that in her teaching she does a lot with the *Being a Writer* curriculum at the beginning of the year, discussing different types of writing and having time for free writing, but not as much time for free writing as she would like. Grace shared that she felt that writing instruction is dictated by the district curriculum, which includes the requirements of producing a piece of narrative, opinion, and expository writing. She said, “Much of our writing is dictated by our curriculum. We do narratives, opinion, and expository” (Questionnaire, June 3, 2019).

Sophie, the sixth-grade teacher, succinctly explained that her students write approximately 15-20 minutes after their language arts lessons, as often as they can. If they are working on one of the required pieces of writing for the district, they may write for the entire language time, which is about 45 minutes. Sophie identified the required district writing pieces during her interview to include an argumentative paper, an opinion paper, and a personal narrative (Interview, June 5, 2019).

After describing their classroom routines, each teacher shared the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with a given statement about writing. The following table provides the questions each of the teachers were asked on the questionnaire and their responses according to a Likert Scale of Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.
Table 1

*Teacher Questionnaire*, adapted from Brindle et al. (2015)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Ella (Second Grade)</th>
<th>Grace (Fifth Grade)</th>
<th>Sophie (Sixth Grade)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The act of composing is more important than the written work children produce.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Students need to meet frequently in small groups to react and critique each other’s writing.</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Instead of regular grammar lessons, it is best to teach grammar when a specific need for it emerges in a child’s writing.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. It is important to teach children strategies for planning and revising.</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Formal instruction in writing is necessary to ensure the adequate development of all skills used in writing.</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. A good way to begin writing instruction is to have children emulate good models for each type of writing.</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. It is important for children to study words in order to learn their spelling.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Before they begin a writing task, children who speak a nonstandard dialect of correct English should be reminded to use correct English.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Ella (Second Grade)</td>
<td>Grace (Fifth Grade)</td>
<td>Sophie (Sixth Grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Being able to label words according to grammatical function (e.g. nouns, verbs) is useful in proficient writing.</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Teachers should aim at producing writers who can write good compositions in one draft.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Before children begin a writing task, teachers should remind them to use correct spelling.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. If a student masters a new writing concept quickly, this is because I knew the necessary steps in teaching this concept.</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. When a student does better than usual in writing, it is because I exerted a little extra effort.</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. When a student is having difficulty with a writing assignment, I would have no trouble adjusting it to his/her level.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from Brindle et al. (2015)

As the table indicates, all three teachers agreed that it is important to teach planning and revising strategies to students (question 4), and they also agreed that formal instruction in writing is necessary in order for students to develop adequate writing skills (question 5). All teachers disagreed that spelling and correct English should be
emphasized at the start of an assignment (questions 7 & 8). All three teachers in this study also disagreed that teachers should expect students to compose a good piece of writing in one draft (question 10). This data is helpful when examining the research question, how do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy? The teachers’ responses to these questions on the questionnaire support the pedagogy of teaching writing as an iterative process that includes strategy instruction (Calkins, 1994; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graves, 1984; Langer & Applebee, 1987; Ray, 2001). Although there is evidence of a shared pedagogy among the teachers for teaching writing, the implementation and structure of writing instruction varied among these three classrooms. Each teacher’s practices with regard to the pedagogy of NWP and the expectations of the CCSS will be described in further detail, according to classroom observations, evidence-based practices, and teacher interviews.

Ella - Second Grade

Ella’s second grade classroom was primarily a student-driven environment. Only one out of four lessons observed was teacher-driven, as the teacher modeled the structure of writing an opinion piece. Memos recorded from the researcher’s notes indicated that the teacher routinely employed a writing workshop in her classroom:

Judging by the automaticity the students exhibited in the routine, it was apparent that the classroom was a well-oiled workshop machine! Students’ writing varied
greatly, with an abundance of choice and enthusiasm. I saw mostly pieces of fiction writing on students’ papers. (Observation, May 30, 2019)

The most prevalent themes from the observations in Ella’s classroom were feedback (from teacher and peers) and building a community of writers. During the first observation, many students were engaged in writing conferences with the teacher or peers (Graves, 1984). When meeting with students, the teacher would structure the conferences by asking reflective questions for the student in order to determine the next steps for strengthening the writing piece. For example, in one of the rotations during the observed literacy block, four students joined the teacher at the kidney-shaped table located near the side wall of the classroom. The teacher devoted individual attention to each student but allowed the students to guide the conference. Once the group was seated, the teacher asked the group what they needed to work on that day. Two students replied that they needed to conference with someone, so the teacher sent them to find a spot in the room to conference with each other. The next student wanted to read his writing to Ella. Rather than informing the student on what he needed to correct, Ella informed the student what she noticed in the writing, saying, “I love how you have an introduction!” The boy explained that he was working with a classmate for this story. Ella replied, “Oh, you’re working with Isaac? Are you working today on this? Ask Isaac if he wants to work on this today or wait” (Observation, April 30, 2019). Ella explained to the researcher that most of the students have multiple pieces of writing that they are working on, so the students learn to manage their time if they would like to work on a
story with a classmate. If that particular day does not work for another student to partner write, the writing becomes independently focused that day.

Ella acknowledged that her students need assistance in developing their independence. She helped her second-grade students learn how to manage their time and work collaboratively by seizing teachable moments during their workshop time. For example, during the first observation, Ella listened to a conference between a girl and a boy. After the boy shared his story, the girl said to the boy, “I have a question: Is it a really high-tech place?” Rather than leave this to be a “yes” or “no” response, Ella interjected, “So maybe he could add some details to describe the Headquarters?” (Observation, April 30, 2019).

During another conference within the first observation, Ella quietly listened while a boy and girl shared and discussed their writing. After listening to the boy read his work, the girl said that “the vision” could be the problem in the story. The girl thoughtfully suggested, “Maybe this is just the beginning?” (Observation, April 30, 2019). The fourth observation showed similar teachable moments during students’ writing time. Two students were at the side kidney table with the teacher, and one of the boys read his story aloud. The second boy asked the author of the story, “What does whimper mean?” The first student said, “It’s like this,” and made a whimpering sound, explaining, “It’s kind of like whining.” The second boy then proceeded to critique the first student’s story, commenting on what he felt the first student should do. Ella interjected, “Are you making a suggestion for his story? Then you could say, ‘You could…’” [turning to the author of the story] So this is his idea for you” (Observation,
Ella realized that writing conferences were not only an opportunity for students to improve their writing, but they were also an authentic way for students to learn and practice social skills.

Ella’s approach to using writing conferences to help develop a community of writers supports the work of Franklin (2010) who concluded that students’ growth in writing came through risk-taking, and that was achievable only after they had established a trusting classroom community. In this way, the teacher and students are all participating in writing conferences, and students have a clear purpose for their writing. They are part of a writing community. The community that had been established in Ella’s classroom was evident outside of writing conferences, as well. Approximately 25 minutes into the first observation, a boy came into the classroom and walked right up to the teacher to show his work from the reading resource teacher. The teacher gave him a high-five. Two other students who were standing nearby also gave him a high-five. Another student complimented him on his “cool” folder. The boy walked away, appearing happy (Observation, April 30, 2019).

During the second observation, Ella modeled how to construct an opinion piece of writing using one of the books she had read aloud to the class. Although this was a teacher-directed lesson, the second-grade teacher again fostered a sense of community in her classroom by asking students to discuss in small groups, sharing a reason that they liked their favorite book. She made it clear to the students that all group members should have the opportunity to share their ideas, saying to the class, “I want each person to get this chance” (Observation, May 10, 2019). At the end of the lesson, the teacher informed
the students that they would continue the work on opinion writing the following week.

As she spoke to them from her teacher chair in the reading corner, she modeled that she is a part of the writing community, saying, “You’re going to revisit some things back here with me, because I think I could make some changes to my opinions, as well” (Observation, May 10, 2019).

Ella offered motivational feedback for her students. For example, during the third observation, the teacher asked two students who were working as partners if they could add more to extend the ending of their story, “‘Cause you have us on the edge of our seats. Do you think you could work on that?” (Observation, May 15, 2019). During the same observation, Ella encouraged the entire class to write their best endings to their stories and openly noted her confidence in her students’ writing ability: “We want to make a strong ending, right? We want a strong ending….Okay. You guys I consider are my expert, expert story writers, and I have some authors that are going to share stories today” (Observation, May 15, 2019). Ella then invited a few of the students to share their writing with the class as their classmates gathered around the Author’s Chair at the front of the classroom.

One of the students, Ahmed, shared his story about a cat that chased and caught a rat. Students listened respectfully, then Ella directed Ahmed to take three questions or comments from his classmates. One student commented, “I like how fast and nicely you read.” Another student appeared to struggle with the speed of the reading, saying, “Next time could you read a little bit slower so we can understand what you’re saying?” A third student asked, “Are you sure that’s school appropriate? Because the cat is eating the
mouse.” Ahmed replied, “Yep. Cats like to eat mouse [sic] usually” (Observation, May 15, 2019). These observed interactions between Ella and her students seemed to promote a sense of community in the classroom and appeared to be highly motivating for students.

Three of the evidence-based practices identified by Troia and Olinghouse (2013) were prevalent during the second-grade observations. Peer collaboration, motivation to write, and feedback each occurred in three out of four of the observations. These practices support the philosophy teachers have typically experienced during the Summer Institute professional development that was provided by the National Writing Project (National Writing Project, 2019).

During the follow-up interview, Ella’s responses indicated that her instruction is heavily influenced by the philosophy she developed by participating in the NWP Summer Institute. Her remarks referring to NWP’s teachings of developing a writing workshop appeared 23 times during our interview. As Ella stated, “I stuck with what I knew, which is going through the Writing Project, and building the culture” (Interview, June 12, 2019). The professional literature that she read during the Summer Institute has remained an important guidepost for Ella’s instructional decision making. She remarked:

I feel like I just kind of do my own thing [which is] extremely successful in my classroom… you read a lot of the books that come from the Writing Project. We had time to sit and we had time to read it and adopt some of these things that were happening in the book…I’ve read a lot of Ralph Fletcher and about response journals and about capturing ideas and reflecting…so I tried to incorporate what I’ve read and what I’ve learned from other teachers. (Interview, June 12, 2019)
Ella’s comments explain how she has drawn from her experience and training from NWP to build her confidence in making instructional decisions for writing in her classroom.

Ella felt strongly that students need purpose and extended periods of time to write “because it seems like the more we write, and the more we share, the more ideas keep budding in the classroom” (Interview, June 12, 2019). She explained her role in the classroom and how she creates a student-centered culture:

I feel like my role is first and foremost of facilitator. I feel like my job is to expose kids to a lot of different types of literature and have conversations about the literature that we’re reading and the authors. And I feel like my responsibility is to expose them to different styles of writing, to give them opportunities and times to write throughout the day. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

Ella’s excitement and passion for writing are evident from her interactions with students during the classroom observations, as well as her questionnaire and interview. She described her goals for teaching writing in this way:

I want my kids to love, and see the love of, stories [pause] and storytelling [pause] and information gathering…and being able to put their thoughts down on paper….and appreciating authors and their styles and just having a good experience….I want them to just genuinely be able to grab their journal and say, “Oh, you gotta read my story! It’s so great!” And just be excited. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

As evidenced in this statement, Ella is passionate about teaching writing and creating a community of engaged writers.
During the observations and interview, Ella did not reference specific standards. She gave no indication that she felt constrained by the standards. Her instruction appeared to be guided by her own passion for writing, as well as her desire to nurture her students’ needs and interests. The NWP philosophy of student ownership and teacher-as-facilitator clearly remains a strong influence in Ella’s instructional decision making.

When considering the first research question, How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?, Ella’s background with NWP has helped her navigate the standards and expectations of her district by providing a strong foundation of various strategies to help support her writing instruction. The evidence-based practices of peer collaboration, motivation to write, and feedback were woven throughout the observed lessons and the teacher interview and were important facets to the writing community of this second-grade classroom.

Grace – Fifth Grade

The four observations in Grace’s fifth grade classroom were all focused on an inquiry unit that incorporated social studies with ELA standards, which Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, had planned with the Teacher Librarian in her building. Student choice was a strong tenet during this unit, as well as student engagement and motivation. The purpose of the inquiry unit was to provide a student-centered approach for studying the American Civil War. Student learning was focused on the three Enduring Understandings for this district’s fifth grade level, which were created by teacher leaders.
in the district. The Enduring Understandings were printed on a handout for the inquiry unit and provided to each student. They include: 1) The internal struggle between rules and beliefs impacts behavior, 2) The balance between order and authority and rights and responsibilities impacts our world, and 3) Perception and perspective provoke societal change. The unit was newly created by Grace and the building Teacher Librarian prior to the request for participation in this study.

To start this unit, students were given the choice of topics they would like to study in-depth related to the Civil War. Grace then sorted through the student requests and assigned each student his/her topic, based on one of their top three selections. During the first observation, students received their books and/or articles for their assigned topic, and were asked to begin taking notes on their graphic organizer. The organizer divided each category into three sections. The first section, “BHH,” was taken from *Disrupting Thinking: Why How We Read Matters* (Beers & Probst, 2017). The “BHH” stands for book, head, and heart; a strategy for actively reading. The classroom teacher and Teacher Librarian had participated in a book study of this book and wanted to integrate the ideas into their unit. Therefore, the first notetaking box prompted the students with the following questions: How did this challenge/confirm my thinking? What surprised me? What does the author think I already know? The second notetaking box was a place for students to record important moments, and the third box offered an opportunity to write their own perspective and perception from their reading.

The second observation took place in the school library. Students worked with their peers who shared the same research topic. Using large white sheets of paper that
covered each library table, students shared representations of the important ideas from their research by creating sketchnotes – an interactive notetaking strategy that incorporates drawings and labels (Duckworth, 2018). Students were very social during this time, discussing their thinking and the reasoning for their chosen drawings. Notes from the researcher indicate that the library “is buzzing with activity and conversation,” while “students are quietly drawing on butcher paper” (Observation notes, May 17, 2019). Below are examples from student conversations:

Student 3: Should I put something about the Soldiers’ Aid Society?
Student 1: Sure.
Student 1: Do you want to make sure we’re not overlapping ideas?
Student 4: I did Union soldiers, and then I did Confederate soldiers, and then I did women nurses.
Student 1: I found it interesting that women – they were paid. I didn’t know they were paid. So I’m drawing someone paying a nurse.
Student 2: I’m drawing [inaudible].
Student 1: I’m gonna draw tents. The hospitals were made out of tents.
Teacher: So what are we drawing here?
Student: A telephone pole.
Teacher: So how does that represent spies?
Student: Because normally…they rarely used the telegraph poles, so we did them because that was a way of communicating but they rarely used it.

(Observation, May 17, 2019)
As shown here, the students were very motivated during this activity, excited to share their new learning. While the emphasis was on the content and not the artwork, the act of drawing may have slowed down some students’ productivity. One student commented, “I don’t know what I’m doing anymore” (Observation, May 17, 2019). A student from another group asked, “Has anyone drawn Lee?” Collaboration was evident in this group, in the responses that followed:

Student 2: No, I couldn’t find a picture of him.

Student 1: I can’t find the picture of Lee.

Student 2: Then draw something that represented him. That’s what I did for John Wilkes Booth.

Student 1: Bravery! Bravery! Instead of drawing him, we could put “Bravery” in a box. (Observation, May 17, 2019)

Here students are sharing ideas and working together to try to best communicate their findings.

In the third observation, the students were working on an end-of-year social studies project that required them to choose one of the Enduring Understandings for fifth grade, as well as a minimum of three historical events that they had studied this year, and synthesize their learning into a final project that communicated their learning. According to the student handout outlining Enduring Understandings and expectations, students were required to consider and answer the following questions as part of their presentations: Why does any of this matter? How has American History impacted us? How does it continue to impact us? It was quite clear that the teacher had provided a lot
of student choice in this final project. Students had been able to choose their preferences for their topic, make their own connections to their research, and select which project they would like to do in order to share their learning with others. By teaching with inquiry, the outcomes are uncertain, allowing the teacher and students to learn together. Grace shared her thoughts privately with the researcher during the third observation, admitting that she enjoyed providing students the opportunity for agency in their learning. She said, “I love teaching social studies this way! They have learned so much this year; I can’t wait to see what they do!” (Observation, May 23, 2019). Grace reminded students that they must have everything in writing before they begin their presentations. Other than that directive, students were free to manage their time and resources accordingly. Grace continued to provide choices for her students: work alone or with a partner, hand write or type, create a technology-driven project or a trifold board. Students were excited to begin the work. While circulating the classroom, Grace came upon two girls who were very animated in their discussion, brimming with ideas.

Girl 1: Can we start the script?
Teacher: Sure.

Girl 2: We were thinking of doing Readers’ Theater with a green screen.
Teacher: [Dances in place] Yay! That sounds awesome!

Girl 1: We were thinking of Abraham Lincoln…

Teacher: What about people other than Abraham Lincoln? There are some more perspectives. Cool! I can’t wait to see this!

(Observation, May 23, 2019)
As shown in this exchange, Grace both motivated and pushed her students via her feedback. She was open to student ideas and encouraged students to take risks.

Throughout this inquiry unit, the fifth-grade teacher, Grace, showed a lot of genuine excitement for sharing in the discoveries that the students had made. Her excitement led to motivational comments, such as, “Cool! I can’t wait to see this!” (Observation, May 23, 2019). By scaffolding the research steps of the inquiry process, the teacher allowed students time to process the information and use writing to learn. Grace repeatedly referenced the Enduring Understandings but did not speak openly about the standards that students were practicing. Although Grace was aware of the standards and purposefully included them in her lessons, they did not appear to be the driving force for instruction.

The fourth observation was structured as time for students to share their learning. The pair of girls who had worked on a Readers’ Theater showcased their learning by including the use of a video recorded green screen. They explained the ways that several leaders had provoked societal change by role playing Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In this way, the students were attempting to show the progression of struggles and progress of civil rights leading up to today. Other presentations included Google Slide Shows and trifold board displays.

Throughout this unit, several of the evidence-based practices identified by Troia and Olinghouse (2013) were present in Grace’s instructional practices during the observations. Peer collaboration, inquiry instruction, and motivation were all present in three out of four of the observations in Grace’s classroom. These practices were
confirmed in Grace’s interview, and may be found in the context of the Readers’ Theater that was used for the girls’ final project:

What I liked about doing that…when they can record themselves, they are different people. They never would have – in front of the class – been as dramatic as they were with the green screen. I mean, that was just…it was awesome!

(Interview, June 6, 2019)

The codes that appeared most frequently in Grace’s interview were teacher decision making, district expectations, and creativity. The training from NWP and the utilization of Being a Writer appeared to influence Grace’s instructional decision making. For example, Grace described her dedicated times for writing at the beginning of the year:

We do more quick writes, following with some of these things that we would do in a day. So they would have that, but then they could always come back to something that they started…you would try one of these and then you would add that to your list in the back of things that I can write. So they always have a list of things. So nobody’s ever at a loss for, “I don’t have anything to write about.”

(Interview, June 6, 2019)

In order to navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy, Grace has demonstrated an alternative to isolated writing instruction by embedding her district’s priority standards for ELA and social studies into an integrated unit. This approach has allowed her to provide authentic writing opportunities involving inquiry and social studies content.
**Sophie - Sixth Grade**

Sophie, the sixth-grade teacher, displayed tension between her beliefs for writing instruction and her enacted curriculum. Sophie was very dedicated to her understanding of her district’s expectations and was typically very standards-driven with her writing instruction. However, the four classroom observations provided examples of teacher-directed assignments as well as creative activities.

The first observation began with six story starters listed on the whiteboard at the front of the room. The teacher had not yet provided the directions for the story starters, as the class was finishing a grammar activity with a photocopied handout from the *Being a Writer* curriculum for the purpose of an exercise using adverbs and adjectives. Sophie was reviewing what an adverb does and what an adjective does. The students were instructed to put that activity away and direct their attention to the story starters. Sophie told students to choose one of the prompts to use in their writing. As the directions were conveyed, an exchange occurred between the teacher and a few of her students:

Teacher: As you’re writing, you’re looking for good adjectives. Pick one of these as a starting line.

Student 1: Can we pick what we write about?

Teacher: Yes!

[A student could be heard whispering an excited “Yes!”]

Teacher: Use computers to type if you want.

Student 2: Does the sentence [prompt] have to be in the first line, or can it be anywhere?
Teacher: Anywhere is fine.

[The teacher announced they will have 10 minutes to write.]

(Observation, May 1, 2019)

This exchange provides evidence of teacher-directed instruction. Also, the reaction of the student whispering an excited “Yes!” appeared to indicate that student choice of writing was not a routine occurrence in Sophie’s classroom.

Once the students began to write at their desks, the teacher immediately sat at a side table and wrote alongside them. Teachers as writers was a habit that was instilled in the NWP Summer Institute, but Sophie was the only teacher in this study who modeled this behavior. The room remained very quiet for the duration of the writing time. The activity was motivating and enjoyable for both the teacher and the students. When Sophie announced that writing time had ended, one student announced disappointedly, “But I had so much more to write!” (Observation, May 1, 2019). Next, Sophie instructed the students to work with a partner to select a sentence from what they had written and try to improve it by adding an adjective or adverb. The teacher said, “When we’re done, we’ll put them on the board and enjoy our writing” (Observation, May 1, 2019). The purpose of the lesson appeared to be writing for enjoyment, and also collaborating with peers to use adjectives and adverbs.

The second observation provided a glimpse of teacher-directed instruction that required students to follow a five-paragraph essay format. Sophie began by pointing to the Learning Target that was written on the board and reading it aloud: “Today I can find evidence to support my thoughts when writing my essay” (Observation, May 7, 2019).
Students had the choice of two essay prompts that asked them to analyze the movie *An American Tail* for the topic of immigration. The teacher called small groups of students over to a side table to have brief one-on-one conferences with her about their essays. The essays were structured with a five-paragraph essay format: introduction with a thesis statement, three supporting paragraphs with evidence to support their opinions, then a conclusion at the end of the essay. An example of feedback from Sophie while discussing a student’s essay explains the expectations for the format: “So it’s really explicit that that’s the three things you’re gonna be talking about. So you’re gonna be talking about how the Jews’ lives changed when they got here” (Observation, May 7, 2019). The teacher’s statement of “three things” refers to the three supporting paragraphs required for the format of a five-paragraph essay. Throughout the observation, the only person giving feedback to students about their writing was the teacher. Here is an example of a teacher-directed conference with a student, discussing the student’s essay comparing the historical references from the movie *An American Tail* to actual historical events:

Teacher: Okay, so you’re using a quote to start your introduction.

Student: Yeah.

Teacher: [reading aloud] “Over the years, immigrants have arrived to begin new lives in America. To them, the Statue of Liberty is a symbol of all of their hopes and dreams. She has welcomed millions of people arriving in New York by ship… comma… says *The Story of the Statue of Liberty.*” Now, this is found on what page? ‘Cause we have to be able to cite that evidence correctly.
Student: I think it’s important, because like, their family came to New York because they thought cats weren’t there…

Teacher: Uh-huh. So this page?

Student: Yeah.

Teacher: I really like it [pause] that’s a great opening. So then, what is your thesis statement?...Which question are we answering?

Student: I think it’s actually number one.

Teacher: Number one? Write an essay comparing the historical references?

So…you picked this because why?

Student: It’s like, kind of like to the movie, that they thought that cats weren’t there, and then they started traveling to America…and he lost his family.

Teacher: Okay, so this…

Student: If you read here, to Phillip, the Statue of Liberty is like…

Teacher: Fievel…Mousekewitz, and how did you find that? Phillip Glasser?

Student: From the website.

Teacher: You found it in the website? Good job…[reading] “washes up on shore on Ellis Island. Phillip sees the Statue of Liberty with the pigeon, Henry. The Statue of Liberty symbolizes the hope for Phillip to find his family. Also, did you know the Statue of Liberty was completed in 1886, the same year the first film takes place? In fact, *An American Tail* was released particularly in the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the statue.” Oh! That’s a really cool fact! But now, you didn’t write that. [smiles]
Student: Yeah.

Teacher: So how can we use this evidence to support what you think? All right? So, you have it, and you’re liking those other people’s words, but how can we say it in your words? So, what do you believe? Do you believe that the Statue of Liberty is a symbol and that they came over to America all excited, and they think that it was the place where all their hopes and dreams were gonna come true, right?

Student: Yeah.

Teacher: And…so somehow, after you’ve stated this here, we have to put your thesis statement, which is…what you believe. So, you could begin with, “Many immigrants thought that the roads, you know, or that life in the United States…and maybe use some of those comparisons that they talked about, were like paved with gold.

Student: Okay.

(Observation, May 7, 2019)

During this exchange, it becomes evident that the teacher is trying very hard to help the student conform her ideas to fit the five-paragraph essay, as well as making sure to include a thesis statement and cite the source that she used. The teacher shares the student’s excitement for the interesting fact that was discovered regarding the timeliness of the video, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the completion of the Statue of Liberty. However, the student’s motivation appears to be lost as the conversation
continues, and her verbal responses to her teacher become limited to a single word of passive agreement.

The third observation continued students’ work on the essays from the May 7 observation, but Sophie took a different approach for feedback during the May 16 lesson. Students were told that they would be doing “some critiquing, some evaluating, some analyzing” over their own writing and other people’s writing, using a rubric (Observation, May 16, 2019). Students appeared confused with how to use the rubric, which indicated that this approach was unfamiliar to them. After ten minutes of going through the directions, Sophie assigned partners, and students set to work. As Sophie circulated around the classroom, however, many questions arose about how to use or how to interpret the rubric. Once the students did start using the rubric to evaluate each other’s writing, the teacher discussed the writing with the student who had evaluated the work, rather than with the author of the piece of writing. For example, while visiting with another group, the teacher read aloud one student’s evaluation:

“I liked how the essay had clear language and good historical references. In paragraph 4, it says, ‘The Statue of Liberty is also a real statue. It symbolizes life, liberty, and freedom, and much more.’ This shows the language was clear and concise, with good facts and history references.” Your wish for her was: “My only wish was a few spelling and capitalization errors were fixed.” (Observation, May 16, 2019)

The structure of these peer reviews was for an evaluative purpose, rather than helping each other grow as writers.
The evidence-based practices (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013) that were apparent from the classroom observations were the utilization of a word processor and feedback. However, as noted previously, the feedback was mostly given from the teacher. The sixth-grade observations showed evidence of peer editing during one of the classroom observations. Franklin (2010) described the difference between peer editing and peer conferences, suggesting that peer editing consists of students utilizing checklists or worksheets to follow as they check for correctness. The term peer conference connotes “a meeting that may or may not include evaluative feedback” (p. 80). A peer conference emphasizes the act of having a conversation about writing. The distinction between peer editing and peer conferencing is significant when considering the research question: How do teachers with a background and pedagogy for teaching writing through the workshop model of the National Writing Project (NWP) navigate the increasing standardization of writing curriculum and pedagogy?

During the Summer Institute, participants are exposed to the work of Donald Graves, Ralph Fletcher, and others who share the importance of the teacher’s role as a facilitator in a writing workshop, letting students lead the way for their own thinking and writing. This appeared to be an area of tension for Sophie, who shared during our interview that she felt that, “in sixth grade, we do have a little tighter schedule with what types of writing that we really have to have produced and to teach,” and therefore does not teach with a writing workshop approach (Interview, June 5, 2019). Similar to Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, Sophie shared that she develops a writing community at the beginning of the year, then focuses on the pieces of writing that are required by her
district. Sophie explained that at the start of the school year, she establishes a writing community in her classroom through the use of writing prompts or what happened at recess, “and then we get more into the technical pieces and then it becomes, no, there’s not much time for that” (Interview, June 5, 2019).

Sophie’s excitement for writing and her readiness to participate in writing activities demonstrate her interest in writing, but her frequent references to district standards and rubrics indicate that Sophie navigates her instructional decision making through a strong influence of the prioritized standards and assessments that are required in her district.

**District Expectations**

The classroom observations and teacher interviews provided insightful considerations for the second research question, What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints or catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making? The three participants in this study are employed in the same New Hope school district. The second- and sixth-grade teachers teach at Oak Ridge Elementary school, and the fifth-grade teacher teaches at Clark Elementary School. All three teachers have taught in the same district for over twenty years, so they are very familiar with the district policies and procedures. Although they did adhere to what they perceived to be instructional expectations from the district, they showed varied degrees of confidence in these expectations. The degree of perceived constraints or catalysts put forth by the standards and guidelines also varied in the teachers’ instructional decision making. The district expectations were available through
the district website, in a password protected area that was available only to staff members of the district. The purpose of the protected pages of the website is to provide teachers, coaches, and administrators with curriculum information to guide instruction that is accessible and consistent per each grade level. The documents accessed for this study included the Curriculum Night Slide Shows for grades 2, 5, and 6, which are shared by each classroom teacher and discussed with parents during Curriculum Night presentations at the start of each school year. The presentations include a general list of curriculum resources and expectations for each particular grade level that is presenting in the classroom.

**Second Grade District Expectations**

According to the slide show that was shared with second grade families at the district Curriculum Night for the 2018-19 school year, writing in second grade included the Writing Process (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, and sharing) and completing many different types of writing (e.g., journaling, riddles, friendly and thank you letters, story summaries, reports, personal narratives, and fantasy stories). The slide show indicated that they also used the *Being a Writer* curriculum.

During the first classroom observation, the students were involved in free choice writing. Some students participated in a writing conference with a peer or the teacher. The management and structure of Ella’s writing workshop approach indicated that her interpretation of the writing process aligned with the pedagogy of a writing workshop, as defined in chapter 1 (Ray, 2001). Ella explained, “I do not ever – and I can say this with
confidence – tell a kid what to write about; unless we are doing something that the district says we have to do” (Interview, June 12, 2019).

The second observation was a teacher-directed lesson explaining opinion writing. Ella modeled the text structure of a piece of opinion writing, using a recently completed class read aloud novel as the topic for constructing an opinion. Although opinion writing was not indicated on the district slide show, Ella identified opinion writing as one of the required pieces of writing for second grade. In her interview, she stated,

With our ELA units, we have some specific writing that has to happen and then we’ll have some mini lessons about those particular types of writing…At least at second grade, I feel like the district expectations are: The children will write one personal narrative, one opinion piece, one research-type piece. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

This explanation indicates that Ella acknowledges and respects the writing genres that are required at her grade level, and she balances time for embedding these particular genres within her organized writing workshop. Ella’s statement, “I feel like the district expectations are” suggests that these genres are Ella’s belief of the district requirement, although she may not be quite certain that this understanding is accurate.

The third observation was a teacher-led review of the components of good writing, using a read aloud of a picture book mentor text by Marc Brown (1998), called *Arthur Writes a Story*. Ella used this story to model writing, as well as teach the text structure of a narrative story. She used student input to generate some pre-writing ideas on the whiteboard. She also provided motivating comments to the class such as, “You
guys are becoming expert story writers! Because I’ve seen a huge improvement in your stories!” (Observation, May 15, 2019). At the end of the observation, students were able to share their stories with the class and hear feedback from their classmates. These were all examples of evidence-based practices that were identified by Troia and Olinghouse (2013).

In the final observation of Ella’s classroom, Ella demonstrated how she balances district expectations with her pedagogy about writing workshop. She began the lesson by offering students choice of continuing to work on their opinion pieces, have time to free write, or time to share. As Ella explained in her interview,

> When I think about my kids…in my classroom, first of all, they need time to write. They need the purpose. Many of them are writing for an audience because we do a lot of sharing in my classroom. And as we go through the school year, I’m pulling kids over to the guided reading table with me, we’re talking about their writing. I’m usually looking at their overall story structure and we are giving each other ideas of what they could add or details that they could add or how they could make changes. I’m more facilitating those conversations with the kids. They’re having the conversations themselves. (Interview, June 12, 2019).

As this statement describes, Ella discovered a way to target her structured lessons within her workshop framework in a way that allowed students opportunities for choice and feedback while still satisfying the district expectations. For Ella, the district expectations appeared to disrupt the flow of her student-driven writing workshop. Her comments such as, “I do not ever – and I can say this with confidence – tell a kid what to write about;
unless we are doing something that the district says we have to do” (Interview, June 12, 2019) indicated that she viewed the district expectations as a constraint to her classroom instruction.

**Fifth Grade District Expectations**

When considering the second research question, What are the district level expectations for teaching writing and then how, if at all, are these reflected as constraints of catalysts in teachers’ instructional decision making?, data from Grace’s classroom observations, as well as her interview, seemed to indicate that the standards did act as a catalyst for instructional decision making in some regards, and did not constrain the teacher’s ability to integrate creativity and choice in her students’ work.

The slide show that was presented to families for Curriculum Night during the 2018-19 school year summarized the routines for fifth grade writing, including the use of the *Being a Writer* curriculum, thirty minutes of daily writing time, integrated writing throughout subject areas, and the use of the writing process. The slide show described the three forms of writing that are required from the Common Core: personal narratives, opinion pieces, and informative or explanatory texts. In her interview, Grace expanded on the district expectations for the *Being a Writer* curriculum, saying, “They want us to do two parts of *Being a Writer*, the Writing Community and the Writing Process, but we do a lot more than that” (Interview, June 6, 2019). Grace and her teaching partner also use the curriculum for teaching the three district required pieces: personal narratives, opinion, and informative or explanatory.
According to the lesson outline for Grace’s fifth grade Civil War unit, the targeted standards for Informational Reading, Reading Literature, and Social Studies were included in a list of standards during the planning for the unit. The teacher collaborated with her grade level colleague and the Teacher Librarian to create the unit, and their lessons were deliberately crafted to include those standards. Although there were no writing standards listed, students were expected to use their writing skills for taking notes in the graphic organizer and crafting descriptions for their sketchnotes that they presented to their classmates. Students also created their end-of-year project, which may include the topic of the Civil War or any other social studies topic that had been learned during the fifth-grade school year. Their project was required to be written out for the teacher’s approval. The style of writing varied, depending on the type of project that was selected. The Common Core does include writing standards for production of writing, as well as conducting short research projects.

Grace felt that the writing expectations from the district were emphasized through the writing they did in their ELA units. She explained, “The only things that we have to do are the writings that go with our ELA [the genres of writing]” (Interview, June 6, 2019). The expectations for writing were somewhat unclear to Grace, as she stated, “We still do personal narratives [at the] beginning of the year. I don’t know if that’s still an expectation…but it always has been” (Interview, June 6, 2019).

When planning with the Teacher Librarian, Grace knew that the reading and social studies standards listed were the ones that they wanted to emphasize. For writing, they wanted to give the children a lot of choice of what they wrote, since they “had
already done the required pieces for the year” (Personal Communication, July 28, 2019). These statements show that during this time period, Grace used the standards as a catalyst for planning creative options for students that would help students reflect on what they had learned and communicate their learning through their writing. This also supports Grace’s goal for writing instruction that she described in her interview: “I want them to be able to communicate with people through writing…you know, to communicate their thoughts and ideas, to be able to organize it and have people understand what they’re saying” (Interview, June 6, 2019). Grace prioritized her students’ growth as writers, and their ability to communicate with others, rather than defining success through a set of completed genres from each student.

**Sixth Grade District Expectations**

Sophie, the sixth-grade teacher, made clear the standards that she was using for her instruction. During the observations, Sophie reminded students of the purpose for that class period through verbal and visual reminders of the Learning Target for the day. In her interview, Sophie referred to specific standards that are important in sixth grade. For example, she explained:

Our first unit, we have our priority standards and you know, for me that’s that RL 6.1, citing textual evidence, and RL 6.2, finding the theme, and RL 6.3, finding change in behaviors and where an episode of a book starts and ends…RL 6.1, citing textual evidence, we use it all year long. It’s just so important.

(Interview, June 5, 2019)
As these comments suggest, Sophie was very clear about the reading standards that are prioritized and expected to be mastered at her grade level. However, she seemed less certain about the district expectations for writing. She stated, “You have your reading and language standards that I have to really focus on…I can be honest that I don’t know my writing standards as well as I know my reading and language standards” (Interview, June 5, 2019). Sophie believed that the district expectations for writing standards were not as strong as for reading standards, “because then it would be emphasized more in our ELA units” (Interview, June 5, 2019).

The district slide show that described the sixth-grade expectations in the area of writing for the 2018-19 school year stated that they use the Being a Writer curriculum for writing. It also stated the purposes for writing in sixth grade, listing the genres of narrative, argument, informative, and functional. According to the slide show, sixth grade also used the writing process, which includes prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, publishing, and sharing. The slide show indicated that sixth graders used writing to analyze and share their learning through inquiry or research writing.

During the observations, the students were either working on very structured pieces of writing in the second and third observations, or very free creative writing in the first and fourth observations. The structured pieces of writing were students’ analyses of the film An American Tail. Students were required to write a five-paragraph essay to explain their thinking. At the start of the second observation, Sophie reminded students that their Learning Target was, “Today I can find evidence to support my thoughts when writing my essay” (Observation, May 7, 2019). The students were using the five-
paragraph essay, which was an important format to Sophie. However, the perceived value of the five-paragraph essay may not be consistent across the district. As she explained during her interview,

I believe that was all talked about as a district if we needed to make sure that the five-paragraph essay-type format was used. But there was [sic] a lot of different opinions on that…you can use five paragraphs, but can we do it on different things, and can we focus on using it more with technology rather than a nice five paragraph paper? And then some of us more old school people are more like, “No, I think it’s really important that a paragraph paper be something that they can whip out in a good amount of time”…I just feel like when you need to write something for someone that you have that same kind of structure in your head or even in a paragraph; I’m going to write the introduction, I’m going to tell the reader three things and I’m going to make sure I have a concluding statement.

(Interview, June 5, 2019)

The formula that Sophie described was evident in her students’ writing during the second and third observations.

During the first and last observations, Sophie’s students were able to exercise their creativity in a less controlled format. Each of these lessons began with writing prompts on the whiteboard at the front of the room. During the first observation, students seemed excited for the freedom to have choice in their topics for writing. The only direction was to complete the story starter that they had chosen. As previously mentioned, the reaction of a student with quiet excitement saying, “Yes!” indicated that
this opportunity was not routine in Sophie’s classroom. During the final observation, students were directed to write one of three genres: a legend, realistic fiction, or a newspaper report that included the 5W’s (who, what, when, where, why). The teacher shared the excitement of this creative opportunity, writing alongside her students. At the end of the lesson, Sophie was visibly enjoying the opportunity to share her own writing with the class. She provided directions to the class, saying, “Everyone look at your writing. Are there any words you could make more interesting? While you do that, I’m going to read aloud my legend.” While the students began editing their own papers, Sophie read her writing expressively to the class, which she had chosen to write about her husband. Her story ended with, “I caught this legend, and he is my hero…That’s a true story! It’s about my husband!” (Observation, May 20, 2019). Then Sophie asked again if there were any other volunteers who would like to share their writing.

Sharing, without constructive feedback, was an important part of the first and last observations. During the final observation, students could choose to write a piece of realistic fiction, a legend, or a newspaper report. Any feedback that was provided came from the teacher, which was based on encouragement rather than for improvement of writing. For example, the teacher responded to one student, “I like how you introduced the character, and how you brought in your interest of the Marines.” She questioned another student’s claim that she had chosen to write a piece of realistic fiction, saying, “Okay, but let’s be clear; could that really happen? Okay, so that’s more of a fantasy, right? I like your story, though” (Observation, May 20, 2019). These responses offer encouragement for students, but do not offer specific suggestions for improving writing.
The analysis of data from Sophie’s classroom observations and her interview showed that her instruction was driven by standards, which put constraints on her instructional decision making. The stark contrast in the environment and the activities between these four observations corresponds with Burvall and Ryder’s (2017) claim that many teachers find the standards and creativity to be mutually exclusive.

Sophie was very dedicated to the expectations of the standards that must be taught and assessed in her district. Based on the observations and the teacher interview, it appeared that Sophie has interpreted the standards and assessments that are required by her district to be taught devoid of creativity, and she has developed a pedagogy for teaching writing that includes a preference for formulaic, predictable writing, rather than the student-driven pedagogy that NWP supports. This indicated that the standards and district expectations appeared to place a constraint on Sophie’s classroom instruction, prioritizing student production over student creativity.

**Instructional Resources**

The third research question that was investigated during this study was, what resources are teachers using to support their writing instruction? To answer this question, the researcher examined the resources that teachers used for their writing instruction. All three teachers in this study referenced the prioritized standards that had been selected for their grade level, either during their observations or within their teacher interview. However, the type of resources that were selected for instruction were largely the result of teacher decision-making by either the teacher, the building team, or the district grade level.
The *Being a Writer* curriculum was purchased for all teachers in the district several years ago, but was presented to teachers as a resource, not a mandated curriculum. Therefore, the extent of utilization of this resource varied among the teachers in this study. The following information describes the teacher resources that were either observed or discussed, including the accompanying rationale by the teacher, if available.

**Ella - Second Grade**

Ella preferred to use a variety of resources for her writing instruction. The greatest resource for Ella was each student’s writing notebook. In the classroom observations and during the interview, Ella demonstrated how the notebooks were used as a place for students to express themselves, collaborate with others, and try new ideas. As she explained in her interview, she credits her NWP training for introducing her to the work of Ralph Fletcher (2003), whose published book *A Writer’s Notebook* taught her about the importance of writing notebooks in the classroom. Ella stated, “[Through the Writing Project] we’ve read a lot of Ralph Fletcher…you read a lot of the books that come from the Writing Project. We had time to…adopt some of these things that were happening in the book” (Interview, June 12, 2019). Ella demonstrated through her classroom observations how the students’ writing notebooks were used for drafting pieces of writing, as well as providing feedback to improve writing.

Ella did not use the *Being a Writer* curriculum at all, and she said, “I can actually tell you the reason why [pause] because when we were given the materials, the training
wasn’t there, the conversation wasn’t there” (Interview, June 12, 2019). When explaining her resources, Ella used opinion writing as an example:

We don’t have a curriculum for opinion writing. We don’t have materials for opinion writing. So we sit down in our PLC [Professional Learning Community] and we draw our resources together. It might be something from Teachers Pay Teachers; it might be something from Pinterest…we go and we search out resources and then we use those materials to teach the structure…” (Interview, June 12, 2019).

Despite having access to the Being a Writer curriculum, which includes a unit for opinion writing, Ella and her second-grade team (Professional Learning Community, or PLC as she refers to it) in her building did not consider utilizing the available resources from that program. Instead, Ella relied on her training from the NWP and her own teaching experience to make instructional decisions for teaching writing, as she explained, “I tried to incorporate what I’ve read and what I’ve learned from other teachers and what I see [are the needs] in my classroom” (Interview, June 12, 2019).

Ella used various resources for teaching craft and structure of writing, as well as grammar. During the third classroom observation, Ella used the children’s picture book, Arthur Writes a Story, by Marc Brown, as a mentor text for students to learn and review the characteristics of a good story before asking students to attempt to apply those concepts in their own writing notebooks. For grammar instruction, Ella used students’ own writing to find teachable moments when learning a particular grammar skill might be relevant to them. As she explained,
I think that you just have to be mindful as to what’s happening in your classroom and pair that with their writing. And I think that just comes from experience, I guess…So, for example, I noticed that three or four of my kids still at the end of the year were lower casing [sic] the letter “I” when it was standing by itself… So then we were putting a piece of writing up underneath the document camera of an author’s writing…and what kind of capital letters are written in the writing…and [we were] just talking through and just taking that teachable moment but not calling out the kids. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

Ella’s explanation of her instructional strategy supports her comfort with teacher decision-making. She is able to draw upon her teaching experience, and her involvement with NWP, as well as utilizing convenient online resources and students’ own writing for her daily instruction.

Ella also shared that she routinely used the Fundations curriculum, which is required in her district for grades K-3. She described Fundations as “more of a phonetic program…It’s supposed to help with reading fluency” (Interview, June 12, 2019). However, Ella takes advantage of opportunities to infuse grammar or spelling mini-lessons within their Fundations discussions. Another resource that Ella uses to support grammar lessons is the Daily Oral Language (DOL) book, which was a required resource many years ago in the district. Some veteran teachers have held onto this resource, and will bring it out occasionally to reinforce particular grammar skills. However, Ella questions the effectiveness of DOL. She stated,
And so I’ve done years of DOL – years and years of DOL – and I remember just being so frustrated, like, they can do it in isolation, but they can’t do it in their writing. I don’t understand it. And so I feel like, yes, the grammar has a place, but it has to be woven into what’s happening at the time in the classroom.

(Interview, June 12, 2019)

Ella’s conclusion about the lack of effective transfer and application in teaching isolated grammar skills is supported by research (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013).

Ella has preferred to use a variety of resources, including students’ notebooks, mentor texts, professional books, and the district curriculum materials of Fundations and DOL. Ella also collaborated with her grade level colleagues, who have shared resources and ideas from Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers. She has found her training from NWP and her own teaching experience to be very valuable for teaching writing in her classroom.

Grace – Fifth Grade

Grace also utilized a variety of resources for her writing instruction, but the classroom observations showed that Grace’s motivation for the resources that she chose was an effort to create interdisciplinary opportunities for writing, especially combining social studies, reading, and writing. The resources that Grace selected to support her instruction were not limited to objects; human resources were a vital asset for her unit. Grace shared planning documents with the researcher that had been created from meetings with her teaching partner and her school’s librarian. She also worked with
special education teachers during the implementation phase of the social studies unit, so that they would be able to support her students and enable success for all.

The first two observations included a class period of reading from a variety of resources (textbook, library books, articles) in order to learn about the American Civil War, and a lesson on sketchnoting, which required students to collaborate with peers in an area where space was a resource, the school library, where they investigated the same subtopic of the Civil War, and created a mural of sketches and written descriptions that depicted their learning from their research. The Teacher Librarian was a valuable resource for preparing teachers and students how to sketchnote. Together, Grace and the Teacher Librarian used professional books, such as Disrupting Thinking by Kylene Beers and Robert Probst (2017) and How to Sketchnote; A Step by Step Manual for Teachers and Students by Sylvia Duckworth (2018), to help them grow professionally in order to push their students’ thinking.

The third observation included time for students to work on their end-of-year social studies project, and then share their projects with the class during the final observation. Technology was an important resource for these projects, including the use of computers, iPads, and green screens. Writing was an integral part of the projects, rather than an isolated subject. However, there are certainly times during the year where writing is taught separately from content.

During her interview, Grace said that she found the district’s Being a Writer curriculum to be especially beneficial for establishing a writing community at the beginning of the school year, saying, “It’s a big resource for us. I mean, we use it a lot.
I’m not going to reinvent something that is this good” (Interview, June 6, 2019).

Furthermore, Grace shared her insight for how she believes that Being a Writer fits with the district expectations, saying, “We’ve got to follow what the district wants us to do…this just really helps us to get there” (Interview, June 6, 2019). Grace said that she liked using the curriculum because it offered some “real fun things” for different genres of writing, including the use of high-quality mentor texts and different ideas for writing. She also believed that the skill practice book was helpful for understanding various skills to improve writing.

Like Ella, Grace mentioned that she does pull out older district materials such as DOL and her 6-Traits activities. However, even when using these extra resources, Grace admitted, “It’s not like it used to be” (Interview, June 6, 2019). For example, she said, “I mean, it’s not like it used to be where we did one, you know, we really hit one hard…we just kind of like where we think they’re writing fiction then we really, you know, go into the word choice more and we look at the way that they’re saying things. (Interview, June 6, 2019)

As shown through observations and the interview, Grace uses many different available resources to teach writing in a way that is responsive to her students’ needs, while still addressing the required standards and genres from her district.

Sophie – Sixth Grade

Sophie viewed the expectations for sixth grade instruction to be very structured and more technical. The resources that Sophie used to support the expectations for the priority standards in her district were more traditional, as well as her own belief of the
necessity for mastering the five-paragraph essay. For example, during the structured writing lessons for the second and third observations, Sophie relied mostly upon the Common Core standards that had been prioritized within the sixth grade ELA units to guide her instruction. During the interview, Sophie explained that RL or RI 6.1, citing textual evidence, is used consistently, and RL 6.2, finding the theme, are both examples of prioritized standards (Interview, June 5, 2019). When referencing standard 6.1, she emphasized, “we use it all year long” (Interview, June 5, 2019). As discussed earlier, Sophie believed that it was important for her to prepare students for future academic demands in secondary education by teaching them the format of a five-paragraph essay. She described herself as “old school,” saying, “I think it’s really important that a paragraph paper be something that they can whip out in a good amount of time” (Interview, June 5, 2019). The resources that Sophie used during the classroom observations to support this goal were laptop computers, student notebooks, and rubrics.

During the second classroom observation, the Learning Target that was written on the board read, “Today I can find evidence to support my thoughts when writing my essay” (Observation, May 7, 2019). All students were writing an essay about the animated movie An American Tail (1986). They were instructed to either compare the refugee experience in the movie to the refuge experience today, or “write an essay comparing the historical references” (Observation, May 7, 2019). While conferencing with the teacher, students mentioned information they had read on a website or in books, which were other resources for students’ writing.
In the third observation, students utilized a rubric to evaluate their own and others’ essays. The five questions were as follows:

This evaluation essay belongs to _______.

Which essay question did you or the author answer?

What did you like about the essay? Support your thoughts with evidence from the essay.

What is your wish for yourself or the author to work on the next time they write an essay?

What did you learn from writing or reading the essay?

(Observation, May 7, 2019)

The teacher asked the students to consider whether or not their partner provided a thesis that clearly explained the topic, included evidence to support the thesis, and had minimal errors in mechanics. Students displayed mostly indifference or lack of motivation using the rubrics during the observation. For example, while circulating around the room, Sophie stopped to check in with one of the students. The following dialogue was observed:

Teacher: So which essay question did you do? Comparing historical references in the movie…Did your person get the right one?

Student: Kind of.

Teacher: Yes or no?

Student: Yeah, I guess.

Teacher: All right…And then what did you like about your essay?
Student: I put that I had good punctuation.

Teacher: Okay. [laughing softly] You thought you improved in mechanics…all right…is that one of the things that you thought you’ve improved with the most this year?

Student: Kinda.

(Observation, May 7, 2019)

As this exchange demonstrates, many of the students during this observation appeared to lack an understanding of the value of the rubric. Much of the feedback that students shared was centered around mechanics, spelling, or spacing of the paper, rather than the content. It seemed that they were more accustomed to receiving feedback from the teacher instead of exchanging feedback with their peers.

The resources that Sophie selected to support her instruction were primarily laptop computers, student notebooks, and rubrics. These resources align with Sophie’s beliefs about writing instruction, namely that all of her sixth-grade students should be proficient with writing five-paragraph essays and build confidence in their writing in order to prepare them for future writing expectations. Sophie also incorporated an animated movie, *An American Tail (1989)*, and various books and websites on the topic of refugees to provide content for structuring their essays. The *Being a Writer* ancillary materials were used occasionally for grammatical instruction or creative writing prompts, which will be described in the next section.
Creativity in Writing Instruction

The fourth research question, how do teachers identify and support creativity in writing? guided the researcher to examine the teachers’ beliefs of what constitutes creativity in students’ written work and how the teachers support students’ creativity in the classroom. Two questions from the teacher questionnaire specifically addressed the topic of creativity. (See Table 2 for teachers’ responses to questions regarding creativity)

Table 2
Teacher Beliefs Regarding Creativity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Prompt: Creativity cannot be taught.</th>
<th>Prompt: The Common Core State Standards do not allow opportunities for creativity.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table indicates, there was some disagreement among the three teachers for the area of creativity. Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, indicated that she somewhat agreed that creativity cannot be taught. Ella and Sophie strongly disagreed with this statement. Ella, the second-grade teacher, somewhat agreed that the CCSS do not allow opportunities for creativity, while Grace and Sophie somewhat disagreed with this statement. There were
also contradictions between some of the questionnaire responses and the actions observed during classroom visits. A detailed analysis of such instances is included below.

The following sections will discuss the data from the classroom observations, teacher interviews, responses to the questionnaire, as well as how the responses align to the teacher interview and observations in regard to teacher’s beliefs about creativity and teaching writing. In addition, teachers shared their insight for evaluating samples of student work for individual creativity. During the interviews, the teachers discussed their evaluations of student work samples from a creativity lens, using the provided creativity rubric. (See Appendix D for an example of the creativity rubric) The interview questions that referred to creativity included: What do you look for in students’ writing as evidence of creativity? Do you believe that the standards allow for opportunities for creativity in writing? How do you support the development of student creativity in your classroom writing instruction? The teachers in this study discussed the ways in which they support creativity to varying degrees in their classrooms.

Ella – Second Grade

For Ella, choice is the key to unlocking creativity for her students. Ella explained that she provided choice by allowing her students to select their topic and genre, as well as how they would like to spend their time during their writing block. During her interview, she said,

I think we have to be careful and continually find that balance. And I don’t think that it’s found yet. If we have to adhere to these standards, how can we allow
voice and choice? How can we allow creativity? …it’s going to be a mindset change for many teachers. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

She went further, describing the potential consequences for not realizing the importance of allowing students opportunities to demonstrate creativity in their work:

And so I feel like that mindset, that shift, is going to have to happen before we get too much further into it. Otherwise we’re having kids doing:

Robotic, how-to paper; check!
Opinion paper; check!
No fun; check!
No creativity; check!
Didn’t get to put my stamp on it; check!
I hate writing; check!

[pause] and that’s what I’m worried about. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

Ella’s concern is clearly that students will begin to associate negative emotions with writing if they are not allowed to be empowered with their own voice and autonomy in what they create.

Ella provided examples of scenarios of students from her class who struggled with writing at first, but once they were given freedom with their writing, they began to flourish. One boy, Max (pseudonym), was recently staffed into special education. At the beginning of the year, he did not have any spacing between his words and would write sentences such as, “Played b-ball.” That would be his entire story. During the interview, Ella shared a recent piece of writing from a student in her classroom. She explained,
Now he has, you know, “The Teacher Lost Her Pen” (title) – Once upon a time there was a lady who lost her pen. She thought the pen was lost forever, but she found it.” [pause] Two words in a sentence at the beginning of the year. Is that creative for him? Yes. Because it’s not about what’s happening in his life. It’s a fiction story about a lady, a teacher who lost her pen. I know that that doesn’t seem creative in comparison to these, but for him, I was like, “Heck, yeah! We’re seeing some progress!” (Interview, June 12, 2019)

In this example, Ella pointed out that creativity varies from student to student. Another student in her class, Sarah, struggled with reading and writing at the beginning of the year, but loved to write. She was not meeting the state expectations for reading fluency, which caused her parents to be extremely concerned. Ella described Sarah’s situation, saying, “She’s been in a lot of different [intervention] groups…but the kid can write. Writing has just opened up a whole world for her this year…her writing went from half a sheet to ten pages!” (Interview, June 12, 2019). Ella supported creativity in her classroom by offering her students choice in what they write, as well as encouragement and motivation for writing.

In the interview Ella shared three writing samples, one piece from three different students, to evaluate creativity in her students’ writing. All three pieces were examples of self-selected fiction pieces that the students had written. When using the rubric to evaluate students’ creativity in the samples of writing, Ella noticed that none of the students had included examples of humor or word play, one of the indicators of creativity on the rubric. However, all three students showed strong descriptions and literary
devices (e.g. metaphors/similes, foreshadowing, flashbacks, personification, imagery), and were different from other students’ pieces of writing.

Ella’s responses to her questionnaire indicated that she disagreed with the statement “Creativity cannot be taught,” and somewhat agreed with the statement “The Common Core State Standards do not allow opportunities for creativity” (Questionnaire, May 7, 2019). During her interview, Ella explained,

I think there are [opportunities for creativity]. I think that you have to be open to it, though. I’m hoping that with more of our inquiry-based route that we’re going to start going, that there’ll be more opportunities to be a little more creative in our curriculum. But I still don’t want to lose sight of allowing kids that time just to write. (Interview, June 12, 2019)

Although there was no evidence of inquiry-based activities during the classroom observations, Ella demonstrated how she has been able to incorporate a writing workshop within her classroom routine while meeting district standards. She looks for depth in her students’ writing when identifying creativity. As she explained, “Anybody could write character, setting, problem, solution” (Interview, June 12, 2019). Ella supported creativity in her classroom by allowing students choice in their style and topics of writing, and helped students develop their unique, creative ideas through writing conferences that allowed students to dictate the needs and direction of their writing.

Grace – Fifth Grade

Grace also considered student choice to be an important factor in supporting creativity in her students’ writing. During the observations, Grace’s students enjoyed
applying their creativity to the activities of sketchnoting for their Civil War unit, as well as creating various formats for their end-of-year projects. One group did a particularly creative project by utilizing a green screen and recording a video of themselves using a script they wrote for Reader’s Theater. As she recalled this example, Grace commented during the interview, “I think that shows there’s a way to be really creative with something, even when it’s a social studies project” (Interview, June 6, 2019). This comment supported Grace’s response on the questionnaire, when she indicated that she “somewhat disagreed” that the CCSS does not allow for creativity. Grace’s social studies project indicated that creativity may indeed be embedded into standards work.

In the interview Grace shared six samples of writing, one piece from six different students. All pieces were from assignments that had been given to the entire class, with varying degrees of latitude for individual creativity. The genres included: persuasive essay, Mother’s Day essay, Flag essay, poetry, and two different samples from the end-of-year social studies project. Grace brought her student samples and completed rubrics to share during the interview discussion.

The persuasive essay showed effective communication for an intended audience, and included strong spelling, conventions, and organization. The majority of identifiable characteristics for creativity, as outlined in the rubric, were absent from this piece. The student was attempting to persuade the principal to institute longer lunch periods at school. The writing followed a clear structure, with an introduction, supporting argument, and conclusion. Although the structure appeared to stem from a somewhat rigid formula, the piece did not follow the typical rule of three supporting paragraphs,
with one reason of evidence in each paragraph. In this essay, the student had four supporting paragraphs and a final concluding paragraph.

Although all students were required to write a persuasive piece of writing, Grace allowed the students to choose to whom they would like to write, and any topic they felt strongly about. She said that many students wrote their essay about recycling plastics because the class had read a book about this issue, and then the class had a video conference through Skype with the author. This motivated many of them to write about recycling, but it was not required. The essay she selected to share was one of the strongest essays, in her opinion, due to the organization and structure. However, it did not show many indicators of creativity, according to the rubric.

The other two essay pieces she showcased offered more opportunity for creativity. Grace scored them strong in the categories of effective communication, vivid descriptions, and emotional appeal. They also incorporated literary devices, with strong organization, spelling, and grammar. Grace indicated on the rubric that these pieces showed individual expression, different from other classmates’ pieces of writing. During the interview, Grace explained that she felt that these pieces were creative due to the way they were organized, and also the figurative language that was used.

Grace marked her student’s poetry example strong in all categories on the rubric. She believed that creativity was much easier to incorporate when writing poetry. She remarked, “Well, in poetry, [creativity] was everywhere” (Interview, June 6, 2019). During their poetry unit, she and her grade level colleague provided the structure for
different types of poems, shared an example for each type, “and then they took off,” exploring various formats for writing poetry (Interview, June 6, 2019).

The final two pieces of writing were different approaches to the end-of-year social studies project. The first piece was written by two students working as partners for the project. They chose to create a Google Slide Show to communicate their learning from the year in social studies. Grace marked their writing as generally lacking creative aspects, although noted that it showed strong communication for a specific audience and was different from other pieces of writing.

The second end-of-year project was a script to be used with a green screen, written by two girls in Grace’s class. Grace scored this piece as strong or moderate for all categories except aesthetic appeal. Although the actual piece of writing does lack color or intention for making the paper aesthetically pleasing, the format of the writing is arranged using a script format. They were the only group to select this format for their presentation. The script calls for the use of several different background changes with a green screen, using an iPad app. The students recorded their presentation in advance of sharing it with the class. Grace explained,

What I liked about doing that and when they can record themselves, they are different people. They never would have – in front of the class – been as dramatic as they were with the green screen. I mean, that was just…it was awesome!

(Interview, June 6, 2019)

Grace’s comments show not only her support of student choice and creativity, but also her enthusiasm for unique products. Grace explained that when looking for evidence of
creativity, “I think it’s got a lot to do with the way they put things together” (Interview, June 6, 2019). This is a shift in the way Grace has begun to perceive creativity. As she described her transforming views of creativity, Grace said,

“It’s hard for me because when I think of creative writing, I think of writing cute little stories, you know? I mean, that’s always what we thought of that. So it’s, you know, for them to find a way to be creative…like the girls were in the writing that they did to show their knowledge of social studies for the year. That was creative. It was the way they presented the information. (Interview, June 6, 2019)

Grace described how she is allowing her understanding of creativity to evolve. Although she admits that this shift in her thinking is difficult, she models risk-taking and a growth mindset. One example of how Grace demonstrated these traits was that after the projects were complete, she asked her class for feedback. Since they had never done this particular project before, Grace asked her class for suggestions of how to improve this project in the future. She said their only suggestion was to include the use of the Book Creator app as a project choice.

Grace represented her beliefs about creativity on the teacher questionnaire. In response to the prompt *Creativity cannot be taught*, Grace marked “somewhat agree” (Teacher questionnaire, June 3, 2019). This seemed to align with the classroom observations. Grace provided opportunities to be creative, but typically did not intentionally plan for ways to improve creativity. However, sketchnoting certainly helped students to stretch their ability to think flexibly and build connections with their classmates through visual representations of their thinking. Grace responded “somewhat
disagree” to the questionnaire prompt *The Common Core State Standards do not allow opportunities for creativity* (Teacher questionnaire, June 3, 2019). Grace demonstrated how she was able to incorporate creativity in her social studies projects while making sure she is teaching the standards that are included in the CCSS.

Grace identified creativity in her students’ work by the way they structured their thinking, and also looked for unique displays of their knowledge and ideas. She supported creativity in her classroom by not only offering choices for student work, but also by modeling ways that she is able to think creatively in her instruction.

**Sophie – Sixth Grade**

Based on the classroom observations and the follow-up interview, it appeared that Sophie typically offered a more traditional approach for teaching writing. However, during the first and last observations, Sophie tried to use a more creative approach for writing by posting choices on the board that she had found in her *Being a Writer* materials, and asked students to choose one to write about. The story starters from the first observation included random sentences to begin writing a piece of fiction. In the last observation, students chose from three genres (realistic fiction, a legend, or a newspaper report), but had to brainstorm topic ideas on their own. During both of these creative writing days, the purpose seemed to be more for enjoyment and practice of writing creatively. In fact, during the first observation, the researcher wrote the memo, “For my benefit?” (Researcher memo, May 1, 2019). As mentioned earlier, the reaction from a student saying, “Yes!” at the announcement that they would be able to choose what they wanted to write about indicated that choice and creativity were not part of a typical
routine in Sophie’s classroom (Observation, May 1, 2019). More evidence that the observations may have included some staged components was discovered during the third observation, when Sophie explained to her class: “I’m gonna come around and talk to you a little about some of the things that you’re writing for your actual observation that we’re doing here today for Mrs. Kress” (Observation, May 16, 2019).

Later, during the teacher interview, it became clearer that Sophie may not have been trying to stage something for the benefit of the researcher but was rather attempting to incorporate more creativity within her instruction. This revelation came as a result of Sophie’s reflection after her decision to participate in the research study. In the interview she explained:

It made me reflect more about maybe what I was doing…and then by doing the creativity part…made me reflect a little bit more about how I could put some creativity into that because it’s just not…creativity isn’t a part of sixth grade per se, because we do so much technical writing…It made me think maybe some creativity would be good…and enjoyable. (Interview, June 5, 2019)

In this comment, Sophie explained how she had viewed creativity as being separate from the sixth-grade curriculum, but her involvement in this study was causing her to question her values and beliefs for teaching writing in her sixth-grade classroom.

In the interview Sophie shared four pieces of student writing, all from the same whole-class writing assignment. She said that they were randomly selected as examples of students’ work. She was not certain which students had created the examples that were shared, since not all projects contained the author’s name. Students were asked to
write a series of “Day in the Life” journal entries from the point of view of someone living in Athens or Sparta, using the Book Creator app on the iPad. Teachers may check out a class set of iPads from the school library to use with classroom projects. Sophie said that this was a new project for her, and she shared with me the criteria for the project: 1) Historical references to real situations or events have taken place in the fictional account 2) Behavior change occurred and is obvious to the reader 3) Pictures are provided to enhance presentation, and 4) Adherence to proper grammar, sentence structure, and mechanics. This was not a district-wide expectation, but something Sophie decided to try as a result of reflecting on ways to incorporate more creativity in her classroom.

While going through the rubric for each piece of writing during the interview, Sophie remarked that two of the pieces seemed “kind of like a report almost,” and did not show individual expression (Interview, June 5, 2019). She marked all four pieces as moderate or strong for effective communication, vivid descriptions, aesthetic appeal, and also in the categories of organization and spelling and conventions.

Sophie admitted that even with an opportunity for creativity with this assignment, the emphasis remained on including historical references. She commented, “Historical references…she’s exceeded in that. [pause] So that was one of the real goals is to have those historical references in there as your story. So she knocked it out of the park on that one” (Interview, June 5, 2019). Sophie maintained a strong commitment to teaching with the standards in mind, yet developed an attempt at offering a more whimsical approach for students to convey their knowledge.
Sophie’s responses on the questionnaire indicated that she “strongly disagreed” that creativity cannot be taught, and she “somewhat disagreed” that the CCSS do not allow opportunities for creativity (Teacher questionnaire, 5/1/2019). According to the questionnaire, Sophie did believe that it was possible to incorporate more creativity in her classroom but has only just begun to experiment with how to organize and manage creative elements in her instruction. However, when asked how she supports the development of creativity in her classroom, she replied, “I wish that I could say that I did” (Interview, June 5, 2019). There seemed to be pedagogical tension between her interest in offering more creativity in her classroom and her firm belief about the importance of preserving the five-paragraph essay and teaching with strict adherence to the CCSS.

Conclusion

Overall, the three teachers who participated in this study demonstrated very different approaches for writing instruction. Ella, the second-grade teacher, believed strongly in the effectiveness of the writing workshop format. She followed the strategies that she learned from her participation in the NWP professional development, and especially valued writing conferences. Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, modeled the importance of risk-taking as she collaborated with her colleagues to develop an inquiry unit that incorporated both ELA and Social Studies standards. Sophie participated as a writer among the students in her classroom on days when they were given opportunities for creative writing. However, Sophie prioritized the structure of the five-paragraph essay for required pieces of writing. The following chapter will address the analysis of
themes that emerged, as well as the implications of these themes as they related to the current literature.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This chapter will share the overall thematic findings from the research and analysis of this study. The first theme that emerged was the divergent application of instructional practices that developed after a common experience of professional development from the National Writing Project (NWP). The second theme was the discovery of teachers’ use of autonomy in aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The third theme was student engagement and opportunities for creativity during writing instruction. Implications of the findings will also be discussed in this chapter.

Common NWP Experience, Divergent Application

Although all three teacher participants in this study shared the same experience of the Summer Institute that was offered through a local site of the National Writing Project, they applied their learning in various ways in their writing instruction. Ella exhibited confidence in her ability to teach responsively to students’ needs, facilitating a workshop approach where students directed their learning through choices of topics and genres and the ability to experience collaborative feedback. Ella addressed required expectations through whole group minilessons, as well as individual and small group writing conferences. Grace relied on her experience from teaching writing for 40 years, as well as collaboration with her grade level colleague and teacher librarian. Grace did not incorporate writing conferences but did allow her students plentiful opportunities for choice and individual expression. Grace possessed a growth mindset that enabled her to
be open to new ideas for writing instruction, as well as modeling risk-taking in her classroom. Sophie was passionate about her personal interest in writing but believed that students were best prepared to be strong writers once they had mastered the formula for a five-paragraph essay. This section discusses the connections to existing literature, as well as implications for future research and practice regarding outcomes of teacher participation in the NWP Summer Institute.

**Connections to the Literature**

Despite participating in the NWP Summer Institute, the three participants in this study each applied their understandings in different ways. The new learning combined with individual experiences and personal beliefs and manifested in unique outcomes for each teacher’s writing instruction.

During her interview, Ella referenced her experience with NWP frequently, speaking of specific strategies and resources that have influenced her instructional decisions (Interview, June 12, 2019; Fletcher, 1993). For Ella, her strongest takeaways from her involvement in the NWP professional development and leadership opportunities appeared to be the importance of establishing a community of writers through structuring a writing workshop that included peer conferencing and co-creating pieces of writing and offering students choice while utilizing writers’ notebooks. She used peer conferencing in her classroom in a way that exemplified Franklin’s (2010) definition: “a peer conference is a meeting that may or may not include evaluative feedback” (p. 80).

The social skills that are required for an effective peer conference do not always come naturally to students. Therefore, Franklin developed several strategies for helping
students improve their social skills, which in turn would bolster the effectiveness of their writing conferences. For example, Franklin reviewed the characteristics of ineffective conferences with her students, and then enlisted students’ feedback to help create a chart that outlined the expectations for an effective peer conference.

Franklin took the advice of Peter Elbow (2000), offering times for students to simply say, “Thank you,” after listening to a classmate share his or her work. As Franklin explained, “appreciative listening is an important social skill and the foundation of a good conversation” (p. 82). The care that Franklin described in slowly developing a caring classroom where students felt comfortable taking risks and sharing their writing was similar to the classroom environment that the second-grade teacher, Ella, constructed in her classroom. For example, when the second-grade students met for a writing conference, their questions indicated genuine curiosity about the other student’s writing and offered suggestions to strengthen the piece. After listening to a student read aloud her story, one girl suggested that the student’s character needed a name because the story was not very clear. Another student inquired to a boy, “I have a question: Is it a high-tech place?” and suggested that he provide more details to describe the Headquarters so that he could picture it in his head (Observation, April 30, 2019). These types of interactions exemplify a peer conference as described by Franklin (2010). It was clear that Ella had explicitly taught her students how to be good listeners in order to offer effective feedback to their classmates. Franklin argued that by asking students to participate in a conversation about writing ideas, rather than identifying surface level mistakes, students are able to build a community within - and beyond - the classroom.
Grace did not make specific reference to NWP, but expressed regret for her lack of time to conference with students. This indicated an awareness of writing conferences as being a strong tenet of NWP. She commented, “That’s a real weak part with me…but once in a while, I’ll pull them back and talk to them about what they’re writing…not really editing, just discussing” (Interview, June 6, 2019). This approach aligns with Franklin’s (2010) definition of peer conferences, as previously mentioned. Grace said that she does have her students peer edit, using a checklist of items to address.

Grace’s instruction was observed and discussed in the interviews as offering students choice in their writing. Student choice is another strong tenet of the NWP (Graves, 1994). Through choices, Grace incorporated opportunities for creativity and inquiry. In her article “Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay,” Campbell (2014) encouraged teachers to move away from formulaic instruction, particularly the traditional five-paragraph essay. Campbell claimed that

Its offer of structure stops the very thinking we need students to do. Their focus becomes fitting sentences into the correct slots rather than figuring out for themselves what they’re trying to say and the best structure for saying it.

(Campbell, 2014, p. 61)

Grace’s decision to embed choice in her students’ work allows her students the opportunity to problem solve through the process of developing their own pieces of writing for a particular purpose.

Campbell explained what Peter Elbow (2000) called “low-stakes” writing (Campbell, 2014, p. 63). During low-stakes writing, the teacher focuses primarily on
what the students are trying to say, and then looks at organizational structure. Low-stakes writing helps students develop their writing, as well as learn content, through the act of writing. The philosophy described by Campbell seemed to relate to Grace’s approach to the end-of-year work that she did with her fifth graders. There were notable similarities in the questions posed by Campbell in the article and the questions that Grace required of her students during the observations for this study. Grace provided a handout to each student for each of the class projects that stated three guiding questions for students to consider and address in their final projects. (See Table 3 for a comparison of teachers’ questions)

Table 3

*Questions for Student Reflection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Campbell – Close Reading (High School)</th>
<th>Grace – Civil War Project (5th Grade)</th>
<th>Grace – End of Year Social Studies Project (5th Grade)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What connections can I make to this text?</td>
<td>What does the author think I already know?</td>
<td>How has American History impacted us?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What techniques does the author use, and to what effect?</td>
<td>What surprised me?</td>
<td>How does it continue to impact us?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Why does this text matter?</td>
<td>How did this challenge/confirm my thinking?</td>
<td>Why does any of this matter?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grace’s teaching aligned with Campbell (2014). This table shows that both teachers value open-ended responses that are the result of students’ reflective thinking. For Campbell, these questions laid the foundation for beginning a literary analysis with
students at the secondary level. For Grace, her questions aimed to support students’ thinking as they organized their learning into a creative culminating project. Both teachers allowed students to draw their own conclusions and support their findings, rather than complete a predetermined formula of prescribed concepts.

Grace modeled a growth mindset throughout this study. She clearly valued the importance of student choice in her writing instruction. This aligns with the sentiment of Donald Graves, late professor emeritus at the University of New Hampshire, and revered by NWP as being an expert in the area of teaching writing (Graves, 1994; NWP, 2012). Graves also believed that teachers of writing should be writers themselves.

Sophie considered herself to be a writer, and enjoyed writing for personal reasons, including poems for family members or advancing her own education. She stated, “That’s what I really enjoyed about coming and getting my Masters. I was back into writing again. I loved it!” (Interview, June 5, 2019). When asked what she believed to be the most important elements of a writing curriculum, she responded,

First of all, the most important thing would be to provide that time that there is a clear time when teachers can say, “Okay, we’re going to relax…we’re gonna write.” And, you know, just like really when we talk about creating that culture of writing, that they know that they can just relax and write. And have freedom to do that. When I was taking those writing classes [with the Writing Project], I was just very passionate about it. (Interview, June 5, 2019)

These comments from Sophie’s reflection are indicative of the tension that occasionally emerged between her passion for personal writing and her commitment to following
through on her district’s expectations. Through Sophie’s participation in this study, she began to consider the benefits of including creativity in her writing instruction, yet her beliefs about the importance of mastering the five-paragraph essay format were unwavering.

On the teacher questionnaire, Sophie strongly agreed that she enjoyed writing personally, but responded that she “somewhat agreed” that she likes to teach writing. Sophie also strongly agreed that she enjoyed learning about becoming a better writer. It is possible that Sophie’s participation in the NWP professional development opportunities improved her own confidence and passion as a writer but did not translate into her writing instruction. Although her goal for teaching writing was to help students become “confident writers” with the ability to write with “that organization of that five-paragraph paper” (Interview, June 5, 2010), her students generally lacked excitement for writing during the classroom observations.

This disconnect between personal enjoyment of writing and excitement for authentic writing experiences in the classroom was a surprising discovery. However, upon closer examination of the data and the literature, a plausible explanation was considered. One of the core principles of NWP is listed on their website and states, “Knowledge about the teaching of writing comes from many sources: theory and research, the analysis of practice, and the experience of writing” (NWP, 2019). During the Summer Institute, these three areas were nurtured for participants. The facilitators, called “Teacher Consultants,” facilitated the reading and reflective discussions of myriad professional literature devoted to theory and research of writing, as well as analyzing
practical applications of classroom practice. The third component of the Summer Institute was experiencing the messiness of writing and participating in response groups. This enabled teachers to consider a combination of researched best practices and also personal experience of being a writer when making instructional decisions.

It appeared that the latter component of the NWP Summer Institute, personal experience with writing, had the biggest impact on Sophie. She enjoyed the writing experiences and became a more confident writer as a result. This excitement has remained over the years, and carried over into her classroom, where she eagerly shared her own pieces of writing with her students. She indicated this passion for writing during the interview, as well as in her responses on the questionnaire.

Sophie’s inclination for traditional instructional decision-making and reinforcement of the five-paragraph essay aligned with the observations from Wilcox et al. (2015), who noted that classrooms in their study that exceeded expectations were focused mostly on more essay writing, research, and citing text evidence. They concluded that:

This finding suggests that at least in some educational settings attempts to align to the CCSS may ultimately work against recommended practices identified in the research such as the use of creativity/imagery to prompt writing, and self-regulation and metacognitive reflection as teachers focus on the use of rubrics to align students’ writing to the CCSS tests. (Wilcox et al., 2015, p. 920)

Sophie’s adherence to teaching formulaic essay writing and utilization of rubrics was evidence of the care she has in making sure that she prepares her students to be successful
writers. One may conclude that Sophie’s definition of successful writing is to score well on a writing rubric.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

One implication gleaned from the analysis of the data and literature is that we must be cognizant of the outcomes of the delivery of professional development. For the NWP, one of their core principles states, “Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform” (NWP, 2019). The goal of NWP is to empower teachers to become leaders in their districts and communities, so that they may support other teachers in implementing best practices for writing instruction.

This goal is most successfully attained when there is a continued partnership between school districts and the university site where teachers participated in the Summer Institute. Troia, Lin, Cohen, and Monroe (2011) studied six writing teachers who received year-long professional development support for writing instruction. The teachers consistently displayed the components of a writing workshop, which did not surprise the researchers, given the ongoing professional development. The ongoing support proved beneficial, as teachers with a strong efficacy for teaching writing translated into their writing instruction and their ability to effectively teach through both explicit and incidental writing instruction (Troia et al., 2011). The absence of ongoing support beyond the parameters of the NWP Summer Writing Institute may have caused Sophie to rely on her own success with formulaic essay writing, rather than drawing from
the teachings in the Summer Institute. Stokes et al. (2011) reported the results from a study that was conducted by Inverness Research, Inc., which was a follow-up study of over 3,000 NWP participants representing over 120 colleges and universities from the 2009 NWP Institute. They discovered that 96% of those surveyed “gained confidence that they could continue to learn and grow in their classroom practice,” and 93% “were motivated to continue doing their own writing” (p. 12). Sophie was clearly motivated to continue her personal writing, like the majority of respondents who participated in the survey. Perhaps Sophie was also motivated to continue to learn and grow in her professional practice, but her personal belief regarding the effectiveness of teaching the five-paragraph essay overshadowed the new strategies that she was exposed to during the Summer Institute.

Future research is needed to examine successful methods for preparing teachers who participate in the NWP Summer Institute to become teacher leaders of writing. Specifically, how can district leaders support teachers’ passions for writing instruction and build upon the knowledge and pedagogy learned through Summer Institute participation in order to strengthen district writing programs? This may lead to implications for district leaders who are responsible for preparing professional development for their teachers.

### Alignment of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

All three participants aimed for their students to effectively communicate their ideas through writing. However, the resources and methodology they selected to use for instruction varied greatly. A combination of district-wide and teacher-created
assessments were referenced during the study. The connections to existing literature and the implications for future research and practice concerning curriculum, instruction, and assessment are discussed in this section.

Connections to the Literature

In the New Hope school district, teachers are encouraged to actively participate in the development of curriculum and assessment decisions. Teachers are valued for their expertise and decision-making contributions. Teacher leaders have worked with consultants from their Area Education Agency for many years to unpack the ELA standards as written in the CCSS and develop rubrics for evaluating student performance on the district common assessments for these standards. Grade level teachers have shared ideas and resources for supporting instruction of the standards. New Hope has undergone various iterations of prioritization of ELA standards the development of common assessments among K-6, but the instructional approaches have often been left up to the teachers’ professional decisions.

During the teacher interviews, it was evident that the teachers were somewhat uncertain of the district expectations for ELA instruction, but were very familiar with the genres of writing that they were held accountable to teach. As Ella explained, “I feel like the district expectations are…the children will write one personal narrative, one opinion piece, one research-type piece” (Interview, June 12, 2019). She continued to describe the role of the Being a Writer curriculum, saying, “We have a ‘curriculum-ish’ in our district. We purchased the Being a Writer curriculum, and…the training for that wasn’t really extensive” (Interview, June 12, 2019). Grace shared a similar perspective, as she
explained, “*Being a Writer* is a guide. The only things that we have to do are the writings [tasks] that go with our ELA [units]. . . we had a persuasive, we had an opinion, and then the expository” (Interview, June 6, 2019). She clarified that “at the beginning of the year . . . they want us to do two parts of *Being a Writer*, ‘The Writing Community’ and ‘The Writing Process’ . . . we do a lot more than that . . . and then we pick and choose” (Interview, June 6, 2019). Sophie agreed that the district upholds the expectations of the genres that are included in the CCSS, sharing that “we do have a little tighter schedule with what types of writing that we really need to have produced and to teach,” such as an argumentative paper and a personal narrative (Interview, June 6, 2019). The insight of perceived district expectations from the three teachers in this study indicated that they believed that their district emphasized accountability for teaching their grade level prioritized and supporting ELA standards and administering common district assessments for each grade level. It was unclear if or how the data from the assessments was utilized by each teacher.

According to Carter (2008), “Too often, teachers are asked to align instruction in their classrooms without a clear understanding of what they are expected to do” (p. 13). She believed that one of the first steps to aligning instruction is to audit the current system to ensure that students’ learning is organized in a sequential order that is connected to the work of others and reflects the expectations from the state’s standards. The second step is to make sure that the assessments and the curriculum are aligned. Formative assessments are an integral part of this process. Carter claimed that the “third and possibly most important step of the Total Instructional Alignment process “is
alignment of instructional practices” (p. 19). As she pointed out, “requiring teachers to reference standards in written lesson plans does not always ensure that students are being taught those things that are essential for them to learn or for which they ultimately will be held accountable” (p. 20).

From Carter’s description of instructional alignment, it would appear that the New Hope teacher participants are lacking an alignment of instructional practices. As Glatthorn, Jailall, and Jailall (2017) stated, “Even the most conscientious teachers will need help to ensure that they are effectively delivering the written curriculum” (p. 159). The authors also suggested that teachers and principals examine the assessment data to confirm that the learned curriculum reflects the taught curriculum. Then, using “an atmosphere of inquiry,” a discussion should ensue with a positive tone among teachers that enables them to share their experiences and determine what has worked (p. 162). Such a solution-focused discussion should provide educators and administrators with evidence and reasoning for moving forward and reducing any gaps between taught and learned curriculum.

Dialogue and reflection among teachers are crucial for alignment of curriculum and instruction. Russell and Airasian (2012) believed that teachers must “recognize one’s own knowledge and pedagogical limitations and preferences” (p. 93). As the authors point out, “preferences for one or two teaching methods may deprive students of exposure to other methods or activities that would enhance their learning” (p. 94). Russell and Airasian also recommended that teachers do not rely entirely on textbooks and their ancillary materials when planning for instruction.
Implications for Research and Practice

Thus, teachers need to be reflective about their own preferences and open to different approaches with the process of instructional alignment. The need for instructional alignment was evident by the teachers’ comments. Ella commented, “We purchased the Being a Writer curriculum, and…the training for that wasn’t really extensive” (Interview, June 12, 2019), and Grace claimed, “The only things that we have to do are the writings [tasks] that go with our ELA [units]” (Interview, June 6, 2019).

These comments indicated a lack of theoretical understanding of what they were teaching and depicted a task-oriented, assessment-driven obligation to check off the pieces that are required by the state standards and district assessments.

The implications of this realization for any district and teacher-preparatory programs are that it is important to develop a clear understanding of the purpose behind what is being taught, as well as the best practices for achieving the learning goals. The Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) that were cited by Troia and Olinghouse (2013), as well as the research and pedagogy that was provided by Calkins (1994) and Graves (1994), may offer direction for strengthening instructional practices. Completing a process of instructional alignment (Carter, 2008) may help school systems strengthen their ELA curriculum.

Creativity and Student Engagement

Through the classroom observations, it appeared that the different approaches to teaching writing resulted in varying degrees of student engagement and opportunities for
creativity during ELA instruction. The results of the various approaches, as well as the theories associated with them, are discussed in this section.

Connections to the Literature

There is a growing concern among researchers that our society has entered a creativity crisis. Kim (2011) asserted that creativity is steadily declining among various demographic groups, and Davis (2012) claimed that this was especially true in the area of writing. Some argue that standardized assessments, which require convergent thinking, have contributed to the decrease in creativity (Sawyer, 2012). According to a meta-analysis conducted by Graham et al. (2012), creativity/imagery instruction produced a strong effect size of 0.70. They discovered that the quality of students’ writing improved when students were taught how to create visual images or how to be more creative. Thus, educators must be explicit in teaching to promote creativity.

According to the classroom observations for this study, the students demonstrated more active engagement with writing when they were afforded opportunities for creative expression. Ella, the second-grade teacher, allowed for creative expression during her writing workshop by encouraging her students to choose their own topics and add more details in their writing to create more vivid descriptions. She believed that student choice helps to foster creativity, and she provided an example of how development of creativity may foster motivation to write, as well. Ella explained that of one of her students was so motivated by reading the Warrior series by Erin Hunter, he informed his teacher, “I want to write Erin Hunter this summer…I feel like she needs to have one about scavengers because they talk about different animals that are scavengers…but she never really talks
about their survival in there.” He returned to school the next day and said, “I had to write a part two because I’m not done with my story” (Interview, June 12, 2019). The student had become so accustomed to acting on his creative ideas, he could not contain his excitement for a new idea that Erin Hunter could write about and felt compelled to share his ideas with the author. His excitement also fueled his motivation for wanting to continue to develop his own ideas for writing, even beyond the school day.

The students in Ella’s class appeared to have many creative ideas to write about during the classroom observations. This may have been attributed to the age of the students, or perhaps the supportive environment may have allowed students to feel more comfortable with risk-taking. Research has shown a correlation between younger students and increased creativity. Kim (2011) concluded that “until fifth grade, children were increasingly open-minded and curious and more apt to produce unique responses. After that, they began a trend of increasing conformist thinking that continued through high school” (p. 291). Therefore, age may have been a contributing factor for the divergent thinking that appeared during the second-grade observations.

Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, employed strategies to specifically teach for creativity. She introduced her students to sketchnoting (Duckworth, 2018), and allowed them to experiment with this notion during their study of the American Civil War. The students engaged in active discussions as they worked collaboratively to create a mural of their research findings using the sketchnote strategy. During the end-of-year social studies projects, students were encouraged to create products that were not typical of their peers, such as using a green screen for a readers’ theater presentation. Grace relied on
collaboration with her colleagues to grow her own teaching practices and improve student learning through an inquiry approach.

The effects of Grace’s collaboration for inquiry were similar to the findings of Spence (2009), an elementary school librarian, who examined a collaboration project between herself and a teacher in her building. They had collaborated together previously on projects within a writing workshop, and had decided to work with the classroom teacher’s second grade students to develop “an inquiry writing workshop” (Spence, 2009, p. 2). Students were allowed to select a topic of their choice, and were able to work in groups with similar topics, or individually if they preferred a unique topic. Spence explained that “re-envisioning the roles of teacher and librarian required moving beyond our comfort zones, but was well worth the effort” (p. 4). Her overall assessment of their collaborative project was that allowing students to explore various sources for research for their chosen topics “influenced and enhanced the children’s writing” (p. 4). She discovered that personalizing students’ writing experience improved students’ writing.

Grace’s ability to demonstrate risk-taking and professional growth in her instructional practice mirrors Spence’s experience in her collaboration with her school’s librarian. It was unclear whether or not Grace’s willingness toward adaptability and flexibility was nurtured from her participation in NWP, but during her interview, she stated, “I guess we can’t do what we did 30 years ago, 40 years ago” which expressed her openness toward shifting pedagogy for writing instruction (Interview, June 6, 2019).

Mascle (2013) wrote that in order to prepare students to meet future writing challenges, teachers must provide writers with “many varied opportunities to write so that
they can develop their skills and strategies. This writing should also be meaningful and purposeful within a specific context” (p. 220). Grace demonstrated the success of allowing students purposeful context for creativity within her Civil War project and the class end-of-year social studies project. The students in her class were highly engaged in their writing activities throughout all of the classroom observations.

Sophie provided opportunities for creativity in two out of the four observed lessons. The activities were not within the context of a particular content area, but more for experimenting with creative exercises. This may have been an effort to provide “low-stakes” writing (Campbell, 2014). Students showed excitement for the freedom, and wrote random, unstructured pieces of writing. During the observations, only teacher feedback was provided, which did not offer specific strategies for improving creativity. However, her responses to students who volunteered to share with the class were positive and encouraging, which can be helpful given Mascle’s (2013) claim that students with writing apprehension are more likely to avoid writing. During her interview, Sophie commented, “It kind of seems like they have better writing when they get more freedom” (Interview, June 5, 2019). Sophie stated that one of her goals for teaching writing was to build her students’ confidence in their writing. This may be related to the positive feelings toward writing that she associated with the NWP Summer Institute, as she experienced improved confidence in her writing as an outcome of that work.

Implications for Research and Practice

With the increase of standardized assessments, and more attention given to teaching the CCSS, creativity is often viewed as something that is nice to have, but not
necessary to include. Research indicates that if the area of creativity is neglected, students may not be prepared to meet future challenges that require divergent thinking. Sophie indicated that her participation in this study prompted her to reconsider her writing instruction, causing her to think about adding more opportunities for her students to use creativity. Administrators, classroom teachers, and instructors of education courses may consider the role that creativity plays in preparing students for the future. Grace provided an effective example of how to incorporate creativity when merging reading, writing, and social studies standards through inquiry in the classroom. Future research is needed on how teachers can support students using strategies to incorporate creativity into their inquiry process and products.

**Conclusion**

While in the midst of my research, I accepted a position as Teacher Leader for Elementary Curriculum. One of the expectations of my responsibilities requires me to examine the written curriculum across the district and work with teachers to improve the implementation of the enacted curriculum so that our students are provided guaranteed and viable learning opportunities across the district. This research has been invaluable to me to learn more about teachers’ perceptions of district expectations, as well as the instructional decision-making by teachers who experienced involvement with NWP many years ago.

The three teachers who participated in this study appeared to be navigating the standardization of writing curriculum in various ways. Ella, the second-grade teacher, remained true to the pedagogy of the writing workshop that she learned from her
experience with NWP. There was an abundance of creativity in her classroom as students worked independently or with peers to develop pieces of self-selected writing. She has found ways to embed the required pieces of district writing within her classroom routine, through minilessons, modeling, and a combination of whole group instruction and individual writing conferences. She felt that the district expectations were somewhat constraining when they interrupted the flow of her writing workshop, but she appeared supportive of the expectations of the writing standards. She chose not to utilize the Being a Writer curriculum, and instead relied on her teaching experience and knowledge from NWP training, as well as resources that she had obtained from colleagues or electronic sources.

Grace, the fifth-grade teacher, believed in the principles of student-centered writing opportunities that allowed for student choice and voice, which is supported by the NWP. She was able to use the states’ writing standards as a catalyst for developing an integrated inquiry project that offered multi-modal options for demonstrating their knowledge of social studies content in creative ways. However, she felt that she did not have time for a traditional writing workshop or for writing conferences with students. She found the Being a Writer curriculum to be helpful at the beginning of the year for establishing a writing community in her classroom, and also as a resource throughout the school year for supporting instruction of the three genres of writing that are expected through the state standards (opinion, informative, and narrative).

Sophie, the sixth-grade teacher, expressed her dedicated belief of the effectiveness of the five-paragraph essay. The standards appeared to drive her instruction and resulted
in very little opportunities for student choice or creativity. Therefore, the standards were a constraint on Sophie’s writing instruction. Sophie reflected that she was interested in integrating more creativity in her instruction as a result of her participation in this study. She occasionally used the Being a Writer curriculum to provide writing prompts or grammar lessons for her students.

There are several conclusions and implications from this study. First of all, teachers who have participated in NWP professional development require ongoing support from their school district or the NWP university affiliate in order to become the teacher leaders that NWP has strived to create. A second conclusion of this research is that the observed and self-reported instructional strategies of this study do not consistently align with the best practices that are highlighted in the NWP philosophy. The next step for this district would be to clarify and support the expected pedagogy for teaching writing in elementary grades, followed by a district-wide curriculum evaluation for writing instruction.

It is imperative to align the school system’s curriculum and assessments with their state standards. It is equally, if not more, important to support teachers in the research-based instructional strategies that have been proven to be effective for helping children to grow as writers. Neglect of these proven strategies may result in a reliance on checklists and rubrics to be certain to cover the standards, ignoring the value and effects of the instructional strategies that were employed. All of these alignment components must be regularly revisited to be sure that they are working; that is, students are achieving success with the intended outcomes. A final conclusion is that creativity has been proven to be a
valued component of a student’s learning experience. Creativity is currently included as one of the Universal Constructs in the Iowa Core standards yet is not always considered a necessary piece of instructional planning.

The literature has indicated that there is a need for creativity in schools, and the data from this research has demonstrated that creativity is not mutually exclusive with teaching the standards. It is my hope that this research will contribute to the existing literature and encourage administrators, educators, and teacher preparatory institutions to review their systems and improve upon their practices in elementary writing instruction by including more focus on integrating creativity into their writing instruction.

Students in this study responded favorably with open-ended ways to address various standards through either a writing workshop approach or through an integrated social studies and language arts unit. Both the second graders and the fifth graders discovered new ways of thinking and writing while having ownership of their learning. The teachers in this study demonstrated how to offer opportunities for “rigorous whimsy” (Burvall & Ryder, 2017) while meeting the expectations of CCSS.

In order to prepare pre-service teachers to teach this way, institutions of higher education may offer opportunities for modeling this approach and supporting experimentation with non-traditional methods of instruction for writing in their teacher education programs. The findings of this study indicate that designing cross-disciplinary units of instruction with student centered opportunities for choice help students discover their creative potential. Teachers require training that provides the theoretical underpinnings of a writing workshop, as well as the techniques and benefits of fostering
collaborative writing communities that include collaboration and feedback through peer conferencing and writing conferences with the teacher. By participating in such a workshop, teachers will understand the benefits beyond test scores, and realize that they may satisfy the curricular requirements while preparing students with creative thinking skills for the future.
REFERENCES


Pfeiffer, S. I., & Thompson, T. L. (2013). Creativity from a talent development perspective: How it can be cultivated in the schools. In K.H. Kim, J. C. Kaufman, J. Baer & B. Sriraman (Eds.), *Creatively gifted students are not like other students: Research, theory, and practice* (pp. 213-230). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense.


APPENDIX A

TEACHER SURVEY QUESTIONS

* The survey questions will be placed in a Google Form. The first three questions will be open response:
1. Please tell me about your teaching experience (prompt for years of teaching/grade levels):
2. Describe your experience with the National Writing Project (NWP).
3. Tell me about your classroom routines.

Questions below will be formatted as multiple choice, using a 4-point Likert Scale:
4. The act of composing is more important than the written work children produce
5. Students need to meet frequently in small groups to react and critique each other’s writing
6. Instead of regular grammar lessons, it is best to teach grammar when specific need for it emerges in a child’s writing
7. It is important to teach children strategies for planning and revising
8. Formal instruction in writing is necessary to insure the adequate development of all skills used in writing
9. A good way to begin writing instruction is to have children emulate good models for each type of writing
10. It is important for children to study words in order to learn their spelling
11. Before they begin a writing task, children who speak a nonstandard dialect of correct English should be reminded to use correct English
12. Being able to label words according to grammatical function (e.g. nouns, verbs) is useful in proficient writing
13. Teachers should aim at producing writers who can write good compositions in one draft
14. Before children begin a writing task, teachers should remind them to use correct spelling
15. If a student masters a new writing concept quickly, this is because I knew the necessary steps in teaching this concept
16. When a student does better than usual in writing, it is because I exerted a little extra effort
17. When a student is having difficulty with a writing assignment, I would have no trouble adjusting it to his/her level
18. Creativity cannot be taught
19. The Common Core State Standards do not allow opportunities for creativity
20. I enjoy learning about becoming a better writer
21. I write for relaxation, entertainment, or pleasure
22. I am an effective writing teacher
23. I like to teach writing
24. Additional Comments:
APPENDIX B

FIELD NOTES

Sketch of classroom:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time:</th>
<th>Observation:</th>
<th>Researcher Comments:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are things you notice about children’s writing in your classroom?

2. How do you think children grow as writers?

3. What do you believe are the most important elements of a writing curriculum?

4. What are your most important goals for writing?

5. What are your district’s expectations for writing instruction?
   5.a. How do you feel these expectations relate to your instructional decision making?

6. What is your role as a teacher in regard to writing? (or, Describe your role in the teaching of writing.)

7. How would you describe the role Being a Writer plays in your classroom writing instruction?
   7.a. What other resources do you utilize in your writing instruction?

8. How do you describe creativity?

9. How do you support the development of student creativity in your classroom writing instruction?

10. What do you look for in students’ writing as evidence of creativity?
    10.a. Looking at the creativity rubric, where do you feel that students have shown creativity in the sample(s) of writing that you’ve selected?

11. What do you hope is your students’ outcome at the end of the year in the area of writing?

12. Is there anything else you would like to share?
### APPENDIX D

**RUBRIC FOR SCORING STUDENTS’ WRITING**

*(adapted from Kress & Rule, 2017, p. 138)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Product:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Is the message or purpose clear to the audience through <em>effective communication</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Does the writing include <em>vivid descriptions</em>, allowing the reader to <em>visualize or connect</em> to the piece of writing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Is the writing intended for a <em>specific audience</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Are <em>Humor or wordplay</em> present?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Is an <em>Emotional appeal</em> present?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does the writing contain thoughtful use of color, arrangement, and/or space causing <em>aesthetic appeal</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Does the writing contain elements of creativity and individual expression, <em>different from other pieces of writing</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Are there any additional <em>literary devices</em> present (metaphors/similes, foreshadowing, flashbacks, personification, imagery, colloquialism, symbolism)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Did the student apply grade-appropriate <em>spelling</em> and <em>conventions</em>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Was the <em>organization</em> of the writing logical and easy for the reader to follow?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>