TEACHERS OF STRUGGLING WRITERS IN THE UPPER ELEMENTARY GRADES

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
November 2014
Acknowledgements

The process of conducting this research has been the most challenging academic undertaking I have experienced. I was able to complete the process with the support and guidance of many people.

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Susan Gracia, who provided me with the expertise and guidance that enabled me to work through the research process. Her optimism helped me strive to continue in my efforts. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Carolyn Bair, who offered me insightful feedback to improve my study. My third reader, Dr. Deborah Almeida, graciously provided her time and expertise and encouraged me to think positively.

I would also like to express appreciation to the colleagues with whom I work. They have always been willing to listen and discuss my research with me. Their encouragement has been invaluable.

I would like to thank my friends and family who also supported me. They never doubted my abilities to complete the process and, when I needed it most, reminded me to have confidence in myself. I also have to thank my parents, who, since I was a child, helped to foster my belief in the value of education and the importance of effort in learning. These beliefs helped lead me to this journey and to continue with it even when it seemed too difficult.

Finally, I would like to thank Delta Kappa Gamma, an organization to which I belong and through which I was generously awarded with a scholarship to complete my doctoral studies.
Abstract

This descriptive case study examined how teachers in an elementary school support struggling elementary writers. This study was guided by the central question: How do grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach? The following questions helped to clarify the central question: (a.) What are these teachers’ perceptions of struggling writers’ difficulties and how to support them in learning to write? (b.) What instructional practices do these teachers implement to support struggling writers and scaffold their learning? (c.) How do these teachers structure the classroom environment to support struggling writers? (d.) What do teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers? (e.) How is teachers’ instruction for struggling writers perceived by administrators? (f.) How are these teachers supported by administrators as they instruct struggling writers? Data was gathered from four teachers and two administrators within one elementary school through interviews, observations of teachers’ writing instruction, and a review of teachers’ lesson plans. Sociocultural theory provided a lens through which to examine the context of the study and inform the findings. Triangulation of the data revealed the following: teachers perceive writing to be a challenge for many of their students, teachers’ implementation of the process approach varies, teachers provide some explicit instruction and supports for struggling writers, and there is a need to strengthen the teaching of writing for struggling writers. These findings have implications for educational practice that can help educators support struggling writers in their writing achievement.

Keywords: elementary education, writing instruction, writing process approach, struggling writers
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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem of Practice

During an elementary writers’ workshop session students transform their thoughts and ideas into the written word as their pencils glide across their notebook pages. Kyle, a fourth grade student who has some difficulty with the core subjects of literacy and math, is the most challenged during these writing sessions. As other students write, Kyle makes a trip to the bathroom, walks to the back of the room to sharpen his pencil, fiddles with the pencils in his desk, and stares at a notebook page that remains empty even when the teacher signals that writers’ workshop has ended. When pressed by his teacher, Kyle states, “I don’t have anything to write about.” When he does write, he usually does not engage in the planning process and his text is short without any elaboration on his ideas. He is resistant to revise his writing and usually only makes changes to surface features such as spelling and punctuation. Kyle does not perceive himself as a writer and finds writer’s workshop to be his least favorite part of every school day.

Many elementary teachers have been faced with the challenge of helping struggling writers, such as Kyle, make gains in their ability to become proficient writers. Writing has been identified in the Common Core State Standards, which have been adopted by the majority of U.S. states, as one of the essential skills that students need to be college- and career-ready (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The writing development of students begins when they are in elementary school and is supported by teachers who have knowledge of effective practices for teaching writing. However, some elementary students struggle with learning how to write. These are students who teachers perceive as having greater difficulty than their peers and who are not producing the quality of writing that is typical of their grade level. Students who struggle with writing and do
not learn to write well are likely to face academic challenges throughout their education since writing is a tool they will need in order to learn new content knowledge and show evidence of their learning (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007). If we know more about teachers’ instruction for struggling writers, we will then know how teachers need to be supported in developing effective practices and be able to design professional development to help ensure that all students, even struggling students, become proficient writers. Therefore, this descriptive case study sought to gain insight into how teachers and administrators at a public elementary school in Massachusetts understand and support struggling elementary writers.

Justification of the Research Problem

Currently, teachers are being held accountable for the success of all students, including struggling writers, as new standards and high stakes tests are implemented in many states. The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts includes a major focus on ensuring that students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to become proficient writers in a variety of genres so they can then apply their writing skills as a thinking and learning tool (Graham & Harris, 2013). For this reason, many school districts are considering ways to increase the time spent on writing instruction and improve how writing is taught. In the state this research was conducted, the Massachusetts Curriculum Assessment System (MCAS) is currently used to measure students’ achievement related to the learning standards. Schools are held accountable in ensuring that all students move towards proficiency, as demonstrated through MCAS scores in many subject areas, including English Language Arts (ELA). As part of the ELA portion of this high stakes test, starting in fourth grade students’ writing skills are measured through a task that requires them to write a long composition. It is essential that educators provide instruction that
will help all students meet the demands of the learning standards and ensure they become proficient writers.

Writing is a complex and cognitively demanding process that even proficient writers can have difficulties with (Torrance & Gailbraith, 2006). Case study research has been conducted in order to understand the composing process of students as they are engaged in writing (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1975). The process approach to writing instruction, in which students are taught and engaged in the process of real writers, grew out of this research (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). The use of the process approach in teaching writing has become increasingly more frequent across K-12 schools in the decades since this research was conducted (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006). Since this is a common method of instruction, examining how teachers support struggling writers within this context will be beneficial. Researchers have provided evidence that there is variation in the ways that teachers implement the process approach (Troia, Lin, Monroe, & Cohen, 2009; Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Fink, 2002). Because of this variability, all teachers may not be using the most effective practices to support struggling writers.

Writing instruction, including that which is taught through a process approach, involves the teaching of skills and strategies that students need to be independent writers of a variety of genres. This writing instruction has to be effective for all students including those who struggle. The instructional practices of teachers have a great impact on the achievement of their students (Marzano, 2003). If students are in classrooms in which their teachers are not using the most effective, research-based instructional strategies, they will be less likely to make adequate progress. Researchers have identified effective instructional practices for teaching writing to the general population of students at the elementary level, as well as for those who have difficulties
with learning to write (Page-Voth, 2010). However, many teachers, whose classrooms are diverse in terms of students’ abilities, are ineffective in helping their students learn to write (Troia, Shankland, & Heintz, 2010). Understanding teachers’ instruction for struggling writers provided insight into how teachers’ expertise can be supported and improved so they are more effective in raising the writing achievement of students regardless of their ability level.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

School districts are placing a greater focus on their efforts to reform writing instruction, in part due to the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, which reveals a need to understand teachers’ practices and perspectives about the teaching of writing and instruction for struggling writers. In comparison to reading research, writing receives much less attention. There is also limited research concerning writing instruction in elementary classrooms and the research that does exist focuses more on students’ writing ability and development rather than the instruction that is occurring within these classrooms (Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012). Because the research provides limited data related to the instructional practices for teaching writing there is still a need to improve writing instruction (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010). This minimal research also indicates a lack of inquiry into teachers’ instruction for struggling writers. Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, & MacArthur (2003) studied teachers in grades one through three to determine the instructional adaptions that they make for struggling writers, but they stated theirs was the only study examining how typical teachers support this population of students. This investigation adds to the minimal research concerning instructional practices of writing teachers in elementary classrooms and the supports they provide for struggling writers. This qualitative study provided a holistic view of teachers’ interactions with
struggling writers in order to gain knowledge that can be used to improve writing instruction for all learners.

**Relating the Discussion to Audiences**

Inquiry into how elementary teachers support struggling writers yielded knowledge that is helpful in furthering the development of these students as they learn to become proficient writers. This study can inform teachers who are challenged in supporting the needs of struggling writers by providing them with knowledge of effective practices. It also can inform administrators and others who design and implement professional development so that they can provide teachers with the guidance they need to become more successful at improving the writing ability of struggling writers. This research provided understanding into what needs to be accomplished in classrooms to support the achievement of all writers. This study, through a descriptive case study exploration, also added to the minimal body of literature concerning the instructional practices of teachers of writing within elementary schools. Furthermore, this study demonstrated how Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory can be used to deconstruct the research problem related to teachers’ understanding and support of struggling writers within the specific context of the research site, a public elementary school.

**Significance**

Students need to be proficient writers since writing is essential for their academic success and their future success in the workplace. Students use writing in school not only to communicate, but also as a learning tool to expand on their knowledge of the content they are learning and to show what they have learned through written assessments (Graham & Harris, 2005). The National Commission on Writing (2004) has stated that writing is a highly valued and necessary skill in the workplace because of the role it plays in securing employment and in
job promotion. Students who struggle with writing will not have the skills they need to be successful in school and beyond. This study provided insight into the needs of struggling writers and added to the research that is designed to provide knowledge related to effective practices for writing instruction.

The most recent data available from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that the majority of the nation’s students are writing at a basic level, which is defined as, “partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012, p. 7). The 2011 NAEP writing assessment scores are a measure of eighth and twelfth grade students’ abilities to communicate clearly through writing for a variety of purposes, including to persuade, explain, and convey experiences, and for a variety of audiences. Only twenty-four percent of students at each grade level scored at the proficient level, which would indicate clear demonstration of their ability to communicate effectively through writing. Many students are struggling to learn to write, resulting in a need to investigate what is happening in the classroom to help these learners be more successful.

Teachers, who have the responsibility of helping all students learn to write well, often feel challenged about how to best instruct the struggling writers within their classrooms (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003). In order to help struggling writers improve their writing abilities, educators need to be able to reach all learners through the use of effective practices. At the site where this research was conducted the district recently implemented a process approach to teaching writing, through a writers’ workshop model, within the elementary schools. Elementary teachers received professional development on using this approach as part of a district-wide initiative to improve students’ writing achievement. Even with this training teachers expressed
concerns about how to meet the needs of struggling writers. As students get into the upper elementary grades they are expected to show more of their learning through writing and at some grade levels students’ writing abilities are assessed through state assessments. For these reasons, it is essential that teachers in these grades who are faced with struggling writers in their classrooms know how to support them. This research provided understanding about how teachers are supporting struggling writers and revealed areas for improvement, which is useful in helping teachers become more effective in their instruction.

Research Questions

In order to address the problem of practice, this study explored the following central question:

- How do grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach?

The following sub-questions were developed to clarify the central question:

- What are these teachers’ perceptions of struggling writers’ difficulties and how to support them in learning to write?
- What instructional practices do these teachers implement to support struggling writers and scaffold their learning?
- How do these teachers structure the classroom environment to support struggling writers?
- What do teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers?
- How is teachers’ instruction for struggling writers perceived by administrators?
• How are these teachers supported by administrators as they instruct struggling writers?

These research questions were intended to achieve the purpose of this study, which was to gain insight into teachers’ instruction for struggling writers. In order to do this, it was necessary to investigate teachers’ understanding of struggling writers and writing instruction for these students. Learning about teachers’ instructional practices and the structure of the classroom environment provided knowledge about what occurs to support these learners. By understanding what teachers perceive as their needs in instructing struggling writers I gained knowledge of the challenges that interfere with effectively helping these students to become better writers. My research questions provided a holistic view of how teachers support struggling writers by taking into account the perspective of administrators. Through these research questions I strived to gain insight into the problem of practice concerning writing instruction for struggling writers.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural theory is the theoretical framework that guided this research. Sociocultural theory is based on the principle that learning does not occur in isolation but as a result of social interactions that are shaped by the cultural context in which they occur (Miller, 2011). In general, the theory has implications for teaching and education and can also be applied to the teaching of writing. This theory is frequently used to frame the research conducted on the learning and teaching of writing (Prior, 2006).

Sociocultural theory grew from the work of psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. He emphasized that a child’s development is socially and culturally based and learning is dependent upon the social interactions that take place within the child’s environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is
inherent upon the cultural context in which social interaction takes place since it helps to define the knowledge and skills that are necessary for the child to develop and provides the tools, such as language, that are needed for this development (Miller, 2011). The process of a child’s development does not reside solely within the child, but is heavily influenced by factors within the context of the child’s learning. The same developmental processes may lead to different outcomes depending on the cultural context. For example, students whose home culture more closely matches the school culture also have fewer adaptations to make in their own learning in order to perform well academically (Smagorinsky, 2013). Writing, as a form of literacy learning, is linked to the context in which students are engaged and also dependent on the social identities that students form (Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf, 2006).

The cultural context within which the child learns also reflects the importance of social interaction. A child learns through a process that is based on participation in activities with others (Miller, 2011). Vygotsky believed the development of higher psychological functioning occurs on two levels, as he stated:

“Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57).

Through the interdependence of the social and individual processes a child co-constructs knowledge that leads to the development of higher cognitive functioning. Classroom instruction, including the teaching of writing, is most effective when teachers collaborate with learners
through modeling, discussion, and joint problem-solving and there are many opportunities for interaction with peers (Dyson & Freedman, 1991).

A central concept of sociocultural theory that further explains the process by which social interaction leads to development is the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky defined the zone of proximal development as, “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86). A child’s development is supported through collaboration with a more competent person who builds on the competencies a child already has through various means including prompts, modeling, explanations, and discussions (Miller, 2011). Learning is the result of an interaction with a teacher or more knowledgeable peer that serves to support the child in moving to a slightly higher level of cognitive functioning. As the child moves through the zone of proximal development with the assistance of another, what was first supported socially becomes internalized so the child’s functioning moves from other-regulated to self-regulated (Miller, 2011). Teaching to the zone of proximal development requires that the child participate in an activity with a more knowledgeable other and that the instruction be based on the child’s current level of functioning and be orchestrated to support the child in accomplishing what is slightly beyond the child’s independent level.

Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development suggests that a principle of writing instruction is to create opportunities for sociocognitive apprenticeships (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006). Through sociocognitive apprenticeships, “teachers make tacit knowledge perceptible through think-alouds that make visible the discourse, thought, actions, decisions, struggles, and deliberations that are part of the writing process” (Englert, Mariage, &
Dunsmore, 2006, p. 209). In addition, the student is provided with opportunities for guided practice and is expected to gradually take on more responsibility for completing tasks as he or she becomes more competent. Sociocognitive apprenticeships also involve the use of instructional scaffolding practices in which the teacher provides support for learners by modeling and prompting at the point of need, connecting what they already know to what they need to know, and shifting control away from the teacher to the student (Englert, 1992).

Learning experiences are also mediated through the use of tools in order to transform other-regulated behavior into self-regulated behavior (Vygotsky, 1978). Tools, either psychological or technical, are created by culture, connect children to the world around them, and shape their thinking (Miller, 2011). Tools can come in mental, linguistic, or physical forms and can help to support students’ writing performance in a variety of ways, such as making a task more attainable or helping learners organize their thinking (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006). Procedural facilitators, such as the use of mnemonics, think-sheets that cue self-talk and strategy use, and graphic organizers, make explicit the tools that will support the writing performance of learners who have not yet internalized their use (Englert, Mariage, & Dunsmore, 2006). The goal for the use of these tools and procedural facilitators is that after they are used for a time they become internalized and serve to mediate a learner’s actions during writing through self-directed inner speech.

Language, which according to Vygostky is the most important of the psychological tools, helps children internalize their behavior. Language, as a culture-based system of meaning, helps children make sense of their world and their learning (Miller, 2011). Students acquire the language and vocabulary necessary to increase their cognitive processes through a more knowledge other, either an adult or peer, who models and supports the use of language (Englert,
Raphael, & Anderson, 1992). Immersing children in the tools and language characteristic of a field of study will lead them to become more proficient in that area as they use the language to think and solve problems. Children’s writing performance is enhanced as they are immersed in talk about the cognitive processes that are involved in writing (Englert, et al., 1992). This can be accomplished as teachers model their own talk as they think aloud and help to guide students’ own use of language. Writing instruction that establishes community of practices in which teachers and students engage in dialogue about writing and the texts they produce leads to increased writing performance (Englert, et al., 2006).

The sociocultural perspective provided understanding of the context in which struggling writers learn to write and how teachers can support them in learning to become better writers. Vygotsky’s theory emphasizes the importance of the social and cultural context in which children learn. For this reason, the case study methodology was useful for this research since it provided a holistic understanding of the instruction that teachers are providing for struggling writers. A case study helped me gain insight into the social context that influences the learning of struggling writers. Since teachers have an impact on how struggling writers learn through their ability to guide students through the zone of proximal development the participants in my study involved the teachers of these writers. My inquiry into the literature related to my research was guided by my understanding of the learning and teaching process that is reflected through the sociocultural perspective. Understanding the implications this perspective has for effective instruction helped me examine and further analyze teachers’ understanding of struggling writers and the instructional practices they implement. For example, having knowledge of how instructional practices such as social interaction or the use of scaffolding impacts student learning guided my understanding of how teachers are interacting with struggling writers. This
theory was useful to my research because it provides a lens to interpret teachers’ understandings and instructional practices as they support struggling writers in their classrooms.

**Definition of Key Terms**

Some key terms that were used throughout the study are defined as follows:

**Conferencing**: This is the portion of the writers’ workshop when the teacher meets individually with students as they are engaged in writing. Through conferencing the teacher can meet the individual needs of students and guide them in their writing development (Calkins, 1986).

**Mini-lesson**: During a writers’ workshop session, the teacher provides a brief whole-class lesson involving an explanation or demonstration of a technique for engaging in the writing process (Calkins, 1986). The focus of the mini-lesson varies depending on the component of the process being taught and the needs of the students within the class.

**Process approach**: This is an approach to writing instruction that emphasizes the teaching of the processes that writers use when composing, based on the work of researchers who have examined the composing process (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1975). Within this instructional approach, students are involved in writing activities in which they learn skills and strategies for engaging in the stages of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Unger & Fleischman, 2004).

**Struggling writers**: In this study, this term refers to students who have difficulty with learning to write. These students are identified as “struggling” based on teachers’ perceptions that they need support with some components of the writing process and observations that they are not producing the quality of writing typical of their grade level.
Sharing: This is the portion of the writers’ workshop session in which one or more students read their writing aloud to other students.

Writers’ workshop: This is a method for teaching the process approach to writing in which students are provided with a daily block of time to engage in the composing process while the teacher guides their learning. The writers’ workshop structure consists of a minilesson, independent writing and conferencing, and sharing.

Organization of this Document

This document is organized into five sections. This first section has already presented the research problem and questions, the significance of the study, and the theoretical framework that will guide this research. The next section will present the literature review, which includes a discussion of the research related to the research problem being addressed in this study. The following section will explain the research design of this study. The fourth section will present the results of the study. The final section will present a synthesis of the research findings.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

With the variability of student ability levels that exist in today’s classrooms, many teachers are faced with students who are struggling to learn to write. Teachers must have an understanding of these writers and instructional practices that will help them be effective in raising their writing achievement. The purpose of this study was to examine how grade four and five teachers support struggling writers as they learn through a process approach. The following bodies of literature have informed this study: a.) the writing process, b.) the process approach to writing instruction, and c.) struggling writers. A review of the research on the writing process
provided an understanding of the writing development of struggling writers. A review of the process approach to writing instruction provided an understanding of the context in which struggling writers learn to write. A review of research on struggling writers provided an understanding of the challenges these writers face and how teachers’ instruction influences their development.

**The Writing Process**

Writing instruction has evolved since the twentieth century and includes a strong emphasis on writing as a process. Hawkins and Razali (2012) have provided an account of how the focus of writing instruction within the elementary grades has shifted over the past one hundred years from penmanship to product to process. They stated that up until the 1940s writing was viewed as the act of transcribing words onto the page so writing instruction was focused on handwriting. Around the 1950s the emphasis within instruction moved to the written product as the teaching of basic skills, such as grammar and conventions became important. Concerns about writing instruction led to research that examined the composing process of writers, signaling a shift to an emphasis on process in the 1980s and eventually a focus on process instruction within elementary classrooms in the 2000s (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

Emig (1971) was one of the earliest researchers to examine the composing process of students. In her study, she used multiple methods, including having students compose aloud while writing. Through her case study of twelfth grade writers, she viewed the writing process as having multiple components and she determined that students’ engagement in these components varied based on context. The components she identified were prewriting, planning, starting, reformulation, and stopping. Students’ use of these components depended on the
environment, such as the audience for their writing, and the nature of the task, such as whether it is perceived as interesting.

The research of Graves (1975) also focused on students’ behaviors during the writing process, but involved younger students. In this study, seven-year old students were observed to engage in multiple phases of writing, that of prewriting, composing, and postwriting. Graves (1975) discovered that the learning environment has implications for students’ writing, especially concerning choice about writing. Students were motivated and actually wrote more when writing in informal situations in which they had choice about whether to write and what to write about.

Research has been influential in creating a greater emphasis on the components of the process of writing and has also influenced how this process is defined and understood. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) who presented an historical overview of the writing process explained that cognitive research occurring in the 1980s changed views of how the writing process is conceptualized. Models of the writing process initially presented it as a three-stage, linear process, consisting of prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Hayes and Flower (1980) conducted some of the early studies into the cognition of writing that led to the understanding that the writing process is more complex than the linear model suggests and requires the use and coordination of mental strategies.

**Writing as a Cognitive Process.** The task of writing is demanding because the writer has to utilize multiple cognitive resources and problem-solving abilities. Understanding how writers engage in this process is based on cognitive models that have emerged from the research examining the composing process of adult writers (Dyson & Freedman, 1991). Hayes and Flower (1980) examined adult writers by asking them to “think aloud” while they were writing
in order to understand the cognitive processes as they performed the task. From this research they constructed a model that explains the writing process as consisting of three major processes. Planning, which consists of the subprocesses of generating, organizing, and goal-setting, involves drawing on information from the context of the task and from long-term memory in order to set goals and make a plan to achieve those goals in writing a text. Translating is the process that involves producing written language to enact the plan. Reviewing consists of the subprocesses of reading and editing and functions to evaluate and improve the text resulting from the translating process. Contrary to previous thinking about the writing process, the research of Hayes and Flower (1980) provided evidence that writing is goal-directed, goals are organized hierarchically, and the processes are recursive, not linear.

Multiple demands are placed on a writer simultaneously during writing, and the processes are at risk of becoming constrained if not adequately managed (Torrance & Gailbraith, 2006). In performing the writing process, the writer draws on cognitive resources that may compete with each other. The competition for cognitive resources can potentially present challenges, influencing the writer’s ability to spell, transcribe, and access memory (McCutchen, 2006, McCutchen, 2000). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) examined the writing process of children and they proposed that novice writers compensate for the processing demands through a process referred to as knowledge telling. Children have difficulty generating content and coordinating ideas because of cognitive demands, so they use a simplified approach. Through knowledge telling they simply write down any ideas related to the topic. The more sophisticated process would be knowledge transforming in which the writer selects, organizes, and rethinks ideas to fully articulate thoughts about the topic (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). The complexity of the cognitive processes and the multiple demands that writers must regulate indicate that writing is a
problem-solving task. Those with limited techniques for problem-solving will have much more difficulty working through the writing process (Flower & Hayes, 1977).

Skilled writers have the ability to self-direct themselves as they perform the writing process. Zimmerman and Risemberg (1997) identified behaviors that skilled writers engage in to direct or self-regulate their writing. Some of these self-regulation behaviors involve self-monitoring, self-verbalizing, goal setting, and the use of a variety of cognitive strategies related to the text such as generating ideas and revising. The writers’ use of such self-regulation strategies has been established as a way to manage the writing process, achieve goals for completing a writing task, and improve writing skills (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Self-regulation strategies help writers accomplish the various subgoals that are necessary to be successful with a writing task and this success improves the likelihood that the writer will continue to use these behaviors in the future (Graham & Harris, 2000). A study conducted by Glaser and Brunstein (2007) demonstrated that the use of self-regulation skills had a positive effect on students’ writing performance. In the study, a fourth grade group of students was taught strategies for planning and generating writing and another group was taught the strategies along with self-regulation procedures that involved self-monitoring and self-assessment of their writing. Students who were taught the self-regulation procedures wrote qualitatively better stories than those who did not. Young writers may not develop the self-regulation procedures of skilled writers on their own, but when taught how to use them their writing abilities improve (Glaser & Brunstein, 2007).

In order to develop as writers, students must understand and be able to use the cognitive strategies inherent to the writing process. As writers learn and use cognitive strategies effectively they are better able to manage the complexity of the processes of writing, improving
their writing performance. For example, planning is a complex process that requires both knowledge of the topic and strategic knowledge concerning procedures for planning and how to set goals for writing (Hayes & Flower, 1986). A study by Tracy, Graham, and Reid (2009) demonstrated that students’ use of cognitive strategies for engaging in the processes of writing, such as planning, had a positive effect on their writing performance.

**Writing as a Social Process.** Writing is a task involving many mental capacities, but also includes a social component. Researchers criticized the cognitive model of the writing process that Hayes and Flower (1980) proposed because it did not address how the social context influences the writer (Farnan & Dahl, 2003). Hayes (2004) revised the previous cognitive model of the writing process so that it accounts for the importance of the environment, and other researchers have provided evidence that the writing process includes a social dimension. The idea that the writing process does not exist solely within the child, but that learning to write is also dependent upon the child’s environment is grounded in sociocultural theory.

Writing has been identified as a cognitive process, but one that occurs within a social context. The writing process operates within the relationship that occurs between the individual and the task environment, which includes the social and physical environment (Hayes, 2004). The physical environment, such as the writing medium, plays a role in the accessibility of the cognitive resources needed to support the writing processes (Hayes, 1996). The act of writing is shaped by the task environment, as well as the social setting in which it occurs. Through text, the writer is communicating with a reader and the writer must take on the perspective of this audience (Englert, 1992). The necessity of considering the reader, another person, establishes writing as a social process.
Writing is viewed as a social process because interaction with others helps shape writers’ knowledge and development. Schultz (1997) described how students in a third and fourth grade classroom learned about writing within a community of writers who collaborated with each other in various ways. Students within this study collaborated by sharing their work with others, writing individual texts in pairs or groups side-by-side, and working together to write one text. These collaborative activities contributed to the students’ development as writers, in part, because, “As students talked about their writing and read one another’s stories, they appropriated each other’s ideas and phrases, making them their own” (Schultz, 1997, p. 276). The interactions the students had with each other during writing helped them to become more competent as they engaged with a more knowledgeable peer (Miller, 2011). Student writers are supported in becoming more competent with the cognitive task of writing as they participate in social interactions that serve to move their development forward through the zone of proximal development, so they can accomplish on their own what they once could only accomplish with another (Dyson & Freedman, 1991).

The task of writing is a complex process, which has implications for writing instruction. In order to write effectively writers need to manage a variety of cognitive processes. For many young writers, who are still developing their cognitive resources, writing can present a challenge. Understanding the writing process can provide teachers of struggling writers with insight into the challenges these writers face and the instruction that will help them develop as writers. Instruction that supports the writing process would include a focus on the cognitive processes necessary to write and also draw upon the social aspect that supports students’ learning. Learning to write is an integration of both one’s own cognitive resources and the interaction with the social environment. The complexity of the writing process, while providing insight into how
writers become more proficient, implies that the teaching of writing can be complex as well. Writing teachers need an understanding of the writing process in order to help students manage the cognitive and social aspects of learning to write.

**The Process Approach to Writing Instruction**

Research, such as that conducted by Emig (1971) and Graves (1975) contributed to the thinking that writing is a process and that students can learn the process of real writers through participation in authentic writing activities that build on the social purposes of writing through sharing of written work (Berninger, et al., 2009). The process approach to writing instruction focuses on the teaching of the processes that writers use when composing text. The process approach is a widely implemented instructional model in the United States as the majority of teachers implement it either exclusively to teach writing or in combination with other instructional approaches (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). The frequency with which the process approach is used to teach writing suggests that an understanding of the instructional model would provide insight into the context into which students learn to become proficient writers.

Research has provided evidence that the process approach is effective in improving students’ writing (Graham, McKeown, Kiuaha, & Harris, 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Sandmel, 2011). The use of the process approach for teaching writing can be beneficial in improving writing because students are involved in using the cognitive processes of writing, their individual needs can be addressed, and they are motivated through the collaborative, positive tone that is set for the learning environment (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). Graham and Perin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of writing intervention research in order to identify effective instructional writing practices for students in grades four through twelve. Their analysis of studies examining the process approach showed that this instructional practice had a positive
effect on the quality of students’ writing. In the studies in which the teachers had also received professional development in the process approach the effect on students’ writing was even greater. Graham, McKeown, Kiuhara, and Harris (2012) conducted a similar meta-analysis in order to identify effective instructional practices for students in the elementary grades and found that implementation of a process approach had a positive effect on students within typical elementary classrooms. Graham and Sandmel (2011) had previously conducted a meta-analysis of studies examining the use of the process approach in grades one through twelve and found that there was a positive effect when the studies involved typical writers, but not when the studies only involved struggling writers.

There is not a single definition of the process approach to writing instruction, but there are principles that underlie the implementation of this model (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). Typically within a process approach, students cycle through the writing process as they are engaged in writing tasks, and teachers provide instruction within five stages of the writing process that have emerged from the cognitive models of writing: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Unger & Fleischman, 2004). Graham and Sandmel (2011) characterized the process approach as including: (a) extended opportunities for student writing, (b) opportunities to write for real audiences, (c) engagement in the process of writing, (d) a focus on personal responsibility and ownership of writing, (e) high levels of student interaction, (f) student self-reflection and evaluation, and (g) individualized instruction and support. These factors indicate that students’ learning of the writing process is embedded within a social context in which students’ development is supported through interaction with others.

**Writers’ Workshop.** Writers’ workshop is a commonly used framework for implementing the process approach within elementary schools. The work of Calkins (1986) and
Graves (1983) was influential in the wide adoption of writers’ workshop, as many teachers base their instruction on the elements they have described as useful in teaching writing to elementary-aged students (Troia, Lin, et al., 2009). Promoters of writers’ workshop think that it is an effective instructional method because it provides students with frequent opportunities to write, students rather than the teacher have control and ownership over their writing, and the teacher acts like a guide who supports students in their development (Pollington, Wilcox, & Morrison, 2001). Jasmine and Weiner (2007) found that writers’ workshop created a positive atmosphere for student learning, students became more confident and positive about writing, and their writing improved. They described the three components that comprise the writers’ workshop framework: 1.) mini-lesson, 2.) writing and conferencing, and 3.) sharing.

Mini-lessons are brief, five to ten minute, whole class lessons in which the teacher demonstrates or explains techniques students need to know in order to improve their writing and accomplish tasks necessary to successfully use the writing process (Calkins, 1986). The mini-lesson is a useful time to teach strategies for the writing process which can later be reinforced through the other components of the writers’ workshop (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Some students will be able to take what they learned within the mini-lesson and apply it right away, but other students who are struggling with what was taught will need to be supported throughout the writing lesson and future writing lessons to develop independence (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007).

Gibson (2008) has proposed guided writing as an instructional technique that can bridge the gap between the whole class teaching of strategies within the writers’ workshop and students’ independent use of those strategies. During guided writing the teacher supports a small group of students who have a similar instructional need as they write their individual texts. This instructional practice is aligned to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory as students are guided with
“just right” help, from a more knowledgeable other, that advances them to a slightly higher level of cognitive performance (Gibson, 2008).

The writing and conferencing component is the time within the writers’ workshop that students are engaged in the writing process and the teacher observes and confers with students to support them in their writing (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). The writing component fills the majority of time within a daily writers’ workshop session. Students learn to write well when they are provided with the time to write and are supported in developing stamina for writing (Ray, 2004). During this time students are working at their own pace and at varying stages of the writing process. Conferencing, in which the teacher meets with individual students and teaches to their specific needs, has been described as being “the heart of the writing workshop” (Calkins, 1986, p. 223), because it is an essential part of guiding students as they develop as writers.

Sharing is the component of writers’ workshop in which students gather together and listen to one or more students read their writing (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). Dialogue occurs regarding the shared writing so that the students can improve upon their writing. The feedback that the reader receives during sharing helps students develop audience awareness and promotes students’ motivation to write (Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). The share session also serves as a group, teacher-supported conference in which students can learn how to conference with one another (Calkins, 1986).

**Teacher Variability in a Process Approach.** The majority of teachers of writing implement some form of a process approach to writing instruction, such as writers’ workshop (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Monroe, 2011). Although teachers implement the central components of a process approach there is variability in the instructional practices that are
employed (Troia, et al., 2011). Reasons for the variations in the teaching of the process approach have been credited to teachers’ beliefs and experiences (Graham, et al.; 2002, Lipson, Mosenthal, Daniels, & Woodside-Jiron, 2000; Troia, et al., 2011), as well as their professional knowledge and development (Whitney, et al., 2008).

Lipson, et al. (2000) examined the theoretical orientations of eleven fifth grade teachers and found that this influenced the ways in which they taught the process approach. They found that teachers interpreted the writing process differently and this influenced aspects of their teaching, such as whether or not they provided explicit instruction, engaged the students in peer conferences, and allowed students choice and ownership over their writing. Teachers’ beliefs also influenced the structure of their teaching. Some teachers’ instruction was highly structured requiring all students to write on the same topic and move through the writing processes at the same time and other teachers were more flexible and allowed students to work through the process at their own pace. Troia, et al (2011) examined the beliefs and writing instruction of six elementary teachers and found that although they all implemented the elements that are common to a process approach they varied in how they engaged students, managed the workshop environment, and provided instructional supports.

Whitney, et al. (2008) also examined the variability in the implementation of the writing process by comparing teachers who received professional development and those who did not. They found that teachers within the two groups often implemented similar strategies but the ways in which they used them and the purpose differed. For example, in a comparison of two of the teachers they were both found to use graphic organizers to prepare students to write, but they did this in different ways. One teacher used the graphic organizer by projecting it on an overhead, asking students to contribute information about the topic they were writing about, and
filling it in for them. Afterward students used the graphic organizer to simply copy the writing. The other teacher modeled the use of the graphic organizer but with a topic different from the one they were writing about in order to show them how to use the graphic organizer without providing them with the writing itself. Students could use the filled in graphic organizer as a model. Although teachers were both using the technique of teaching students to use a graphic organizer, the purpose of doing so varied, as did the effectiveness of its use with students. There were many other differences between teachers’ instruction, showing that, “there were considerable differences in the framing of the purposes and processes of writing and what students’ relationships to writing were imagined to be” (Whitney, et al., 2008, p. 226).

Teacher variability exists in the teaching of a process approach. Teachers’ instructional practices are an important factor in students’ achievement (Marzano, 2003). The variability of teaching within the process approach has an influence on the quality and effectiveness of this instruction for students (Troia, et al., 2009). When implementing a process approach teachers need to consider practices that will be most effective in improving students’ writing performance.

Best Practices in a Process Approach. The variability that exists in the teaching of the process approach indicates that teachers need an understanding of the essential components of the process approach, as well as the best practices for framing their teaching within these components. These best practices involve the use of instructional strategies and lessons that are grounded in theory and research related to writing instruction and understanding of the writing process (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) have identified a number of areas that are the focus of best practice in a process approach based on the understanding that writing is a cognitive and social task. These practices involve: 1.) creating a
positive environment, 2.) developing students’ understanding of the writing process, 3.) teaching strategies including those for self-regulation, 4.) encouraging peer collaboration, and 5.) helping students develop the language of writers.

Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) point out that the writing environment within a process approach should help students develop positive attitudes about writing. This can be achieved by providing students with adequate time to write, clear guidelines and explicit instruction concerning assignments, and lessons that address emotional issues and the challenges that students may face when writing. A case study conducted by Voss (2003) provided evidence that a classroom environment that is focused on high expectations and fosters positive self-beliefs about writing helps students view writing with a positive attitude and become more self-confident. The child’s success in this study was attributed to more than the teacher’s ability to provide effective writing lessons; the child succeeded because the teacher worked to build a relationship in which she provided encouragement and communicated her beliefs that the student was a writer.

Teaching within a process approach should also involve instruction that provides students with the understanding that they are engaging in the process of real writers, which is a complex process requiring multiple drafts, revision, and the feedback of others (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). The explicit teaching of strategies that expert writers use is a best practice for the process approach that can be accomplished through instruction during mini-lessons and the individual support provided to students during conferencing (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Expert writers also utilize self-regulation strategies so students should be taught to monitor their writing in various ways such as self-evaluation and self-reflection (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007).
A best practice for teaching the process approach that addresses the social nature of writing involves engaging students in opportunities for peer interaction. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) suggest the use of peer partners and peer groups in the elementary grades to foster students’ motivation to write and revise. Students are validated as writers when they receive feedback from peers and they learn the importance of writing for an audience, which positively influences their ability to revise (Peterson, 2003). Collaboration within the process approach can extend beyond peer response. Laman (2011) conducted a study in which fourth grade students’ interactions with one another were observed. She observed that students interacted in a number of ways to support their writing process including through talk about their ideas for writing and also informal talk during their composing. Although peer collaboration has been shown to have a positive effect on students’ writing, some caution should be used. Some students may prefer to work alone rather than with partners, and this should be acceptable since these students are still capitalizing on the ideas and experiences of others expressed in the whole group setting (Burns, 2001).

A best practice that addresses both the cognitive and social dimension of writing suggested by Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) is to teach students a vocabulary that centers on the writing process. They state that elementary writers should have the language to talk about writing. This involves being able to use terms to describe parts of speech and the structure of writing as well as for the process and the craft techniques being used. Laman (2011) argues that teachers need to create the space and time for talk to occur within writing instruction because it provides students with the opportunity to, “reflect on, discuss, and explain their own writing processes and their products” (p. 140). This talk about writing, as a form of social interaction, functions as a way to help students understand their own decisions about writing and make them
more aware of the processes they use so they begin to use strategies more effectively (Laman, 2011).

The research regarding the process of writing and instruction through the process approach indicates that there is knowledge concerning the best practices for helping students become proficient writers. Instruction should incorporate both the cognitive and social dimensions of the writing process. Although the process approach to instruction is widely implemented throughout elementary classrooms (Patthey-Chavez, Matsumura, & Valdes, 2004; Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Troia, Lin, Cohen, & Monroe, 2011), data has shown that many students are still not writing at a proficient level. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Since writing instruction begins in the early grades, elementary teachers need to consider the unique challenges of struggling writers so they can address their needs while they are first learning how to write and help them become proficient before they reach the upper grades in which they are expected to use writing for learning.

**Struggling Writers**

The act of composing text is a challenging task since it requires the coordination of cognitive, linguistic, and physical processes and attention to factors that play a role in how effectively one communicates, such as audience and purpose (Troia, 2006). The complexity of writing is a factor contributing to the difficulties that struggling writers have with learning to write. The research does not provide a clear definition of the term “struggling writer.” Struggling writers have been defined by descriptions of the various challenges they face when writing, including lack of skill and knowledge, reluctance to engage in the task, and a sense of incompetence in their abilities (Fearn & Farnan, 2008). Struggling writers have greater difficulty than their peers and do not produce the quality of writing that is expected of their age and grade.
level. Various students may struggle with writing including regular education students, those with learning and language disabilities, and those learning English as a second language. Knowing the characteristics and behaviors of these students and how instruction influences their learning is important in designing effective instruction.

**Characteristics and Behaviors of Struggling Writers.** There is not a great amount of research regarding struggling writers in the K-12 setting and many studies regarding struggling writers have examined a specific population of students, such as those who are learning disabled. Nonetheless, this research comparing less skilled writers to their more capable peers provides insight into the knowledge and behavior of the struggling writer. Although learning and development varies for individual students there are common characteristics and behaviors that struggling writers exhibit. Struggling writers’ difficulties include those related to the knowledge they have about the writing process, their use of strategies in accomplishing writing tasks, and issues with mechanics and transcription.

Struggling writers produce compositions that are of a lesser quality than their more skilled peers. More skilled writers, when compared to those less skilled, the struggling writers, write compositions that contain twice as many words and are of better quality when rated holistically (Saddler & Graham, 2007). Struggling writers’ tendency to terminate their writing too early influences the quality of their texts (Graham, 1990; Thomas, Englert, & Gregg, 1987). In one study, when struggling writers were signaled to produce more text the quality slightly improved (Graham, 1990). Examining struggling writers’ compositions at the sentence level indicates that struggling writers have difficulties with sentence construction. Compared to their peers they write sentences that are shorter, less syntactically complex, and lacking a varied use of vocabulary (Saddler, Asaro, & Behforooz, 2008). Compositions of struggling writers lack
development of ideas, are disorganized, and contain many mechanical and spelling errors
(Tompkins, 2002). The examination of struggling writers’ narrative texts indicates that they
tend to include descriptions and lists rather than ideas and elements that show an understanding
of story structure. Similarly with expository writing, struggling writers resort to simply telling
content rather than using knowledge of expository text structures to compose well-formed ideas

Writing knowledge, such as that related to process, genre, topic, and audience helps to
shape the development of writing abilities (Graham, 2006b). Students who struggle with writing
have less knowledge about the composing process than their peers (Saddler & Graham, 2007).
Struggling writers have little understanding of the components of the writing process such as
planning, revising, and editing (McAlister, Nelson, & Barr, 1999). Struggling writers may be
able to name strategies for engaging in the writing process, such as planning, but have difficulty
explaining the purpose of the strategies (Lin, Monroe, & Troia, 2007). Struggling writers’
knowledge is also more related to the product of writing than the process of writing (Lin, et al,
2007). Tompkins’s (2002) examination of struggling writers showed that they think writing is
putting words onto paper rather than a task that involves communication and requiring attention
to audience, purpose, and form. These struggling writers also perceived good writers to be
students who work hard, have neat penmanship, and write a lot. A comparison of struggling
writers and normally achieving writers shows that the struggling writers have a less mature
understanding of the writing process since they focus more on surface features rather than
substantive features of text when describing good writing (Graham, Schwartz, & MacArthur,
2001). Skilled writers are also more likely than less skilled writers to have an understanding of
why writing leads to school success and the benefits of writing outside of school (Saddler &
Graham, 2007). Since students draw on a variety of knowledge when they are writing it is an important factor shaping writing development (Saddler & Graham, 2007).

Struggling writers’ lack of knowledge about writing suggests that they do not purposefully and effectively engage in the steps of the process. Struggling writers have difficulties carrying out all components of the writing process and do not plan, organize their texts, or revise as well as their normally achieving peers (McCutchen, 1995). When struggling writers compose they generate one idea after another without organizing their thoughts, setting goals, or considering their audience (Saddler, Moran, Graham, & Harris, 2004). Before being taught a planning strategy, the struggling writers in a study conducted by Saddler, et al (2004) wrote short, incomplete stories, spent less than 24 seconds planning before writing and did not make any planning notes. Revising is a step of the writing process that is difficult for many young writers, but even more so for struggling writers (McCutchen, 1995). When struggling writers revise they mainly focus on fixing mechanical errors within the text rather than making changes that improve the quality of the text (Graham, MacArthur, and Schwartz, 1995; MacArthur, Schwartz, & Graham, 1991).

Struggling writers’ difficulties with the steps in the writing process indicate an inability to effectively use strategies and coordinate multiple processes. Writing is a goal-directed activity requiring self-regulation, the ability to monitor and manage a variety of cognitive processes that are necessary to compose a text (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Graham & Harris, 2000). Skilled writers typically engage in more self-regulatory behavior than less skilled writers and are more goal-directed in their efforts to compose a text (Graham & Harris, 2000). Struggling writers have difficulty executing the processes necessary to self-regulate their writing behavior (Graham, MacArthur, Schwartz, & Page-Voth, 1992). Englert, Raphael, Fear, & Anderson (1988) also
found that struggling writers were more likely than high achieving writers to lack awareness of strategies and procedures for writing and the knowledge of how to control and monitor those strategies, also known as metacognitive knowledge.

Struggling writers’ have difficulties with many lower level skills associated with writing. In comparison to more skilled writers, struggling writers have less well-developed handwriting and spelling skills (Graham & Harris, 2000). In a longitudinal study, Juel (1988) found that of the twenty-one fourth grade students who were identified as poor writers, fourteen of them also had poor spelling skills. The difficulty struggling writers have with these lower level skills influences their overall writing performance. When writers have not mastered lower level skills, such as mechanics, they need to focus more of their attention on these skills, which interferes with their ability to attend to the higher-order processes of writing (Graham, 1990, MacArthur & Graham, 1987).

**Teachers of Struggling Writers.** Even though the research is limited, there is a knowledge base concerning the challenges that struggling writers face in learning to write. Teachers’ instruction is vital in addressing these challenges. Although there is not a great amount of research available concerning teachers’ instruction for struggling writers, there is some evidence that the quality of writing instruction is a factor influencing the development of struggling writers.

Moats, Foorman, & Taylor (2006) investigated the effects of high-quality and low-quality writing instruction on the performance of students who were struggling with writing. They found that when students had high quality instruction in fourth grade their writing performance, as measured by composition length and spelling, was better than those who had low quality instruction. Writing performance was even greater if students had high quality writing
instruction for two consecutive years. These researchers argue that explicit teaching of writing skills is necessary to support students who struggle with writing (Moats, et al., 2006). Troia and Graham (2002) argue that a lack of balanced instruction in writing in which students are explicitly taught lower-level skills, involving transcription, along with the higher-level processes that help them to become strategic when managing the many demands of writing contributes to the difficulties of struggling writers.

Cutler and Graham (2008), who surveyed primary grade teachers, reported that teachers place more emphasis on skills, such as grammar, spelling, and mechanics, than they place on teaching the writing process. Teachers reported that 50% of instructional time was devoted to teaching skills, 35% of it involved students writing text, and only 16% of it was spent on teaching the processes of planning and revising. In an earlier study conducted by Graham, et al. (2003), primary grade teachers also reported that they spent at least twice as much time teaching basic skills than writing processes such as planning, organizing, and revising. The researchers also found that only one in four teachers made one or two adaptations for struggling writers and one in five made no adaptations. In this study, the adaptations teachers made for struggling writers more frequently addressed basic writing skills rather than writing processes and served to limit students’ abilities to make their own decisions concerning their writing.

In their observation of teachers of struggling writers, Moats, et al, (2006) also found that although students had inadequate writing abilities only a minimal amount of the language arts block was devoted to writing instruction and time for independent practice – only eight percent in grade three classrooms and eleven percent in grade four classrooms. Gilbert and Graham (2010) surveyed teachers in grades four through six about their writing instruction and found that teachers only spent fifteen minutes teaching writing per day and students only spent twenty-five
minutes doing their own writing. In their study, Cutler and Graham (2008), surveyed teachers in grades one through three about their instructional practices and found that students in those grades spent only twenty minutes writing text a paragraph or longer per day.

Struggling writers have various difficulties with writing tasks and writing instruction can constrain or influence how these writers develop. Although best practices have been identified for making the process approach an effective method for helping students write well (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007), teachers also need to consider the needs of struggling writers and their instruction for these writers in order to provide them with the support that will help them become proficient writers.

**Effective Practices for Teaching Struggling Writers.** Struggling writers have difficulties mastering the writing process. In order to help struggling writers become more proficient writers, teachers need to have knowledge of effective instructional practices that will support them. In order to be effective for supporting struggling writers, instructional practices should address the social and cognitive nature of writing. The research provides evidence for the use of instructional practices that emphasize the writing process, provide explicit teaching of strategies, and include opportunities for social interaction in order to improve the writing performance of struggling writers.

**Emphasis on the Process of Writing.** The process writing approach has been recommended as an effective practice for teaching all students to write (Graham, Olinghouse, & Harris, 2009). This approach allows students frequent opportunities to write and engage in the cognitive behavior of writers by learning to use the steps of the writing process in a recursive manner. The cognitive activity of writers occurs within a social context as students interact with their teachers and peers, as a community of learners, and write for an authentic audience.
Zaragoza and Vaughn (1992) examined how writers of varying abilities respond to process writing instruction, providing evidence for its use over traditional, skills-based approaches in instructing struggling writers. In this study, the researchers determined that a high-achieving writer, as well as a low-achieving writer and one who was learning disabled all made gains in writing, language, spelling, and mechanics through participation in a writing program based on the process approach to writing instruction. Clippard and Nicaise (1998) examined the efficacy of writers’ workshop, a common instructional method for teaching the process approach, on the writing performance of fourth and fifth grade students with significant writing deficits. Evidence that these writers made gains through this teaching method was apparent in the quality of their writing samples, their ability to engage in planning, generating, and revising, and their positive attitudes towards writing. The writers’ workshop approach benefits struggling students through instruction that involves authentic writing activities, significant time for students to engage in the processes of drafting, revising, and editing, and opportunities to engage in discussion concerning writing (Clippard & Nicaise, 1998). Writers’ workshop can be beneficial for a variety of writers when the approach includes sustained time for writing, assessment and teaching of students’ individual needs, and opportunities for students to work at their own pace, choose their own topics, and engage in interaction with their peers (Fu & Shelton, 2007). Troia, et al, (2009) found that the effectiveness of a process writing approach, such as writers’ workshop, is also dependent on the teachers’ implementation of adaptations to meet the needs of struggling writers (Troia, et al., 2009). When Troia, et al (2009) compared the effects of writers’ workshop on good and poor writers they found that the good writers made greater gains in their writing performance than poor writers. Teachers in this study generally made limited use of adaptations
for struggling writers, but it was found that those who made the least adaptations also taught the struggling writers making the least progress.

Other researchers have suggested that the process approach to writing instruction should also include explicit and systematic strategy instruction in order to support struggling writers (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). Graham, Harris, & Mason (2005) compared the effects of writers’ workshop instruction to writers’ workshop instruction that was enhanced through explicit instruction in strategies for writing and self-regulation of the writing process on struggling third grade writers. The struggling writers taught through the enhanced writers’ workshop model made gains, but the struggling writers taught through the writers’ workshop without the addition of the strategy instruction showed little improvement over the course of the five months of the study. The effectiveness of a process writing approach, such as writers’ workshop, is also dependent on the teachers’ implementation of adaptations to meet the needs of struggling writers (Troia, et al., 2009).

The research on the process approach suggests that struggling writers benefit from frequent opportunities to engage in the authentic work of the writing process, but this is most effective when it’s combined with instruction to address specific needs of these writers. Teachers should have the ability to assess individual students’ needs in order to adjust instruction (Fu & Shelton, 2007). The needs of struggling writers, who have difficulties with the cognitive demands of writing, can be addressed more effectively when teachers include a focus on the explicit teaching of strategies.

**The use of explicit instruction.** A purpose of the process writing approach is to provide students with the opportunity to frequently use skills and strategies in order to build the habits of proficient writers. The role of the teacher becomes especially important for struggling
writers who have difficulties using and managing the complex, cognitive processes of the writing process. These students need guidance in understanding and being able to implement writing strategies effectively. In order to be effective with struggling writers, teachers need to provide explicit instruction in strategies for the various processes involved in writing. The use of explicit instruction, which is a beneficial strategy for all writers, is even more pronounced for struggling writers (Graham, Olinghouse, & Harris, 2009).

The writing process can be taught with the addition of explicit instruction to increase the performance of struggling writers. Bui, Schumaker, & Deshler (2006) examined the effects of a comprehensive writing program that integrated instruction in the writing process with explicit instruction in strategies for learning to write. Various strategies for planning and other writing processes were taught through a method that involved explaining the strategy, modeling it, and providing guidance through whole class use of the strategy, followed by independent practice. They found that a range of writers, including struggling writers, made gains in their writing performance as evidenced through their written products and a self-efficacy measure. Other researchers have examined the effects of the integration of an explicit strategy instruction method, Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) with the process approach to writing. SRSD, developed by Harris and Graham (1996), is a model designed to help students gain knowledge of writing strategies and engage in the cognitive work necessary to apply those strategies in their own writing. Six stages of instruction are used in the SRSD model to teach strategies: development of background knowledge concerning the strategy, discussion of the purpose and benefit of the strategy’s use, modeling of the strategy, student memorization of the strategy, scaffolded practice of the strategy, and independent practice. Researchers have found that SRSD instruction can be effectively integrated into a process approach to significantly
improve the writing performance of struggling writers (Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993; Helsel & Greenberg, 2007; MacArthur, Graham, Schwarz, & Schafer, 1995). Supplementing the process approach with explicit instruction guides struggling writers in executing and managing the cognitive processes that are challenging to them (Danoff, et al., 1993). Explicit instruction in the use of strategies also involves teaching students to use internal speech to guide thinking as they manage the cognitive processes which can help struggling writers develop self-regulation skills (Helsel & Greenberg, 2007).

Researchers have compared explicit strategy instruction through implementation of the SRSD model to process approaches that do not involve this sort of explicit instruction and found evidence that it has greater benefits for some struggling writers in the elementary grades. In a study conducted by Harris, Graham, and Mason (2006) struggling second grade writers who received SRSD instruction three times a week in a setting separate from their classroom wrote longer and more complete stories, spent more time planning, and were more knowledgeable about writing than peers who were taught through a writers’ workshop model without explicit strategy instruction. The same researchers had also previously conducted a study with third grade struggling writers and demonstrated that these older students also had greater writing performance and writing knowledge when provided with SRSD instruction than their peers taught through writers’ workshop (Graham, et al., 2005). Students in both studies were taught planning and writing strategies and procedures to self-regulate the processes in order to write stories and essays. Troia and Graham (2002) found that fourth and fifth grade struggling writers who were taught a routine to set goals for their writing, brainstorm ideas, and sequence their ideas wrote stories of better quality than their peers who were taught the process approach but without this explicit instruction in planning. Teaching the explicit use of the planning strategy
involved teacher modeling and scaffolding of the students’ use of the strategy through collaborative writing before students were expected to apply it independently.

Explicit instruction improves the writing performance of struggling writers because it helps them know exactly how to accomplish the steps in the writing process and how to think through these steps to self-regulate their performance. Since planning is an essential step in the writing process and struggling writers spend insufficient time engaging in this process, explicit instruction in this strategy is useful in improving writing performance (Saddler, et al., 2004). Saddler, et al. (2004) found that struggling second grade writers improved their story writing ability when they were taught a strategy for planning and drafting. This involved the use of the SRSD model and the use of mnemonics to help students know that in order to write a story they need to choose an idea, create a plan, and write and tell more by answering *what* and *how* questions about their story ideas. Teaching struggling writers to set goals related to determining the purpose, text structure, and length for the writing task as part of a planning strategy provides them with a way to manage and evaluate their writing and, therefore, improves writing performance and increases writing knowledge (Graham, et al., 1992). Struggling writers who do not have adequate knowledge about revising and do not use this step of the process effectively were found to benefit from being explicitly taught what they should do in order to revise in a study by Graham, et al. (1995). In that study, fifth and sixth grade struggling writers who were given an explicit goal to revise by adding information made more meaning-based revisions and were more likely to improve their papers than those students who were given the goal to make their papers better.

Struggling writers’ performance increases when a writing task is explicitly broken down into the tasks and goals to be accomplished (Graham, et al., 1992). For struggling students the
process of writing can be overwhelming if they are unsure of the smaller tasks that are necessary
to complete a writing activity. Strategy instruction, such as the SRSD model, is a way to make
the steps of the writing process more explicit. Although strategy instruction has been shown to
have a positive effect on students’ writing performance and there is also evidence that it can be
integrated within other writing instructional approaches, it is not widely used (Graham, 2006a).

*The use of scaffolded instruction.* The goal in writing instruction is for students to be
able to write proficiently and with independence. Struggling students will not learn to write well
just from independent writing practice, but also need instruction in order to know how to write
well (Fisher & Frey, 2003). Effective instruction should scaffold students’ learning so they
progress from being dependent on others to achieve a task to being able to do it independently.
Through scaffolded instruction teachers provide the supports students need as they are involved
in tasks they are not quite capable of completing independently (Winn, 1994). This concept is
based on Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development, which he describes as the
distance between what the child can do with help and what the child can do without help
(Vygotsky, 1978). This concept relies on social interaction as a more knowledgeable other
supports the learner in achieving a higher level of functioning (Miller, 2011). In addition,
learning can be mediated through tools, including language, that serve to help students
internalize new behaviors and concepts (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers can scaffold instruction in a
number of ways to support struggling writers as they learn to become independent.

The gradual release of responsibility has been identified as a structure to scaffold
struggling writers as they learn to write independently (Fisher & Frey, 2003). Within this model
students gradually take on more responsibility as they are engaged in a writing task. Tompkins
(2002) examined the effects of writing instruction, which included the use of scaffolding and
involved a gradual release of responsibility, with struggling seventh grade writers. She identified five levels of writing support as helpful in scaffolding instruction: 1.) modeled writing which involves a demonstration of a particular type of writing, 2.) shared writing in which the teacher and students write a text together with the teacher acting as a scribe, 3.) interactive writing in which the teacher and students collaboratively write a text and they all share in the scribing, 4.) guided writing in which students receive structure and support from the teacher and 5.) independent writing in which students could practice what they have learned about writing.

In their study of a writing intervention program, which they found effective in increasing students’ writing knowledge, Englert, et al. (1992) used talk and oral prompting to scaffold the writing of students, including struggling writers. This involved the teacher modeling the vocabulary and language that writers use to guide their cognitive processes as they write by thinking aloud when writing in front of the students. As students further engage in collaborative activities with the teacher and their peers they take on the responsibility of using the modeled language and gradually it becomes part of their internalized speech (Englert, et al., 1992). Teachers can also scaffold students’ use of dialogue and writing strategies through oral prompting in the form of questions that help them retrieve the knowledge they need to succeed (Englert, et al., 1992). These ways of scaffolding learning through dialogue about writing reinforce the students’ use of writing strategies, increase their ownership over the writing process, and help them focus attention to audience in crafting their text (Englert, et al., 1991).

In this same study, Englert, et al. (1992) also identified the use of procedural facilitation as a way to scaffold writing instruction. Procedural facilitators are tools that can be used to help students learn to use the language and understand the procedures of a cognitive task. The use of these tools, which take various forms, aid cognition by taking into account the sociocultural
perspective of writing instruction that places emphasis on the necessity of helping students internalize the language needed to guide the writing processes and providing a scaffold so students can achieve at a higher level of performance (Englert, et al., 2006). Researchers have found that procedural facilitators, which provide an explicit structure for coordinating processes of a cognitive task, can be effective in improving the performance of struggling learners (Baker, Gersten, & Scanlon, 2002). James, Abbott, and Greenwood (2001) reported that incorporating the use of graphic organizers into the process approach make the planning and drafting processes more explicit for struggling writers so they can be more successful with writing tasks. In a strategy instruction model that Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, and Stevens (1991) found to be successful for both, typical and struggling writers, they incorporated a procedural facilitator in the form of think-sheets, which guided students through steps in the writing process by including the language they should use and the questions they should ask themselves within each step of planning, organizing, writing, editing, and revising. Although researchers have found positive effects of procedural facilitators they may not be useful for all instructional purposes. Researchers in the Graham, et al. (1995) study previously mentioned did not find that the use of a procedural facilitator for revising, in the form of a planning sheet, had an increased effect on revising behavior.

Involving students in collaborative interactions with their peers can also provide students with scaffolds to support their writing instruction. Englert, Berry, and Dunsmore (2001) examined the interaction of two primary-grade struggling writers as they collaborated on an informational text. The researchers found that the interaction served as an apprenticeship relationship, with one student serving as the more knowledgeable other who scaffolds the learning of the novice. Through the collaboration and dialogue that occurred both students were
active participants in the interaction and both were able to write at a more sophisticated level as a result. Struggling writers should be provided with opportunities to take on different roles in collaborative writing activities (Englert, Berry, & Dunsmore, 2001). The study of Harris, et al. (2006) provided evidence that second grade struggling writers can help each other learn and apply strategies when they are involved in peer support activities. Students were involved in working with each other to determine how they could use writing strategies for other writing tasks and setting goals for each other related to strategy use. The researchers compared this group of students who were taught strategies for writing with the addition of peer support to a group of students who were only taught the strategies and found that those students who were involved in peer support were more likely to transfer what they had learned to other writing activities. Similarly, Graham, et al. (2005) included the addition of peer support in struggling third grade writers’ strategy instruction and showed that it helped them generalize their learning to uninstructed genres of writing. Peer revision has been demonstrated as a way for struggling writers to support each other in using writing strategies in a study conducted by MacArthur, et al. (1991). Fourth through sixth graders were taught a peer revision strategy in which they used checklists and questions to help each other evaluate their writing. These struggling writers were able to use the strategy effectively. They also made fewer spelling and punctuation errors, produced papers of higher quality, and had more substantive knowledge of the revision process than students who did not use the strategy. Kindzierski (2009) demonstrated that even students who are typically perceived as not being able to effectively support their peers can provide useful feedback to support each other in revising their writing. In her study, Kindzierski found that students with emotional and behavioral disorders, who commonly display difficulties with
writing, were able to make meaningful changes to their writing through collaborative use of a peer-revision checklist.

Daily writing practice alone will not be effective in helping all students achieve; effective writing instruction is based on the needs of students and involves scaffolding to increase their level of independence (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). In order to scaffold instruction for struggling writers, teachers have to understand their needs. When teachers know the roadblocks that exist in their struggling writers’ development of writing skills, they can address them in order to help them become more proficient (Troia & Graham, 2003). Focusing on the process of writing, the explicit teaching of strategies, and scaffolded instruction are instructional practices that will serve to address the roadblocks of struggling writers so that they become skilled, independent writers. Instruction that includes these practices can be challenging to implement, but it is necessary to ensuring that struggling writers make progress. Instruction for struggling writers, if implemented well, can help these writers gain the skills they need to be successful with writing tasks throughout their schooling and beyond.

Summary

Writing is an important skill that needs to be developed for all learners. Writing teachers need an understanding of the complex nature of the writing process in order to design instruction that supports the social and cognitive processes that support learning to write. The complexity of the writing task can present a challenge for teachers in their instruction. This applies to their instruction for all writers, but even more so for struggling writers who have unique needs and challenges in learning to write. Both, knowledge of the process approach to writing instruction and effective instructional strategies that support struggling writers, are necessary for teachers to help struggling writers make progress. The review of the literature provided insight into the
process of learning to write and the instruction that has been shown to be effective for the development of struggling writers. This instruction should emphasize the process that writers engage in and address the specific needs of struggling writers. The teaching of struggling writers presents a challenge for many teachers so it is necessary to understand the support they provide. The knowledge gleaned from the literature enhanced the understanding of the instruction teachers provide to struggling writers and was useful in determining how instruction can be more effective. With effective instruction, struggling writers will be able to increase the writing ability they need for their future success as learners.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

Many elementary teachers have been faced with the challenge of helping struggling writers make gains in their ability to become proficient writers. The writing development of students begins when they are in elementary school and is supported by teachers who have knowledge of effective practices for teaching writing. However, some elementary students struggle with learning how to write. Students who struggle with writing and do not learn to write well are likely to face academic challenges throughout their education since writing is a tool they will need in order to learn new content knowledge and show evidence of their learning (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007). In order to help struggling writers become proficient it is helpful to know more about the instruction that is provided for these writers so teachers can be supported in developing effective practices. This descriptive case study provided insight into how upper elementary teachers at a public school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write within a process approach.
The central question that this research addressed is:

- *How do grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach?*

In order to clarify this central question the following sub-questions were addressed:

- *What are these teachers’ perceptions of struggling writers’ difficulties and how to support them in learning to write?*
- *What instructional practices do these teachers implement to support struggling writers and scaffold their learning?*
- *How do these teachers structure the classroom environment to support struggling writers?*
- *What do teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers?*
- *How is teachers’ instruction for struggling writers perceived by administrators?*
- *How are these teachers supported by administrators as they instruct struggling writers?*

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe how grade four and five teachers at a public school in Massachusetts support struggling writers within their classrooms as they learn through a process approach to writing instruction. Struggling writers was defined as students who teachers perceive to have difficulty learning to write because they need support with the writing process and are not producing the quality of writing typical for their grade level.

**Positionality Statement**

During the time this research was conducted the researcher was a doctoral student, as
well as a practitioner employed as a literacy specialist at the elementary school that served as the research site. As a literacy specialist, the researcher brought practical experiences as an educator and teacher of literacy to the inquiry process. The researcher’s practical experiences provided understanding and knowledge related to writing instruction, the teaching of struggling writers, and the classroom context in which the research was conducted. As a practitioner, the researcher also had a great interest in the teaching of writing and participated in activities to continually enhance her own expertise in this area. Previous participation in a teacher institute offered by a local site of the National Writing Project, which enabled the researcher to become a teacher-consultant who could provide professional development for teachers, led to an interest in helping educators become more effective as teachers of writing. This interest, along with her experiences working with teachers who feel challenged in teaching struggling writers, led the researcher to design a study examining teachers’ understanding and instruction for this population of writers.

Researchers conducting qualitative research collect data that is subject to interpretation and is shaped by individual experiences, backgrounds, and understandings (Creswell, 2007). While the experiences of the researcher brought insight to the research process and the topic of the investigation, there is a possibility that they also contributed to a bias. In order to enhance credibility, qualitative researchers should point out the biases and assumptions that may influence interpretation of the data and the conclusions that are drawn (Merriam, 2009). As a literacy educator, the researcher believed that struggling students, including struggling writers, need high quality instruction and that the teacher makes a difference in whether or not instruction is effective. In addition, the researcher believed that struggling writers require frequent opportunities to write and guidance in how to engage in the writing process of proficient writers.
Writing instruction is more effective when it occurs within the context of a classroom literacy community, in which students and teachers interact with and learn from each other. Within this writing community, students write for real purposes and audiences and engage in authentic writing tasks, rather than the completion of drills or skills-based worksheets. By stating these assumptions the researcher aimed to provide insight into how the research may have been impacted by her experiences and knowledge. In addition, being aware of assumptions about the topic raised the importance of recognizing that there are varying perspectives. Challenging one’s assumptions, by considering evidence that is contrary to what one already thinks, is a beneficial research approach that will help to reduce bias within a study (Yin, 2009).

**Research Design**

This study was approached through an interpretive perspective that assumes that there is not a single reality, but multiple realities based on individual experiences and that a researchers’ role is to construct the meaning that the participants ascribe to the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009). The meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences is socially constructed and subjective since it is based on their reality (Creswell, 2007). Through research based on an interpretive paradigm, the researcher, along with the participants, is involved in a process in which meaning is co-constructed through mutual engagement (Hatch, 2002). The researcher seeks to interpret the complexity of reality through participants’ understanding of their experiences.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

This study was conducted through a qualitative approach to align with the interpretive perspective that emphasizes the search for understanding of participants’ reality. Through qualitative inquiry, researchers strive to understand how participants interpret their experiences
related to a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). In order to arrive at this interpretation of reality, qualitative researchers employ an inductive process through which themes, patterns, and understanding are constructed through the data that have been collected (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative approach is useful to explore an issue in order to arrive at a holistic understanding of what is happening (Creswell, 2007). The research questions aligned with qualitative research since they were intended to gain an in-depth understanding into the complex issue concerning teachers’ instruction of struggling writers. This research acquired a rich description of teachers’ understandings and experiences through multiple data collection measures that were useful in the construction of themes and patterns. Qualitative research takes place within the participants’ natural setting in order to make sense of the context in which the issue occurs (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). By conducting this study within the natural setting of the classroom the data revealed the ways in which these teachers interact with the struggling writers they teach and how they structure the environment. The study was an exploration into how teachers support struggling writers in order to arrive at an in-depth understanding, making it appropriate for a qualitative research approach.

**Research Tradition**

This study was conducted through a descriptive case study method. The case study method is useful in explaining a phenomenon in depth within a specified context (Yin, 2009). In addition, case studies typically involve an examination of “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2009). This study was an inquiry into how teachers provide instruction for struggling writers and provided an analysis of this phenomenon in the context of the writing classroom. Within case study methodology the phenomenon or issue is explored through a case that exists within a bounded system (Creswell, 2007). The bounded system within a case study is the unit of
analysis that is surrounded by boundaries, such as, “a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the bounded system consisted of a group of teachers of writing in grades four and five within one school. Each of the participants taught struggling writers, which allowed for an exploration of the identified phenomenon.

Descriptive case studies are designed to provide rich, thick description to provide insight into an issue being explored (Merriam, 2009). This case study provided a description of teachers’ support for struggling writers. In order to arrive at this rich description of the issue being explored, some elements of the phenomenological approach were incorporated into this study. Phenomenological research focuses on describing the meaning of the experiences of individuals related to a particular phenomenon and arrive at the essence of this phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The description that resulted from the analysis of the data in this study provided participants’ understanding of an experience they share, the instruction of struggling writers. In order to provide a holistic description of the phenomenon, this study employed the use of multiple sources of data, which is characteristic of the case study method.

The descriptive case study method was appropriate for this study since the central research question focused on exploring the phenomenon concerning how teachers support struggling writers within a specified context. The holistic, detailed description provided an in-depth analysis of what occurs when teachers support struggling writers and how teachers engage in this process.

Participants

Qualitative research most often involves a purposive sample because the researcher desires to study a unique sample in order to meet the intent of the research (Fraenkel, Wallen, &
In this study, fourth and fifth grade teachers were purposefully selected as the case to be studied because they teach struggling writers and can provide insight into the research problem. All eight fourth and fifth grade teachers at the research site were asked to participate in the study. In order to participate in the study the teacher had to instruct students within her classroom who she considers to struggle with learning to write and be willing to be interviewed, observed teaching writing, and provide copies of their lesson plans. The four teachers who met these requirements and who agreed to participate in the study represented the population of teachers who teach struggling writers in the fourth and fifth grades in one elementary school. All teachers were females. In addition, the administrators at the school were asked to participate in the study in order to provide another perspective. Both of the administrators, the principal and the assistant principal, agreed to participate in interviews. The research was conducted at an elementary school in Massachusetts. The school was chosen based on convenience since it is the school where the researcher was employed and had access. Merriam (2009) argues that a convenience sample has advantages because it can address such issues as time, location, and availability but has the disadvantage of decreasing credibility. In the case of this research, the researcher identified a problem from her own practice so the use of the research site provided understanding into how it can be addressed within this specific setting.

**Recruitment and Access**

The research site was readily accessible to the researcher who was also a practitioner at the site. In order to conduct the study at this site, the researcher needed to gain permission and assistance from the gatekeepers, such as the principal and district administrators, and also approval form the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University. Through conversations with the principal the researcher gained support in conducting the study. A letter
granting permission for this research to be conducted at the selected site was received from the district administration office (Appendix A). This letter was provided to the IRB at Northeastern University along with details of how the research was going to be conducted. All of the fourth and fifth grade teachers were asked to volunteer for the study through a recruitment letter (Appendix B) that was placed in teachers’ school mailboxes. In order to gain access to teachers’ classrooms and build positive rapport the research goals and the participants’ role had to be clearly explained. This was accomplished by providing the four teachers who volunteered to participate with a letter, which described the research, and included a consent form (Appendix C). A similar letter and consent form were also given to the administrators who participated in the study. Teachers and administrators all signed the consent form at the beginning of the interview sessions in which they participated.

Data Collection

A principle of case study research is that it utilizes multiple sources of evidence, which establishes the process of triangulation and allows for evidence from one source to be corroborated with another (Yin, 2009). This method of data collection will yield a broader understanding of the issue being examined and help to reduce bias that may result from a single source of evidence (Maxwell, 2005). In most cases, the use of multiple sources of data enhances the findings of a study and is beneficial in establishing rich, thick description. In this study, multiple sources of evidence were collected through interviews, observations, and a review of documents. To collect evidence concerning the research questions, the researcher conducted an interview with each teacher participant. The researcher also conducted administrator interviews, as well, to gain insight from another perspective. These interviews were conducted at the start of the study. Each participant signed a consent form before being interviewed. After teachers had
been interviewed, the research conducted teacher observations to gather additional evidence and to corroborate the evidence collected during interviews. Each teacher was observed twice over the course of two weeks. Observing teachers more than once provided a deeper understanding of what occurs in their classrooms. A debrief session took place after each interview. The collection of documents, in the form of teacher lessons plans, provided a third source of evidence. These lesson plans, along with supporting documents such as handouts or graphic organizers, were collected during the weeks that teachers were observed. After the interviews and observations were conducted, participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on the evidence collected. Participants were provided with copies of the interview transcripts and the reflective notes taken during observations. They had the opportunity to review the data and add any other information they felt was relevant to the topic. Merriam (2009) suggested that data collection involves the careful attention to and selection of evidence from the various sources because not every piece of information will be useful. The theoretical framework, the research problem and purpose, and the sample selected for inquiry all help determine what counts as evidence (Merriam, 2009). Through the data collection process, it was necessary to stay focused on these elements of the research as well as the research questions to be answered through this case study inquiry. Table 1 shows the data collection source(s) used to address each research question.

Interviews

Interviews, which serve as guided conversations with participants, are an important source of evidence in case study research (Yin, 2009). Interviews are beneficial because they focus on understanding the research topic and are insightful in the sense that they provide explanations based on participant’s perspective (Yin, 2009). In-depth interviewing, consisting of
Table 1

Alignment Between Research Questions and Data Collection Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Question</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How do grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach? | 1. Interviews  
2. Observations  
3. Documents |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are these teachers’ perceptions about struggling writers and how to support them in learning to write?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| What instructional practices do these teachers implement to support struggling writers and scaffold their learning? | 1. Teacher Interviews  
2. Teacher Observations  
3. Documents |
| How do these teachers structure the classroom environment to support struggling writers? | 1. Teacher Interviews  
2. Teacher Observations |
| What do teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers? | 1. Teacher Interviews |
| How is teachers’ instruction for struggling writers perceived by administrators? | 1. Administrator Interviews |
| How are these teachers supported by administrators as they instruct struggling writers? | 1. Administrator Interviews |

open-ended questions that were seeking detailed information, was utilized within this study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interviews followed a semi-structured format, as a determined number of questions were prepared beforehand along with plans to follow-up on those questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An interview protocol was followed during interview sessions (Appendix D). The interviews were conducted at the start of the study and took place within a two-week time period. Interviews with teachers provided data related to how they understand struggling writers and their experiences in instructing these students. Administrator interviews
were conducted as another data source to provide a holistic view of the issue and insight into their perspective concerning how teachers support struggling writers. In addition to the interview session that administrators participated in at the start of the study, it was necessary to meet with them on a second occasion in order to ask a follow-up question. After interviews were conducted, teachers and administrators had the opportunity to review a copy of the interview transcripts and to provide any other additional information relevant to the research topic.

Interviews, which were conducted by the researcher, took place in-person and individually. The length of each interview was about forty-five minutes. Interviews were conducted at a time convenient for participants and took place in their classrooms or offices. In order to build trust and rapport, the interview protocol involved telling participants about the goals of the study and included an icebreaker question. Each participant granted permission to be recorded before starting the interviews in order to gain an accurate account of participants’ responses. Two audio recording devices were used in order to have a backup of the files in case one device failed to work properly. An application, provided through an online transcription service, was used to record interviews using a mobile computer. In addition, a hand-held recorder was used. The online transcription service, Rev.com, which ensures confidentiality, was used to transcribe the interviews.

Observations

Direct observations allow for case studies to occur within the natural setting of the case being examined and provide additional evidence about the research topic, as well as evidence that can serve to corroborate that which is collected from other sources, such as interviews (Yin, 2009). Elements that are observed in observations include the physical setting, the participants, and the activities, interactions, and conversations that are occurring (Merriam, 2009). Two
observations of each teacher in their classrooms during writing lessons were conducted in order to observe these elements. Each observation took place for an entire writing lesson, which varied in length from about forty-five to sixty minutes. Through visual impressions, I took note of the context within which the writing lessons occurred, the instruction teachers provided, and the interactions that took place with students. Specifically, observations provided evidence of how teachers scaffold instruction for struggling writers and how they structure their writing lessons and the environment in ways that support these learners. During direct observation of teachers in the natural setting of their classrooms, the researcher took on the stance of an observer who is known to the participants, but not actively engaged in the activities occurring within the environment (Merriam, 2009). The role of the researcher during observations was to examine what is happening in the classroom not to gather any information that could be used for evaluative purposes. Throughout observations, data were collected through the use of an observation protocol (Appendix E), based on the example of Creswell (2007) who suggested including a section for descriptive notes and one for reflective notes. The purpose of this protocol was to collect highly descriptive field notes that include details about the activities being observed and also reflective comments to indicate researcher thoughts on what is occurring (Merriam, 2009). After each observation, there was a debriefing session in order to give teachers the opportunity to provide additional information about the lesson and to clarify what was observed. This debriefing session, which lasted about five minutes, either occurred at the end of the school day or the next morning depending on the teachers’ ability. A protocol for the debriefing session was followed (Appendix F). Handwritten notes were taken during each observation and details were filled in after the observation had concluded. Later in the evening, the notes from the observations were typed.
Documents

Collection of evidence through documents is useful within case study research to corroborate and augment evidence collected through other sources (Yin, 2009). Documents refer to existing various material, in written, visual, digital, or physical form, that is relevant to the research being conducted (Merriam, 2009). In this study, teacher lesson plans were the documents collected as a source of evidence. Any supporting documents, such as handouts or graphic organizers, were considered a component of the lesson plan and were collected along with it. Teachers provided their lesson plans to the researcher at the conclusion of the two-week period during which they were observed and they were copied. A document analysis form (Appendix G) was used to review the lesson plans for elements that are related to the research questions. Documents were collected to gain additional information about teachers’ writing instruction and any teaching tools they used that would serve to support struggling writers.

Data Storage

Yin (2009) recommends the creation of a case study database in order to increase reliability of the research. A case study database establishes easy access to the data by the researcher, and provides evidence for those questioning the findings. Case study notes written by hand and collected documents were organized and stored in a locked filing cabinet. Interview transcripts were stored in a primary file on my computer and a secondary file on a zip drive and hard copies were stored in the filing cabinet. The researcher was the only person who had physical access to this data in order to ensure the protection of participants’ identity and maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data collected in a case study, in and of itself does not describe what is happening
related to a research problem; the data must be carefully and strategically analyzed in order to make it meaningful (Yin, 2009). In this study, multiple sources of data were collected so it was necessary to have a clear and strategic procedure for how the analysis was to be conducted. In order to conduct this case study analysis a two-cycle coding procedure described by Saldaña (2009) was utilized. The process of coding is a way to create categories or themes that help the researcher make sense of qualitative data in relation to the research questions being asked (Merriam, 2009). Coding was used to analyze the data in order to arrive at an understanding of the data that represents the findings of the study.

Sources of data within this study included interviews, observations, and documents. The use of these sources allowed for triangulation of the data. Each data source provided a different perspective concerning the phenomenon being studied. Interviews allowed the participants to provide their perception by stating their thoughts about their experiences. Observations provided data concerning what actually happens. Documents, in the form of teacher lessons plans, provided further information about what teachers intended to do. Interviews were transcribed through a transcription service before the data from this source was analyzed. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and lesson plan documents were read carefully, multiple times, in order to analyze and code the data. Initially, the data collected from each participant was read through in order to make note of first thoughts and impressions. Notes were taken in the form of memos. This occurred throughout the data collection process. After all the data had been collected, the data were read through in its entirety in order to get a general sense of the data as a whole and begin to reflect on its meaning. Notes concerning what was occurring within the data and ideas for codes were recorded.
The sources of data were read again in order to further analyze the data through a coding process. First Cycle coding followed by Second Cycle coding is a useful strategy in qualitative research because analysis is a complex process involving consideration of language and deep thinking about the patterns emerging in participants’ experiences and it is usually necessary to refine the thinking that occurred through the first coding attempt (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive Coding, which Saldaña (2009) has described and identified as useful for most qualitative methods, was utilized as the method of First Cycle coding. Through this method, units of data, including phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, were assigned a code, a word or short phrase, as a summary of its basic topic. Codes were assigned to all sources of data for each participant. This resulted in categorization of the units that comprised the collected data.

After this First Cycle coding was completed the data were further analyzed through Second Cycle coding by what Saldaña (2009) describes as Pattern Coding. This coding method involves analyzing commonalities among codes and labeling those that are similar with a Pattern Code. The data and codes were read through in order to find patterns and identify codes that could be organized into categories. The categories that emerged from Pattern Coding represented the themes within the data. This cycle of coding also involved reflection on the theoretical framework, sociocultural theory, and the knowledge from the literature review. This provided further understanding of what was happening by providing a lens through which to interpret the data. The themes that emerged reflected key elements of the theoretical framework and the research providing a holistic picture of the research problem.

**Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that trustworthiness is essentially achieved through the ability to convince readers that, “the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (p.
Concerns about validity and reliability, which affect trustworthiness, can be addressed within qualitative research through a rigorous approach and careful attention to, “the way in which data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted, and the way in which the findings are presented” (Merriam, 2009, p. 210). A number of strategies were incorporated into this study to address trustworthiness.

Lincoln and Guba (1985), who suggest that validity and reliability be addressed through consideration of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, offer strategies that were utilized in this study. Since qualitative research involves the interpretation of reality and this reality has to be constructed, validity is assessed in terms of the credibility of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Findings of a qualitative study are reliable when they are shown to be consistent and dependable based on the data collected (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation, through the use of multiple data collection methods that allow for cross-checking of findings, has been identified as a strategy to improve credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation in this study was achieved through the collection of data from interviews, observations, and documents. This study also involved the use of member checks, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified as a crucial method of achieving credibility and also as effective in demonstrating dependability. Through member checks participants were provided with the opportunity to review interview transcripts and observation notes and were asked to provide any additional feedback. In addition to these strategies for addressing dependability and also to establish that the findings of the study are confirmable a chain of evidence was maintained (Yin, 2009). This involves creation of a database that allows access to the collected data and also notes about how the data were collected. Qualitative research is concerned more with understanding a particular experience in depth and limits generalization (Merriam, 2009).
Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the audience of a study is responsible for determining whether the findings can be transferred to their own contexts and a researcher can support this through thick description. This study provided rich, thick description concerning the participants, the setting, and the findings (Merriam, 2009).

Researchers need to be concerned with threats to the internal validity of a study in order to plan ways to minimize those threats (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Maxwell (2005) identified two threats to the validity of a qualitative study as that of researcher bias and reactivity. Researcher bias results from the selection of data that parallels a researcher’s own preconceptions and, although this bias can’t be eliminated, it can be minimized through reflection on and identification of one’s assumptions (Maxwell, 2005). The positionality of the researcher was identified in this study in order to address researcher bias. Reactivity involves the influence of the researcher on the setting and the participants (Maxwell, 2005). Since the researcher is also a co-worker of the participants in this study there is the possibility that they felt pressured to participate. In order to address this issue it was made clear to participants that their involvement was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any time. Observations of participants may also result in participants behaving in ways that they believe are desired. Although this issue can’t be eliminated, the triangulation of data helped to ensure that the findings were an accurate portrayal of what was happening related to the issue being examined.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Case study research, since it focuses on issues related to actual experiences of human participants, requires consideration of strategies that demonstrate sensitivity to and protection of participants (Yin, 2009). In order to achieve this, the participants were provided with information about the intent of the study, ways they will benefit, their right to withdraw, and
steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality (Creswell, 2007). Participants were made aware that their participation will have minimal direct benefits beyond a $10 gift card for a bookstore that was given to teachers in appreciation for the time they provided for interviews. All data were kept anonymous and participants’ names were masked within this data and in the reported findings. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw at any time. This helped to ensure that teachers didn’t feel pressure to participate. Teachers provided information concerning their teaching and instructional practices, which for some could be considered sensitive information. Measures were taken to ensure confidentially of all information that participants provided. Findings were also checked with participants to minimize the risk that they were unfairly evaluated. Although there are slight potential risks to participants, reflection on the need and possible outcomes of this study indicated that the benefits would be greater than any risks.

Chapter Four: Report of the Research Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the key findings concerning how grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach. The first section describes the context of the study. The following sections present the themes that emerged from analysis of the collected data. The last section provides a summary of the findings.

Context of Study

This descriptive case study was conducted in an elementary school in Massachusetts. The school is in a rural, middle class town with a population of about 35,000. There are about
440 students in the school where this study took place. The school population is predominantly white. Also, about 6% of students are English Language Learners and about 9% are identified as learning disabled. The elementary school is one of three that serves students within the district.

During the 2010-2011 school year, the district led an initiative to align writing instruction to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Leaders in the district created a scope and sequence that outlined the genres of writing that were to be taught throughout the school year. About a third of each school year was determined as the time frame to teach each of the three genres emphasized in the CCSS: narrative, informative/explanatory, and argument/opinion. The district also provided professional development throughout the year to support teachers in teaching these genres and as part of an initiative to implement writers’ workshop in all elementary classrooms. One of the purposes of this initiative was to increase the amount of writing instruction that occurred within classrooms, since it varied among teachers. The professional development that was provided was focused on helping teachers understand how to implement a writers’ workshop model. Additionally, teachers were involved with learning about the three genres of writing and how they could implement and development mini-lessons to teach these genres. Other initiatives were ongoing at this time: the elementary schools were in their second year of implementing a core reading program and some teachers were piloting a new math program. The school or district has not provided teachers with professional development concerning writing instruction since, but they have provided them with some time to develop writing units. Even with this professional development and an increase in the amount of writing instruction provided to students, teachers expressed concerns about struggling writers.

This study was conducted in the winter of 2014. Four teachers and two administrators volunteered to participate in the study. Over a two-month period, data were collected from
interviews, observations, and teacher lesson plans. At the beginning of February, interviews were conducted with each teacher and administrator participant over a one-week period. At the beginning of March, teachers were observed once a week over the course of a two-week period during their writing instruction block. Lesson plans that were taught over this two-week period were collected from teachers. The interviews and observations provided the most useful insight into the research questions. The lesson plans were collected in order to find out more about teachers’ instructional practices and the use of teachers’ scaffolding, but the brevity of teachers’ plans revealed limited data. Three teachers provided lesson plans that mostly contained information about the topic of the lessons. Two of these teachers also provided handouts they used with students that further indicated the content of their lessons. One teacher’s lesson plans consisted of a copy of three lesson plans that originated from an internet source which she used as a reference for her own lesson plans, but weren’t written to show exactly how she implemented them over the course of the two weeks. A review of the lesson plans indicates that teachers do not place a focus on preparing detailed written lessons. The lesson plans provided some data that was useful in understanding teachers’ instructional practices, such as what content they taught during writing, but did not provide more in-depth information about each teacher’s process in supporting struggling writers.

Participants

Beth. Beth is a grade four teacher who has been teaching for eighteen years. She has also taught third grade and worked at a charter school in an urban setting. Both times Beth was observed in her classroom she was teaching lessons as part of an on-demand writing unit. The school district requires that all fourth grade teachers teach this unit the month before students will take the long composition portion of the state test. The unit is meant to prepare students for
the test, in which they have to write to a prompt and demonstrate writing skills such as topic development and voice. Each of her lessons focused on qualities of writing that students should include when writing to a prompt. During the observations her students were seated at their desks, which were arranged in groups of four to six throughout the room. Her room included an interactive whiteboard at the front, a rug area at the back of the room, and a kidney-shaped table for small group instruction. The rug area was utilized when students were asked to share their writing with the class. There were various posters throughout the room, some of which were related to writing. There were three posters that contained information related to the organization of writing and were titled, “Bold Beginnings”, “Mighty Middles”, and “Exciting Endings.” Another poster, titled “Good Writing Traits” contained information about traits of writing, such as organization and voice. Beth has worked with struggling writers in all of the grades she has taught. She doesn’t feel that the teaching of writing was a focus during her teacher preparation program and for the past eight years she has been in the district she has constantly been trying new instructional approaches for teaching writing.

**Nancy.** Nancy is also a grade four teacher. She has been an educator for twenty-three years. During her first ten years in the district she was an English Language Learner teacher. Nancy was also observed teaching lessons as part of the on-demand writing unit. One lesson was intended to help students understand different types of prompts and the other focused on revision. The desks in her classroom were arranged in two rows on each side of the room, enabling the students to face each other. There was also an interactive whiteboard in the front of the room and a rug area, which included a rocking chair, in the back of the room. During parts of the observed lessons students sat at their desks and or the rug area. There was a mobile easel in the room, which was used to display or create charts during writing lessons. One chart on
display contained a list of qualities students should look for when revising their writing. Nancy feels that writing has been her most challenging area to teach. She explained, “writing is something that not all children come to the table with the same opportunities, the same research behind them or opportunities to have experiences to write about. I also believe that writing is hard because there’s no formula for it.”

**Erica.** Erica is a grade five teacher who has been teaching for sixteen years. She has also taught grade four. When she was observed teaching in her classroom she presented lessons as part of a research report unit, a curriculum requirement during this time of the school year. At the beginning of the observations her students sat at their desks, which were arranged in small groups. Her room also had a rug area and an interactive whiteboard in the front of the room and a kidney-shaped table for small group instruction. Students worked at various places in the room during the observations including the rug area, their desks, and tables within the room. On the walls of her room were various posters, some with academic information and others with motivational phrases. Erica has worked with struggling writers over the years, at the fifth grade level, as well as when she worked in fourth grade. She believes that, “for many kids writing is very, very difficult.”

**Susan.** Susan is a grade five teacher who has been teaching for eleven years. She has also taught grades two, three, and four. Susan was observed teaching a lesson on revising as part of a research report unit and the other on teaching summary writing. Her classroom was arranged with groups of desks in the center, an interactive whiteboard and kidney-shaped table in the front of the room, and a rug area in the back of the room. Students were seated at their desks during one of the lessons and at the rug area during another. The room contained colorful baskets of books and various posters hung around the room. Posters contained academic
information about various content areas and motivational phrases. There were also teacher-created charts with information about topics the students were learning. Student work, such as content-area projects, was also displayed throughout the room. Susan expressed her frustration with the lack of focus on writing throughout the grades. She also feels that writing success is not something that is highlighted within the school. She stated, “I think kids that are struggling in anything need to see that they’re being successful even if it’s in small ways. We celebrate a lot of things here for reading and for math. I don’t think we do that for writing. It would be really great to have something like that, like an at-night thing or something like that where even your struggling writer can be proud.”

Administrator Participants. The school principal and assistant principal were also participants in the study. The principal has been in her position for nine years, but has also worked as an administrator in another district for five years and as an elementary teacher for eighteen years. The assistant principal is in her third year as an administrator at the school. Previous to this she was a teacher for nine years at another elementary school in the district. She taught grades three, four, and five. Both the principal and assistant principal evaluate teachers and observe the instruction that occurs within classrooms. They also participate along with teachers during professional development workshops.

Central Research Question

This study was intended to answer the central research question: How do grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach? To address this question qualitative data were collected and analyzed in order to determine themes that related to each of the research sub-questions. The analysis of the data was guided by sociocultural theory.
Sub-question #1: What are these teachers’ perceptions of struggling writers’ difficulties and how to support them in learning to write?

The first sub-question was related to how teachers perceive the difficulties of the struggling writer and how to support them. Based on the review of data from the teacher interviews four themes emerged. Table 2 presents the themes that were identified across all teachers and the following section further discusses each of the themes.

Table 2

Themes Identified for Sub-question 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Struggling writers have a range of needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Writing is a challenge for various student populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Struggling writers need additional instructional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Struggling writers may not apply and independently use skills they are taught</td>
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**Struggling writers have a range of needs.** Teachers spoke about the difficulties that struggling writers face in learning to write. They reported that the struggling writers in their classrooms have a range of difficulties. Each teacher identified more than one area of concern for the struggling writers they teach. These difficulties range from basic skills to skills associated with vocabulary, genre, and the writing process. Beth commented:

I’ve seen struggling writers that can’t even put a sentence together. I’ve seen struggling writers that can’t understand the purpose of the writing and what the expected outcome is supposed to be. And I’ve also seen struggling writers, even with some of the stronger writers, struggle with the concept that you want them to have for a specific genre even.
Erica also commented, “We have a range of issues with kids that go from students not having correct sentence structure, not being able to paragraph, not being able to develop a topic to kids who just don’t know how to get started in the writing process.”

All teachers discussed the difficulty struggling writers have with basic skills. The ability to construct sentences is one of the basic skills that all teachers said that they observe struggling writers to have difficulty with. Erica commented that the writing of her struggling writers often includes run-on sentences or sentence fragments. When Susan described struggling writers she stated, “They may have really basic sentences. They’re really short. They look more like, maybe, a third grade level.” Another basic skill that the teachers reported that struggling writers have difficulty relates to the mechanics of writing. Erica and Nancy both commented that spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were skills that struggling writers lack. Nancy stated that the mechanics are something that have to be addressed in the later stages of writing and says she first works with students on “getting their thoughts down and not worrying about the spelling, capitalization, punctuation or all those that will come in after.” In addition to these skills, Susan stated that many of struggling writers have great difficulty with grammar, which impacts all their written work, including their writing.

Teachers all reported that struggling writers have a limited vocabulary and that this has an impact on their writing ability. Susan specifically stated that one of the challenges that struggling writers face is, “the basic lack of complex word choice” and that it is difficult, “getting kids to choose other words that are outside their comfort zone and to be able to elaborate with detail and dive a little bit deeper into their topic.” Nancy stated that she has some English Language Learners in her classroom and spends a lot of time teaching figurative language and using different strategies to demonstrate and teach vocabulary. Beth and Erica related the lack of
vocabulary to students’ reading. Beth explained that many students do not read widely and this limits their vocabulary and their creativity in developing a story. She stated:

I have kids that read every day, but they read, I don’t want to say they don’t read good novels, but they read some of the most basic of novels, even comic books they’ll be reading. And then they go to apply their reading and then they don’t have that rich vocabulary and that storyline. The picture is not painted in their head because it’s not there in front of them.

She stated that this doesn’t just apply to struggling readers who tend to read less, but also to good readers who don’t like to read. Erica agreed that students’ reading impacts their vocabulary but also linked struggling writers difficulties in this area to the home environment. She commented:

I have quite a few students who just struggle with language with reading. I attribute it to, it’s an environmental problem, I don’t think these kids are reading at home and having models for them. I don’t know what parents are reading. I don’t know that there’s a lot of conversation at home to help them develop the language that they need to really express themselves, and I think this population just struggles.

The range of difficulties that teachers perceive struggling writers to have extends to their understanding of writing and the writing process. Beth commented that some struggling writers don’t understand the purpose of writing or have difficulty understanding the goal of writing in various genres. Nancy reported that she is often faced with struggling writers who don’t have ideas that they can use to write about. She explained that many students have limited experiences to draw from, which impacts their ability to write. Susan described one category of struggling writers as the “getting started writer.” She further explained:
There's that writer I find that probably has the biggest issues -- don't even know where to begin; don't know what to do. They don't even have the basic structure. They don't understand how to set it up or where to pull these pieces from to start anything. I think once they start it, then they get that realization it's not as difficult as they thought.

Nancy agreed that, “putting pencil to paper” is very difficult for struggling writers, but also stated that, “Staying on topic is awful and another area of great problem is organizing ideas. Struggling writers have a really difficult time organizing ideas.” Erica stated that some struggling writers she works with have an inability to stay on topic and develop their topic. She explained that they have difficulty “jumping into the moment” or elaborating on their ideas.

Writing is a challenge for various student populations. Teachers reported that writing presents a challenge for many elementary writers and there are many different types of students who struggle with learning to write. Erica stated that she had a large group of struggling writers and, also, a large group of students identified as learning disabled who struggle with writing. Many of the learning disabled students in her classroom have difficulty writing complete sentences and developing their writing. She also explained that her English Language Learners struggle with writing. She commented, “They don’t have language. They hear the language here for a very short time every day and it’s not enough to give them what they need to express themselves verbally, never mind on the written page.” Susan and Nancy agreed that their English Language Learners need a lot of support in learning to write. Nancy attributed the writing difficulties of her English Language Learners to the home environment. She stated:

I get all the ELL students. I find that although they are amazing children, their lack of experiences is narrower. They have less to draw from. One of the biggest, biggest problems I see today is broken families. Children are often with one parent and on one
day another parent. They’re exposed to two households but not much in each household that they can draw from. I usually try to stay within, at least while I’m going through this process, topics from school, such as longer recess, lunches, things that I know they know.

Teachers explained that writing is a struggle for many students, even those who may be higher achieving. Beth stated that, “Some of the higher writers still struggle also with trying to make their own writing better. Even my top students this year have areas where they struggle in and work on, on a daily, weekly, monthly basis, throughout the whole year.” She explained that one of the reasons for this is that some students are better at writing in one genre than they are in others so they might need more support depending on the writing unit being taught. She also discussed her higher readers and stated, “I think the higher readers that you have, technically aren’t supposed to struggle, but some of those kids struggle too with the most basic skills. I almost think writing is a talent and some kids will get it, and some kids won’t.” Susan explained that even her highest students need direction and constant support to revise, edit, and work through the writing process. She provided an example of a higher achieving student who needs support. She stated, “I have to help her condense, be more concise, pick out what's most important, understanding that you don't get every piece of information that you read or if you're writing a narrative piece that you're not writing a Harry Potter novel.” Erica remarked that writing is challenging for many writers:

It’s just writing, I think, is difficult for everybody. I have a degree in writing and I can tell you that I suffer still with anything that I have to write. Even the best students have trouble generating ideas in writing, even the strongest students will have trouble selecting their topic and developing it. Still at this point it’s so developmental, you can look at the kids and the kids still want a laundry list, still want to write a dusk-till-dawn piece.
Nancy attributed students' struggles with writing to their development. She stated, “I also believe that writing is hard. There's no formula for it. It's developmental. A lot of children at this age aren't ready.”

**Struggling writers need additional instructional support.** Teachers explained that struggling writers need additional support in order to make progress with their writing achievement. One teacher described conferencing as a way to offer struggling writers additional support. Beth explained that when her class is working on a piece of writing her struggling writers need to be targeted first. She stated:

I’ll take my struggling writers that I know of and conference with them first right from the start. Right from their plan to their graphic organizer, if they’re using an organizer, to their opening, right through to it, to try to get them going, before I’ll go to my other kids. I try to conference with the whole class but they kind of get targeted first.

She further explained her struggling writers need more frequent teacher check-ins because they may still be in need of support. She commented:

A lot of them will say, ‘I got this’ and I will check in with them more and they might not have it. I find my strugglers in here, they might get one piece of writing really good, like dialogue, but then their whole piece becomes a dialogue. Or they might know storyline very well but then their storyline is going on and on and on, and there’s not a tie-together for their storyline.

The need to provide additional support to struggling writers was also evident in teachers’ descriptions of their small group instruction. Nancy, Erica, and Susan all reported that they provide support for struggling writers through small group instruction that is based on their individual needs. Nancy provided an example when she described that a group of students in her
class had needed support in developing their topic so she sat with them to help them brainstorm ideas. Erica explained that she often has to pull a small group of students aside to work on basic skills or for additional teaching related to the mini-lesson that was presented during whole group teaching. She stated:

> Often times to be honest when I do bring them back, it’s to talk about something as basic as sentence structure or combining sentences. So while everyone else is kind of moving on after the mini-lesson and jumping into their work I’ll bring them back and start to work on them for another 5 or 10 minutes as a small group on how we combine sentences or how we look for weak verbs and try to make them more interesting.

Susan explained that she provides small group instruction for students in the class that she has identified as not being successful with a particular skill, such as dialogue. When discussing small group instruction she stated, “That's so key. That way you're touching upon what that student needs specifically. Typically lots of times it's the same kids, but that’s okay. That’s what they need. Then the other ones, I let them fly off and we do a conference.”

Teachers feel that struggling writers need support that involves breaking down the skills and strategies they are teaching into manageable steps. Erica described how she might teach a short lesson to the whole class and then meet with a small group of students who need to have the skill broken down more in order to understand it. She provided an example related to teaching figurative language. She explained:

> I try to do a bunch of different things. So if it’s figurative language I’ll try to structure a lesson where we’re working with synonyms. We’re working with building, okay, here’s the word gross. How many different ways can we say that, and it’s like a word wheel type of activity or I will have them bring their notebooks back. We keep vocabulary
notebooks, so that the kids can write more language down for working on similes. If we’re working on just using strong verbs I’ll just try to help them keep a list of verbs. Susan explained how she breaks down the task of writing research reports, which enables struggling writers to work through the process one step at a time. She described the benefit of this instruction for struggling writers when she stated:

I’ve had a lot of kids, even struggling ones, go ‘oh.’ Then when they're done, they're like, ‘oh this is going to be easy to write.’ Yes, exactly. It's in your own words so it's very small. They don't always see the big picture in the beginning, but the little small steps. Hopefully they will get that for when they go to the middle school. That'll be important I think.

Nancy also described how she brings struggling writers through the writing process in steps and gave an example of how she does this during the planning stage by helping them brainstorm ideas, take notes, and organize their thoughts. She stated:

I don’t ever tell a struggling writer, oh my god, ‘this is the writing process,’ because to them it’s huge. Rather the other children will have notes and they can go off and begin, but those struggling writers, they don’t have the notes ahead of time. We go one, very small step at a time so they don’t get inundated with all the material at once.

**Struggling writers may not apply and independently use skills they are taught.**

Teachers expressed concerns about the ability of struggling writers to apply and independently use what they are taught about writing. Erica discussed the inconsistencies she observes with her struggling writers’ progress because of their ability to apply what they have learned. She stated:

The improvements are small. So, I might see more varied sentences, occasionally. It’s never like, okay we work this out in October and November, this is a skill we really have
to be focusing on, and I can see the pay off in December and January. There are lapses, some days they can apply skills better than others.

Beth explained that her struggling writers’ difficulties in applying what they have learned are evident when students are asked to write in a different genre than previously taught. She stated, “There’s certain things you can teach them and they come so far working with one genre, and then you give them a cold write in the next one, even the most basic of things that you taught them, they don’t apply to the next write.”

Susan explained that struggling writers need support through conferencing because they are not able to write independently. She stated, “If you never sit with a child and point out some things or talk about things, I don’t feel like you’re going to get anywhere. They’re not going to do it on their own.” Erica expressed concerns about the students she supports through small group instruction because many of them continue to struggle with the task. When describing her struggling writers, she stated, “Usually those are the kids who go back and really have a hard time taking what you’ve done and now she wants me to write something, it’s still a struggle for them, it’s hard, and their pieces are always shorter and always reflective of what’s going on.” Nancy felt that her struggling writers can be successful with support, but are not always able to do the same type of work on their own. She further expressed that this presents a challenge in her instruction when she stated:

I think when I feel worse is when they go off and they can’t do it by themselves. That to me is a great area of concern and one that I professionally work on daily. Sometimes I feel so aggravated and say, ‘Darn it, what could I have done or what could have I said so that A, B or C went back to their seats and could do it independently?’ Of course there’s
a lot of repetition and reiterating, but I almost wish I had been so much more effective that they could go off and do it on their own.

Both Nancy and Beth expressed concerns about the ability of struggling writers to use what they learned through an on-demand writing unit. Throughout the unit students were involved in reviewing qualities of writing and learning how to write to a prompt in preparation for the long composition that fourth graders are asked to write as part of the state assessment. The teachers were concerned that students may not remember what they were taught about writing or be able to use the writing techniques without their support.

Sub-question #2: What instructional practices do these teachers implement to support struggling writers and scaffold their learning?

The second sub-question was related to the instructional practices that teachers provide in order to support and scaffold the learning of struggling writers. Four themes emerged from a review of data from teacher interviews, observations, and lesson plans. Table 3 presents the themes that were identified and the following section further discusses each of the themes.

Table 3

Themes Identified for Sub-question 2

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teachers engage students in learning the writing process</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Teachers implement a writers’ workshop model with varying approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Teachers implement some aspects of an explicit instruction approach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Teachers provide supports in the form of tools and language</td>
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**Teachers engage students in learning the writing process.** Through the data collected from there is evidence that teachers provide instruction in the stages of the writing process. Many comments made by teachers referred to the fact that they involve their students in planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Susan commented that she provides her struggling writers, as well as other writers, with support through conferencing so that they are able to revise and edit and work through the stages of the writing process. Beth, Erica, and Nancy referred to their instruction of the planning stage of the process. Their comments also indicated that they provide instruction to support struggling writers with this process. Beth noted that she needed to provide her struggling writers with a lot of support during the planning stage, through conferencing, in order to get them started with their writing. There was evidence that Erica involves her students in instruction in planning when she noted that she has to provide her struggling writers with support to think of ideas and develop their topic. Nancy discussed how she supports struggling writers in the planning stage of the writing process and provided an example of how she helps these students organize their ideas. She stated:

I tell them, ‘Now, we’re going to begin to organize your paragraphs but you don’t have to worry about that.’ I might make a web that has their big ideas. Say they’re writing about the best birthday ever and then make one web with the main idea like the gifts. Every child loves to talk about that, the gifts. Then everything they tell me that has to do with gifts, I put it on that web or underneath that web. Before you know it, they’ve begun to construct paragraphs just by talking and they don’t realize it. I find that that really gets all frustration out and they go back. Again, we cut them out. ‘Here’s one. Go try it. Here’s another, go try it. Now, you’re only going to talk about the food. Now you’re only going to talk about the gifts.’
Beth and Nancy also discussed their instruction related to the revising process. Beth stated that her struggling writers are supported with revision through activities that involve students in highlighting qualities that they have in their writing pieces, discussing what they need to add to their piece, and getting positive feedback from peers. Nancy discussed her mini-lessons as a way that struggling writers are supported in learning about the writing process during writers’ workshop. She described a lesson on revision, in which she teaches students to remove things they don’t need in their writing, and lessons for drafting, such as how to embellish and enhance their topic.

Susan provided an example of how instruction during a research report unit helps students work through the steps in the writing process so they are able to complete research and organize their notes in order to be successful with drafting their reports. She described how she begins this process by having students write notes on sheets of paper that she refers to as “note fact cards.” Students write about facts from the sources they are using to collect information in individual spaces on the sheets. She further described the next part of the process when she stated:

When that’s all done, then we talk about organizing. I say look at all your facts and decide what categories do you have. We talk about nonfiction text, headings and titles and things like that. What would be an overarching title and would you have some headings? Those would be your categories. Once the categories are defined, we color code them. Each category is a different color. We go back to the research and we look at those magnifying glasses and we read the note fact card. We ask them to color code matching the topic. That’s how we get them to understand how to pull out a variety of different facts from a lot of different sources that might go together under one heading.
During observations teachers provided students with opportunities to engage in various stages of the writing process, and their lesson plans indicated that the content of their teaching was focused on understanding the process. Each teacher was observed to be teaching a lesson that focused on either the drafting or revising process. For example, Erica’s lessons, focused on the drafting process, were intended to teach students about how to craft an introduction to their research reports. During the first observation, Erica reminded students that they had gone through the planning process by collecting notes and that it was time for them to start thinking about drafting their reports. During the second observation Erica continued to focus on teaching students to craft introductions, but students were allowed to work at their own pace so the stage of the process students were working in varied throughout the class. Some students were just beginning to draft their introductions, others were revising their introductions with teacher support, and other students were told they could peer edit if they were at that stage in the process. Erica’s lesson plans also indicated that she taught lessons on using transitions, which would help students with drafting the body of their research reports.

Both, Beth and Nancy taught lessons focused on stages of the writing process as part of the fourth grade on-demand writing unit. Both teachers discussed qualities of writing that students should work on including in their writing while drafting. During the first observation, Beth discussed what it meant to “explode the moment,” a strategy for elaborating on a specific moment in a story, and told students they were to practice this technique while writing to a prompt she gave them. During the second observation, Beth asked students to include adjectives in their drafts. She also discussed strategies for writing a beginning when she noticed that students were having difficulty with this. During Nancy’s first observation she reviewed qualities students should include when they’re drafting in two different genres, narrative and
argument writing. Her lesson during the second observation focused on revision. Nancy reviewed the qualities of writing students should look for when revising and provided students time to revise their own work. A review of Beth and Nancy’s lessons plans indicated that they taught other qualities of writing that students should incorporate when drafting their writing and provided them with time to practice these in the context of writing to a prompt.

As part of Susan’s fifth grade unit on informational writing, in which students were writing research reports, she taught a lesson on revision. Susan had explained in her interview that students had previously worked on researching, organizing their notes, and writing drafts of their reports. In the observed lesson, Susan taught students the difference between editing and revising. Susan explained to the class that she often found that students confused the two processes and said to them, “Everyone tends to clump them together, but they’re actually very different.” After explaining each of the processes, Susan provided students time to read each other’s writing and write suggestions for how their partners could revise.

**Teachers implement a writers’ workshop model with varying approaches.** The interview and observation data indicated that teachers take on a process approach to teaching writing through the writers’ workshop model but they have varying approaches. In their interviews teachers discussed their instruction as it related to various components of the model, which include a mini-lesson, writing and conferencing, and sharing. Although teachers referred to these components, they did not always implement all of them during the lessons in which they were observed.

All teachers noted during interviews that they taught mini-lessons within their writing instruction. When teachers mentioned what was taught in their mini-lessons, the examples were related to writing techniques and aspects of the writing process. Nancy, for example, stated:
This week we’ve done embellishing or enhancement. Then today, we’re doing like pulling out the weeds. Yesterday we took one topic and we said, ‘What are some other areas, what are some other sentences?’ We did that through the mini-lesson so that the other children have a chance to help the struggling writers so they’re always getting direction. Other children love to do that because they have a lot to talk about. Again, they have their little note clipboards where they take notes and then they’re given the choice. Which of these do you want to put in? If you want to put them in, how would you put them?

During teacher observations all teachers presented a form of a mini-lesson to their whole class. The length of the mini-lessons ranged from about fifteen to twenty minutes. During the mini-lesson each teacher was observed to be providing direct instruction related to something she wanted students to do within their writing. In the fourth grade classrooms, Beth reviewed a technique called “explode the moment” and Nancy discussed writing qualities that should be included when writing to a prompt. In fifth grade, Erica taught how to craft introductions and Susan taught the difference between revising and editing.

All teachers were observed to provide students with writing time after the mini-lesson. During this time students worked on writing and in most classes they practiced the technique they were taught during the mini-lesson. After Beth reviewed “explode the moment” students were given a prompt to practice this technique. Although in both lessons she taught students were all working on writing to a prompt, Beth explained in the interview that struggling writers benefit from being allowed to work at their own pace during the writing time. She commented:

I think because in this classroom I’m allowing the kids to be at different levels, even though I still do a whole class lesson, we’re constantly reviewing what you need in your
piece, and for those struggling writers, they can be constantly working on something. I don’t know how to explain it. Some are almost to the end of their writing, where some are still in the beginning of their writing, and that’s okay to be there. It’s not a charge forward type of thing.

In Nancy’s class part of the writing time involved reading prompts and deciding on the genre of each after she discussed how to read a prompt and find key words. Later in the lesson, students were given time to choose a prompt and do a quickwrite. In Erica’s class, after she taught how to craft an introduction she encouraged students to begin doing this if they were ready. During the writing time, students either began writing introductions or worked on other stages of the process, such as researching or organizing notes, as they needed. After Susan explained what students should look for when revising and editing in her mini-lesson, students spent the writing time reading a partner’s writing and writing suggestions for revision.

The amount of time that students were provided with for the writing portion of the lesson varied among the teachers. In the fourth grade classroom students were provided with fifteen to twenty minutes to write. Nancy’s lesson plans indicated that the entire writing block is scheduled daily for fifty-five minutes. Beth’s lesson plans indicated that the entire writing block is scheduled for either forty-five or fifty-five minutes daily. During Beth’s observed lessons, the writing session began later than scheduled because the previous math lesson took longer to finish. In the fifth grade classrooms, students had from thirty to forty minutes to write. Erica explained that the fifth grade schedule, which is developed by school administration, includes a writing block that is broken up into parts over the course of a day. The daily writing block is scheduled into a thirty-minute block of time before lunch, fifteen minutes in the middle of the day, and ten minutes at the end of the day. Sometimes fifth grade teachers adjust the schedule to
provide students with a sustained amount of work time, as they did on the days they were observed, but their regular scheduled writing time is broken up over the course of the day. Teachers’ lessons also provided evidence that fifth grade teachers don’t always have an uninterrupted daily time in which to teach writing. Susan’s lessons plans indicated that writing isn’t always taught for a consistent amount of time daily.

During interviews all teachers discussed the conferencing they provide to their students and expressed that it was a way in which they provided support to their struggling writers. Teachers also explained that conferencing was a way to target the specific needs of students. When Beth was asked why conferencing was successful she stated:

I really have no idea. I think trying to pinpoint just one thing maybe that they can work on when they leave. Like if they’re going to redo their opening because their opening isn’t really hooking the reader, then maybe just focusing on that one thing before they move forward. Instead of being all over the place with the conference, just kind of targeting one item for the strugglers.

When discussing her struggling writers, Erica also explained:

I always try to keep the focus narrow and get them through the process, get them through from beginning to end, so they typically will conference with me two or three times over a piece and a piece can take two or three weeks in this class.

Teachers either stated that they conferenced with their students either individually or in small groups. Susan explained that she meets with small groups if they don’t understand what was taught in the mini-lesson. In explaining her work with these small groups she stated:

We go over it. What do we look at? Typically, I like them to pull their writing in with it because something that’s cold on the board or something I hand out usually has no
meaning, so something they’ve already started to write. Then we take a look at how we might structure it better.

Nancy also stated that she meets with small groups often to provide them support in the areas they struggle with, such as coming up with ideas.

Although all teachers discussed the conferencing that they provide students, this component was not referred to in most teachers’ lesson plans and did not always occur within the lessons observed. During the first lesson that was observed, Nancy did not conference with students. During the writing time she walked around the room and made a few comments to students related to their writing. When she noticed a few students were writing to the prompt as if it were a question, she reminded them that they were to tell a story in their writing. During the second observation, Nancy met with a few students individually. She read their writing and either asked for clarification or provided positive comments. These students had finished their drafts and weren’t involved with any writing or revising during or after the conferencing. When Beth was observed during her lessons she did not provide students with any individual or small group conferencing. She didn't sit with students to discuss their writing, but she did walk around the room and provide brief suggestions to students as she read their work. For example, she made comments to students, such as, “if you have a moment with the mask, explode that part, what would you do with the mask on,” “think about what would happen if you became that person, think about your senses, becoming someone else will also have certain consequences, think about that, that’s part of it, too”, and “less dialogue.” During the first observation, Beth noticed that some students were not using the technique she reviewed in the mini-lesson so she addressed it with the entire class. She explained to them that she didn't want them to write a beginning, she wanted them to “jump right into the middle of the story.” She sat with one
student during the first observation to clarify a part of his writing that was confusing and to prompt him to fix it. When Susan was observed during the first lesson, students were involved in writing suggestions for their partners. Although she didn't provide formal individual or small group conferencing related to students writing, Susan walked around the room, stopped to read what students were writing, and provided feedback for partners who were working together. She mostly gave them brief suggestions to help them be more specific in their suggestions. She said to one pair of students, “You can’t just say I think you should write a different ending. You have to be specific. What is your suggestion for how to make the ending better?” She said to another pair of students, “If you’re telling him not to write the word ‘soil’ too much, can you give him a suggestion about what he should do instead?” During the second observation when students were involved in writing summaries, Susan walked around the room and took a few minutes to comment on and discuss the work of individual students. She talked to some students as she stood next to them and sat down next to other students. She talked to students who were confused about the task in order to help clarify for them what main idea meant. She also prompted some students to write down details, gave students suggestions as to how to find the details, and directed students to reread certain paragraphs to find the main idea or details.

In Erica’s classroom, individual or small group conferencing occurred throughout the time in which students were writing. This was the only classroom in which formal small group instruction occurred. The individual conferencing was different from what occurred in the other classrooms since students were reading and discussing their work with the teacher for a ten to fifteen minute duration. Also, during this conferencing, students revised their work, were supported with a task, or were given direction for the next step in their writing. During conferences, Erica worked with students based on their needs and her instruction for individual
students varied depending on the support they needed. Erica called students to meet with her at a
table in the back of the room when she was conferencing with them and she often began by
asking students where they were in the process of writing. She helped some groups of students
to organize their research notes by discussing what categories of information they had. She
helped one student who hadn’t collected many research notes by questioning her about her topic
and helped her decide on just one question to research. When students were revising their
introductions she worked with students on an individual basis to read what they had written,
discuss it, provide feedback, and give them direction as to what to do next. When supporting one
student, she questioned him about his topic, scribed notes for him, and rewrote and reordered the
notes so that the student could then use them to write an introduction.

Most of the teachers also noted sharing as something that occurs in their writing
instruction in their interviews, but it was not observed in all classrooms. Beth, who described
sharing as a benefit to struggling writers stated:

Seeing it from their peers is huge, so we try to share. And I have a crew in here, as
always, that is not willing to share at all, but I might stop and see someone who’s been
struggling and say, ‘I know you don’t want to share but can I share it?’ I’ve had students
say, ‘I let so and so read my work.’ So that’s good because they might feel nervous about
sharing it, but they’ll let one of their friends share their piece.

Nancy also discussed that she has students share during the mini-lesson so that the class can see
how they used the writing technique taught in the previous lesson. Beth had a few students in
her class share during both observations and Nancy had two students share during the second
observation. In Beth’s classroom, after students shared she told them a strength within their
writing and an idea for how the writing could be improved. After the students shared in Nancy’s
classroom she invited the other students to give positive comments. She prompted them with questions, such as, “How did he excite us?” There was not a formal time for sharing in either of the fifth grade classrooms. Erica did have one student share her introduction during one of the mini-lessons she taught. She had also commented during the interview that providing the students with time to share does have a benefit for struggling writers. She stated:

Then we always got a final draft and then we try to share. We try to have the readers sharing, and then, like I said, that to me is super important because these kids, it’s like pulling teeth to get them to the end, and yeah, just about anyone wants to sit in a chair and share is fine because they will read the piece with such a level of enthusiasm that when you’re sitting down with them conferencing doesn’t come out to you, but when they sit down and read it somehow seems a lot more cohesive and you can see the kids are interested and they kind of get excited, the others get excited and I think that’s what fills us into the next piece.

**Teachers implement some aspects of an explicit instruction approach.** Teachers described varying strategies when asked about the explicit instruction they provide to struggling writers. There was evidence of teachers’ use of explicit instruction in the explanations of writing techniques and process that they provided for their students. Teachers also spoke about the importance of models and also sometimes included a model in their lessons so students had an example of what they were being asked to do. Although models were provided in some lessons, teachers did not engage in any of their own modeling, which would involve demonstrating how to approach and complete a task.

When specifically asked about how they provide explicit instruction for their struggling writers, some teachers referred to instructional practices that aligned to an explicit instruction
approach while others referred to instructional practices that did not. Both fifth grade teachers described modeling, an instructional practice related to explicit instruction. Susan specifically discussed the need to model in order to provide explicit instruction in how to use graphic organizers. In addition to modeling, Erica described frequent opportunities for students to practice as an instructional practice she uses to provide explicit instruction. The instructional practices the fourth grade teachers referred to when asked about their explicit instruction were not those that are common to the explicit instruction approach. Nancy discussed sharing and Beth discussed the opportunity students have to work at different levels. They did refer to the use of models in their instructional practice although they didn’t specifically state this as a practice for making their instruction explicit.

The use of a model or exemplar piece of writing that provides students with an example of good writing or the technique being taught was a common instructional practice that teachers felt was necessary to help struggling writers know what is expected of them. Susan felt this was the most successful practice she implemented to support struggling writers. Beth and Nancy discussed the importance of providing students with exemplars written by other students so they feel that what they are working toward is achievable. Erica spoke about the use of models when she stated:

Quite honestly the struggling writers, I can’t see taking that extra intervention that I do with them out of that, they need to see it. I try to do a lot of modeling with them. I try to give them examples of what the work should look like or like I said if we’re working on combining sentences we’re looking at models. We’re writing them on the white board and we’re thinking about it so that they have some focus.
During lessons, most teachers provided students with examples of writing, as models, but didn’t do their own modeling, or demonstrating, of how to complete a task. Erica provided students with models by reading excerpts from nonfiction picture books. When Susan was teaching a lesson on writing summaries she displayed a model of a completed graphic organizer and a summary on the interactive whiteboard. Beth read her class a student exemplar and involved the class in discussing the use of the writing techniques she wanted them to use in their writing. Nancy did not provide models or any modeling in the lessons observed, but she stated that she had done modeling of one of the processes she was explaining to students in a previous lesson. She explained that this involved modeling how she would read through her own piece of writing, check for certain writing qualities, and revise to make her writing better.

Teachers provided explicit instruction in techniques and strategies they wanted their students to use through explanations and discussion. When discussing “explode the moment,” Beth explained the term and involved students in sharing their ideas. She wrote notes to help the understand on the interactive whiteboard, such as, “lots of details about one event” or “five senses.” In one of her lessons, Nancy explained how to use key words in a prompt to determine the genre and created a chart with key words and writing qualities for each genre. She involved students in the discussion by asking them to name key words and asking them about writing qualities with questions, such as, “Which kind of writing would you put a personal story into?” In another lesson, Nancy reviewed qualities of writing the students should be looking for when revising. As she talked about each one she asked students to elaborate on what each meant and to provide examples. In one of Susan’s lessons she referred to charts with acronyms related to editing and revising and explained each of these processes. Her explanations included information about how students should engage in the process, such as when she stated, “You
have to be an analyzer, a little bit of a detective about your writing. You need to evaluate your writing. Does it make sense in that order or do you need to move them around?” In another lesson, Susan explained the steps for writing summaries and the meaning of terms she was using. She gave students a handout with notes about the steps and also presented it on the interactive whiteboard. Susan explained, “And how to get to summarizing. We need to first start with the main idea” and she further explained that students should include details, the facts from the passage, and write in their own words. In Erica’s first lesson on crafting introductions, she explained what various authors had done in the introductions she shared as models. She asked students to provide their thoughts as well. In her second lesson, she used an interactive whiteboard to present additional information, which she further explained, such as, “Introductions explain what a piece will be about,” “A well-written introduction helps the reader know what to really pay attention to as they read,” and “It’s setting up the reader to be an expert on the topic”.

After teachers’ explanations, teachers usually transitioned students directly to independent practice. After Beth’s lesson on a writing technique, she told her class, “Ready, we’re going to explode a moment” and then gave them a prompt to write about. During one of Nancy’s lessons, after the mini-lesson in which she reviewed the qualities of writing students should look for when revising, she gave them directions to revise the pieces of writing they had been working on. After Erica’s instruction on crafting introductions, students were given directions to work on their writing and begin crafting their introductions if they were ready. After Susan’s explanation of writing a summary, students were asked to write their own summaries. Students were not provided with the opportunity to try out the skill being taught in a shared format before being asked to practice independently.
**Teachers provide supports in the form of tools and language.** Teachers either discussed the use of tools as a support for students learning to write or students were observed to be using them during the lessons observed. Tools that teachers noted they use to help struggling writers understand writing procedures and support them in the process of writing included graphic organizers, checklists, sentence starters, or paragraph frames. Erica stated that her students who are significantly below grade level benefit the most from tools such as sentence and paragraph frames because, as she stated:

They don’t have the knowledge, the skills to really structure a sentence or a paragraph. If you can get them to think about, okay you want to write about a time or your favorite holiday, you can kind of come up with those generic frames that let them plug in the information. You can kind of tweak it with them. It takes the anxiety down at the end. They have a piece that they read it and you read it with them. They understand it’s structured, it’s got complete sentences and can work from there.

Nancy explained that she provides students with checklists so they know what to include in a piece of writing. For example, if students are writing a persuasive piece they should check for things such as a main idea, three reasons, and an argument for each reason. She stated that this is beneficial for her struggling writers because:

It’s just like someone who has hurt a leg and you give them a cane or something to brace their walking, it’s going to help. I feel like, not that this is a brace, but it does serve as such because then they have some ideas that they can draw from as they go. It’s very hard to say, ‘Okay. This is the writing process.’ Not every child can do that. I find that with a checklist, it frees them up of worry, ‘What have I remembered? What have I forgotten?’ Again, they have that under their arm. That’s a tool for them.
Susan also commented that struggling writers benefit from graphic organizers as long as it’s the right tool and students are provided with instruction. She stated:

I find graphic organizers sometimes can be overwhelming because they don't know how to use it. That has to be very explicitly taught. You have to make sure that you're picking out the right one for the right skill or else if you say to a child, let's draw a story map, I find that those are too scattered for some of the kids that are struggling. That doesn’t work well. Something more sequenced, steps, that kind of thing.

The use of tools in some teachers’ classroom was evident during the observations and in lesson plans. When Beth was presenting a mini-lesson she discussed how students should include details about their five senses and reminded students to use the sensory starters they had been given. Nancy’s lesson plans also included a handout for students with a list of sensory starters. This list had examples of ways students could start their sentences when writing about what they heard, saw, smelled, felt, and tasted. Some of the sentence starters included, “I took a deep breath and smelled…,” “I couldn’t help but notice…,” and, “As I listened I could hear…”

In Erica’s classroom the students were using note fact cards to write research notes, which were then cut out, categorized, and glued onto separate sheets of heavy paper, which were labeled with the category. The note card sheets provided a tool, which allowed the students to understand the process of collecting research notes and organizing similar information. Susan, whose students also wrote research reports explained that she used the same tool. Another tool that was observed was the use of acronyms to understand the revising and editing process. Susan displayed the two acronyms on chart paper and explained what each term in the acronym meant. The acronyms, which she referred to as “cups” and “arms” served as mnemonic devices to help students understand and remember knowledge related to the two processes she was explaining.
In addition to these tools, teachers also involved students in talk and dialogue to help them understand and engage in the writing process. Teachers used language related to the writing process and explained the language to students. During observations, all teachers elaborated on the vocabulary they were using to describe writing and the writing process. Beth further explained, “explode the moment,” Susan explained each of the terms related to revision and editing, and Nancy explained the qualities of writing she wanted students to look for when revising. In one of Erica’s lessons she stated that writers answer questions when writing an introduction, such as, “How can I draw a reader in right from the start,” “What do I want to teach readers at the beginning of my paper,” and “How do I give the reader an overview of my topic” and explained what each of these meant. Teachers often prompted and questioned students as part of their explanations and discussions in order to help them retrieve their knowledge. During Susan’s instruction on summary writing she asked students to tell what they knew about vocabulary she was using. For example, she asked students about the word, “synthesize” and after students gave their ideas, she repeated the words of a student and said, “it means putting it all together.” Nancy questioned students in order to get them to provide examples of the writing qualities she discussed in her lesson. For example, she asked the class what it meant to use vivid verbs and a student explained that they help paint a picture and result in writing that includes varied sentences. Erica involved students in using language related to writing in her conferencing with students. She asked a group of students, “Can you tell me how you would set this up?” and involved them in a discussion of the structure of their reports and the categories they would include. Teachers also questioned students in order to provide them with the language they could use within their writing. For example, Beth involved her class in a discussion in order to improve the beginnings of their writing pieces. She asked students to tell
what they looked like when they wake up and took notes on the whiteboard. The notes included ideas, such as, “eyes wide open” and “hair a disaster.” Afterwards she encouraged students to use ideas such as the ones they had brainstormed and told the students, “For those of you who wrote, ‘one morning I woke up’ you didn’t show not tell. You can make it better if you show not tell.” When students shared their writing, teachers also prompted students to talk about the writing. For example, after a student in her class shared her introduction Erica asked, “What do you think, what would you add, any suggestions?” After students gave their ideas she further asked, “Does anyone think the introduction could have a definition of simple machines in it?”

Sub-question #3: How do these teachers structure the classroom environment to support struggling writers?

The third sub-question was related to how teachers structure the environment in ways that support struggling writers. Two themes emerged from a review of teacher interview and observation data. Table 4 presents the themes that were identified and the following section further discusses each of the themes.

Table 4

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<th>Themes Identified for Sub-question 3</th>
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<td>1. Teachers involve students in peer interactions.</td>
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**Teachers provide opportunities for peer interaction.** Through interviews teachers discussed the opportunities that struggling writers have for peer interaction within their classrooms and noted the benefits. Teachers discussed opportunities for peer interaction such as partnering students to peer edit, peer revise, and peer confer with each other. Beth spoke about
peer conferencing and explained that it is beneficial because struggling writers are receiving feedback from their peers. Susan, who provides students with opportunities to peer revise and edit, had similar thoughts about the benefits of peer feedback. She stated, “I think it’s effective because sometimes it’s easier to hear things from your peer than it is your teacher.” In addition, Beth felt that struggling writers benefit from peer conferencing because when they listen to their partners they hear what good writing should sound like. Erica, who had similar thoughts, stated:

I think allowing them to rotate among other students, students with varying abilities when it comes to writing it gives them that social piece, the sharing piece. They enjoy it, but it also exposes them to other children’s writing, maybe more sophisticated writing that they can look to as a model, and I think they enjoy that.

Nancy explained that she gives her students frequent opportunities to talk with partners. For example, during mini-lessons students may turn to a partner and discuss ideas and examples related to the topic. She stated that she believes the peer interaction in her classroom is beneficial to struggling writers because it gets them talking and using language.

Peer interaction was observed to occur in some of the lessons. Although Beth discussed opportunities for peer interaction, specifically through peer conferencing, it did not occur during the lessons observed. During one of Nancy’s lessons, students were observed to be working collaboratively with a task. She had them work with a partner to determine the genre of prompts. While students worked together, Nancy encouraged them to have discussions about the prompts, especially if they didn’t agree. When students wrote in Nancy’s classroom they did so independently. In one of Susan’s lessons she had students interact with one another when they partnered up to give each other suggestions for revision. While students were working on this task, Susan checked on their work and prompted them to be more specific in their suggestions.
Susan also commented during interviews that students often have to be supported in talking with each other and effectively helping each other revise. She stated, “Some kids are really, really great at that and other kids read it and they don’t know what to do. Then I float around and I try to engage the conversation a little bit.” During Susan’s second observation, students worked on writing summaries independently. During Erica’s first observation students had the opportunity to work with each other to collect research. She explained that students had been put in groups and each group was researching the same topic. Although Erica stated that she sometimes allows students to choose their partners for activities such as peer editing, she often pairs them strategically for other activities. She explained, “If you can pair the weaker writers with some of the stronger writers on activities, the stronger writers can support the weaker writers and yet the struggling writers can kind of still own what they are working on.” During the second observation, Erica told students they were to work quietly on their writing, but could meet with a partner to peer edit if they needed.

**Teachers foster a positive and encouraging environment.** When teachers discussed their strengths as far as teaching struggling writers they all referred to their ability to create a positive learning environment. Beth supports her struggling writers through her ability to focus on positive aspects of their writing. She commented:

I think just pointing out, even if it's just one positive in their writing, with a struggling writer. Finding that piece, that one little piece, to kind of give them the next boost. There's got to be something in their writing that they do well, even if it's just indenting. So just finding that one little piece to get them to the next level, to say, ‘okay, I've got this, I can move on to something else.’
Nancy talked about fostering a playful environment that is engaging for the students and encourages risk-taking as one of her strengths in supporting struggling writers. She commented:

I think that’s what I’m best at, is providing children with a real comfortable environment and community where they can learn. They’re never made fun of. They learn very early in the year that there is no such thing as a stupid answer. Everyone has a valid answer. It may not be the right answer but they’re never going to get always the right answer from me as well so that’s collaborative.

Erica who mentioned that she has to help students become more enthusiastic about writing, due to the fact that many start to dislike writing after being taught to write for the state long composition test in fourth grade, said, “You know I think we do a really good job at the publishing stage of making it a celebration of the kids’ writing. I really think we do a nice job with that in the class.” When Susan discussed her strength in teaching struggling writers she also referred to her ability to create enthusiasm for writing. She stated, “I think probably getting kids excited about writing. I love to tell my own real life stories. I love to be able to tell a story that has something in it that I want them to think about.”

There was also evidence in the data that most teachers also place a focus on creating positive interactions between peers. When students shared their writing in Nancy’s room she reminded them not to be negative and encouraged them to give positive criticism to one another. The encouragement of positive peer interactions is also something that Beth and Susan incorporate into their instruction. When Susan discussed the peer feedback that students provide each other she stated, “Really, there are no negatives. I don’t want a negative. I want you to ask questions or give good compliments. I liked it when you did this or I like this, but I’m not sure what you mean here.” Beth has also focused on these types of peer interactions in her classroom.
She explained that she has taught students to identify something their partner has done well and something they could add rather than just point out the negative and she found this to be beneficial. She commented:

I've gotten away from the negatives, don't point out the negative. Point out something that they might be missing, like figurative language, because nothing was highlighted for figurative language. I've heard a lot of better conversation going on this year because of it. They might catch each other and say, ‘You do realize, you've said the word fun six times in the first part of the paragraph?’ So they've even managed to turn that negative into a way to say ‘You need better word choice’ or ‘You need to work on your word choice.

In addition, during observations it was noted that teachers provided students with positive and encouraging comments related to their writing and the work they were doing. After students spent their writing time revising, Nancy commented to the class, “What an amazing difference. I’m hearing vocabulary I’ve never heard before. You’re doing beautiful work.” After students engaged in a peer revision activity, Susan told the class they had given each other good suggestions and asked if they thought they had received good suggestions. Erica encouraged her class when she told them, “Some of you are at the point where you can start drafting your reports and it’s going to be phenomenal.” Teachers were also observed to provide positive comments to individual students either when they conferred or shared with the class. Beth gave each of her students a positive comment in addition to a suggestion for their writing. One of her comments was, “He went back to the beginning and wrapped it up nicely. He ended the way he started with a bit of a twist.” Erica also gave students positive comments when she conferred with them. She made comments, such as, “You have a beautiful introduction” or “I like your conversational
tone.” When students shared in Nancy’s class she also always told them something they had done well, such as commenting on the word choice.

**Sub-question #4: What do teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers?**

The third sub-question was intended to determine what teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers. Three themes emerged from a review of teacher interview data. Table 5 presents the themes that were identified and each is discussed in the section that follows.

Table 5

*Themes Identified for Sub-question 4*

<table>
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<th>Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. There is a need for more time</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. There is a need for curriculum improvements</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. There is a need for professional development</td>
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**There is a need for more time.** The need for more time emerged as a theme as based on interview data. When expressing their concerns and discussing what struggling writers further need Beth, Erica, and Susan all brought up the issue of time. Both, Erica and Susan discussed the lack of time for teaching writing. Susan stated, “Just time. There's not enough writing time. We're so focused on math and reading and rightfully so, I get that, that there's just not enough time. We run out of time.” Erica stated:

I’m always very closely monitoring my group of struggling writers. I pull them back, but it’s hard to balance because you’ve got a short amount of time and you want to make sure that they have time to write, but you also want to make sure that you’ve given them a
little extra instruction that they could try and incorporate into their work, and it’s a balancing act. If we had the time, and here’s my other soapbox moment, writing seems to get the least amount, writing and social studies. Those are the two subjects where you feel like you’re really pressed for time and you can’t do the job that you want to do.

Erica further explained that the fifth grade writing block schedule limits the time that teachers have to spend on writing instruction. Susan explained that she doesn’t have enough time to spend the amount of time she would like conferencing with her class of twenty-four students.

Similarly, Erica stated:

If I had more time in smaller groups I think I could move the children at a better rate. I got that specific group of kids who have documented disabilities that really impair their writing ability. And then you just have your everyday kids who just really either don’t enjoy writing, really don’t have a lot of enthusiasm for writing and a lot of skill and I find that I am working with those kids, too. It becomes an overwhelming number of kids.

Both, Erica and Nancy related the issue with time to the demands placed on teachers. Erica reflected back on her teaching when she first began and stated:

Sure I had the same issue then with struggling and reluctant writers, but it was just an enjoyable experience. I am sure time kind of covers things, but I didn’t feel the stress and the overload of trying to get so much writing instruction down in such a small amount of time and in a time when you’re expected to yield miracles over the course of the school year.

Nancy commented, “T-I-M-E, time. I think today we are so rushed. I don’t mean so much. Well, the teachers are, but I’m talking more about administration. We are being told so much, ‘This month do this, this month do that.’” Nancy also explained that she would like more time to focus
on the skills in order to address the developmental needs of her students. She commented that she needs, “More time to address the children’s ability to write. Not even the genre, not even the specifics, but where these children are. Some of them are only at the beginning and we are asking them to publish in a month.”

**There is a need for curriculum improvement.** All teachers mentioned areas that needed to be improved related to the writing curriculum. Beth, Nancy, and Erica all had concerns about the district requirement that writing instruction be focused on three genres of writing, each of the genres be taught during set time frames for about a third of the year, and each student complete a published piece in the genre by the end of the instructional period. Nancy and Beth felt that the necessity of having students write a published piece by a certain deadline places too much emphasis on the end product. Nancy stated, “Everything and every genre of writing have to be mastered I feel because children have to always give us a piece that’s been published. Sometimes I would like us not have to worry about the published piece but more about the process.” Beth also explained her thoughts about how to improve this area of the curriculum when she stated:

I think to not be so concerned about the style of genre expected, because we're very pigeon holed into what we need them to do, and focus more on the skills behind it. If you want word choice to be your topic then focus on just having them write for word choice. If it's figurative language or ‘show-not-tell’ in writing or that you want them to really paint a picture for the author, or the reader, then focus on that as opposed to worry about having to have a finished narrative.

Beth further explained that students should be given more choice of the genres they are asked to write. She commented, “I have some children in here that would probably thrive on writing
narratives all year. The fiction narrative, that fairy-tale or whatever it is, if they could apply the different techniques to that, the voice to that, and just allow them to do it that way.” Erica also felt that there should be more flexibility and choice about the genres she teaches because the time frames that are set for teaching the genres interfere with her ability to teach to proficiency. She explained:

We have kids that have gotten to a certain level with narrative writing in the fall and if you had another few months you might be able to really move them. I have kids who will always be progressing towards the standards in narrative writing just because we didn’t have the extra time that they needed to get them to strengthen some of their skills and pull everything together to write a really lovely piece of writing. You’ve always got loose ends.

Susan also felt that improvements to the curriculum would strengthen students’ achievement. She expressed concerns about the lack of focus on writing and referred to the core literacy program. She stated:

Our focus here at our school has been in a different direction than that. Even StoryTown for example, doesn’t give a lot of support in those types of skills. We've been so focused on the other components of that program that I feel like the writing is not very, very strong.

She specifically mentioned the lack of explicit teaching in grammar and punctuation as a concern. One of her comments related to this was, “We’re not focused enough on it in all grades because I don’t think this is a younger grade problem. I think this is an all grade problem. I feel like that it is just not something we’re focused on here. We need to be.” Susan also commented on the lack of a writing program and thought it would be beneficial to have at least some type of
scope and sequence for teachers to follow. In addition, Susan felt that more resources for
teaching writing are needed. She mentioned the need for mentor texts, as did Erica, who also
mentioned the need for technologies to teach writing.

**There is a need for professional development.** Based on the interview data, all teachers
felt they could benefit from increasing their knowledge of teaching writing and struggling
writers. Erica explained that she’d like to increase her repertoire of skills and mini-lessons for
teaching writing. She followed this up by saying:

I think it would be wonderful to get some professional development around the main
issues and causes of struggling writers and in very specific research based strategies for
working with kids. If there’s anyone out there who can show us what a year of writing,
what the common core should look like at this grade level that would be wonderful.

Beth explained that she would benefit from learning more about writing instruction, since year
after year she is trying new things to see what works in her writing instruction. Susan also
commented that she likes to try new ideas and keep up with the best teaching practices. She
stated:

I think the biggest thing would be to see what's new and up and coming. What are people
thinking that are in that field right now? What is the best ways to do these things? I'm
changing that every year. Every year that changes for me. I think I find a better way or a
different way and I try things out. I'm always learning and I think that’s important. For
me, it's just that in itself really, being able to learn about new things, new ideas, to move
kids along.

Nancy, who referenced the difficulty she sees with struggling writers being able to apply skills
independently, commented:
Anyone that’s out there that’s done that and is perhaps better in that transfer, I would be willing to listen to that. I mean we all need to learn. I don’t believe in ever knowing everything. There’s always an area we can enhance upon. That’s a great area of interest to me. I can perform the magic collaboratively. Don’t get me wrong, a lot of them transfer it but not a hundred percent. I would love to touch everyone a hundred percent.”

Teachers suggested various ways that they could gain more professional knowledge. Although she doesn’t believe that the budget would allow for this to happen, Beth felt that she would benefit from observing a writing coach teach an entire writing unit. She stated, “I’ve had the opportunity to have a person in here work with me during personal narratives, and I think that we got a better product from it, and that was because I was working with an experienced writing person.” Susan also noted that she would benefit from watching another person teach writing lessons. Nancy noted she’d be interested in attending a workshop or webinar to gain knowledge of how to better help struggling writers. Susan also felt collaboration with colleagues would be beneficial. She stated:

I think across the board, talking to people in my own grade level and then talking to people in other grade levels. We need to bring that here. I think that needs to come here for all of us. I think we all feel that way. It's not just a one person or a grade level issue. What are the best ways and really give us time to work in that.

Erica further remarked that professional development should be a focus:

If we had the resources and the time I think that the school systems needs to pick a focus for a little bit and if they want us to become the great writing teachers that we can become I think that the focus needs to be there, the professional development needs to be there, the resources needs to be there within the classroom and outside the classroom.
Sub-question #5: How is teachers’ instruction for struggling writers perceived by administrators?

This sub-question was intended to gain the administrators’ perspective concerning teachers’ instruction for struggling writers. Through administrator interviews four themes emerged. Table 6 presents the themes, which are discussed in the following section.

Table 6

Themes Identified for Sub-question 5

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<td>1. Teachers implement writers’ workshop, but the model could be strengthened.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Teachers support struggling writers through tools and exemplars.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Teachers’ instruction for struggling writers could be supported through more professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. There are concerns with the curriculum that present challenges for instruction.</td>
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**Teachers implement writers’ workshop, but the model could be strengthened.** Both administrators spoke to the fact that they observe teachers to be implementing a writers’ workshop model in their classrooms. They both explained that teachers provide a mini-lesson for the whole class and also confer with individual children. The principal explained that there is modeling that occurs within the mini-lesson and she described examples of lessons focused on the writing process. The assistant principal noted, “What I’ve observed is that the kids who are struggling will usually be retaught during that conferencing time or work with someone, specifically, on their areas of need. If we have students on ed. plans, they certainly are getting more targeted instruction.” Both administrators commented that the approach to teaching writing has improved, but there are still areas to be strengthened. The principal referred to the yearlong focus of a few years earlier in which teachers were provided professional development
to implement the writers’ workshop model and stated, “Our program is better than what it was, but it’s not where it should be.” She also commented, “They have given the teachers so many new initiatives every year that I feel as though they still have to strengthen their writing instruction.” The assistant principal stated, “I think the workshop model can be effective. I don’t know that we’re there yet with running it effectively or running it, I hate to use the word, but with fidelity.”

The principal explained that teachers could improve on providing specific feedback to struggling writers:

I feel as though they keep saying they model; well, I can show you how to pitch a ball. I can tell you how to do it, but unless you are doing it and I am giving you feedback and saying push off with your back foot, look at where you’re aiming that, push through with your arm, and if I don’t give you that specific feedback, it’s not going to get better. So I do feel as though it’s an area that we need to strengthen.

She felt that time can impact the teachers’ ability to provide feedback. She explained:

Then they’ll conference with them, but I think they need to be more specific in their feedback. I think they need to guide them a little bit more. I know that one of their struggles they feel is how do you get around to everyone in order to conference with them. It’s tough when you have so many children and only one person, and how do you do that feedback.”

The assistant principal noted that teachers do provide a lot of feedback to students concerning what they are doing well, but feels it is an area that teachers can continue working on. She also felt that the ability to provide feedback through conferencing presents a challenge to teachers. She stated, “That balance of the conferencing schedule, I think, is something that
everyone still struggles with and wanting to give your due diligence and due time to your
struggling writers, but also checking in with those kids who still need your feedback.” She
further spoke about conferencing being a challenge for teachers in their instruction and, similar
to the principal, felt it was related to time. She stated:

I think that the conferencing schedule and, really, checking in with the kids on a regular
basis, knowing where they are in their writing, just everything that goes along with
conferencing and time and being one person for twenty-four, twenty-five kids and
making sure that you have a good handle on what they’re all doing.

The principal explained that one way to address the time factor is for teachers to provide written
feedback. She has seen teachers who provide written feedback that includes a goal for the
student and she felt this is effective since students know what they need to work on.

In addition to providing more feedback, the principal felt that teachers should include
more small group instruction to target the needs of struggling writers. She noted that there is a
lot of whole group teaching that occurs during writing instruction. When discussing an area that
needs to be strengthened, she stated:

I think the more specific feedback we can give to the children and also grouping the
children together so that they can look at what the students need, the errors. Oh, gee, I
need to work on combining sentences with these two children. Gee, I need to work with
these few children over here on commas or more elaboration. It can’t just be always
whole group modeling.

The assistant principal also felt this was an area that needed to be strengthened. She explained:

I think we do a really good job of working in small groups in reading and math and
targeting what kids’ weaknesses are and I don’t know that we necessarily ever get to that
point with our struggling writers, where if I had a small group of kids who were really struggling with leads, why shouldn’t I just take a small group of kids and work on leads or if I have a small group of kids who have no paragraphing and have no structure, why can’t I take a small group of kids and just work on that?

**Teachers support struggling writers through tools and exemplars.** Both administrators felt that teachers’ use of tools and exemplars is effective for teaching struggling writers. The assistant principal commented on the use of graphic organizers, stating that it’s not a strategy used exclusively for struggling writers, but it is effective for them. She stated:

They do a lot of graphic organizers and tools like that to help almost provide a structure to the kids’ writing. I know that we try to get away from the more prescriptive five by fives or structured writing, but I think for some of our struggling writers, those things are still necessary and they’re still provided to give them the structure that they need to be successful before they can more independently interject their voice. It’s more of what they need to have and helps them to have what they need to have in their writing before they can start working on what they want to have.

In addition, she commented that teachers provide a lot of visuals in the environment, such as charts related to writing, which provide a reference for struggling writers. The principal also commented that teachers provided their struggling writers with tools such as graphic organizers, sentence starters, and lists of transition words. She provided an example of a teacher who she observed using a graphic organizer to teach students how to write in the argument/opinion genre. She thought this was helpful because students were being taught to provide different types of reasons in their piece and how to organize their ideas. Although she felt the use of these graphic organizers was a helpful support for students in organizing their writing, she also explained that
the use of many different types of organizers may be confusing and there is a need to have consistency among the grades.

The assistant principal also explained that the use of exemplars is a commonly used strategy to support all writers, including struggling writers. She stated that teachers provide students with examples of what good writing should look like. She also explained that teachers provide not-so-good exemplars so students can contrast the difference. The principal also felt that teachers’ use of exemplars supports the learning of struggling writers. She stated, “We’ve been trying to have them show exemplars so the children know what is a good writing piece, what does it look like. I think that it is helpful for them to show that exemplar, having it posted, and taking them through the process.” She also provided an example of a lesson in which a teacher showed students an essay and discussed the structure of it. She further explained:

And then they moved it back to the graphic organizer of what is your goal, what are the reasons, and what are the details to support it. I thought that was helpful for the students, and then after they did that, they were going to try and use that graphic organizer to write their own goal, their own argument opinion piece.”

**Teachers’ instruction for struggling writers could be supported through more professional development.**

When discussing how to support teachers in their instruction of struggling writers, both administrators mentioned teacher professional development. They felt that teachers could benefit from professional development related to improving their writing instruction. The assistant principal stated, “I think providing professional development and helping people stay up to date on new things, best practices.” The principal, who referred to previous professional development focused on the implementation of writers’ workshop throughout the district, also
stated, “I think that we need to give more professional development to teachers. I think it needs to be a continuous professional development that they started a few years ago.” The assistant principal further explained that she felt that teachers would benefit from peer observations in each others’ classrooms. She explained that she would like teachers to observe other teachers who are effective with teaching writers’ workshop or various components of it. She stated:

I think if you can, the more peer observations that you can do of things that are going well and maybe not so well and you can hear if from your peers. I don’t think it should just be from your administrator, your coach, of from whatever. The more people you can have collaborating and talking goes back to that whole, two is better than one, five is better than two.

The principal also explained that more professional development could be provided in the future since she is considering including a goal for writing instruction in the school improvement plan. In addition she explained that throughout the year she has focused professional development on reading and math, but writing is an area that teachers also need professional development. When reflecting on improvements that have been made in math instruction, she stated:

Our scores are looking good, both MCAS and Star, on Envision, so is that something we don’t have to worry about right now and do we focus more on writing as a school? Because if you talk to the different teachers at different grade levels, they will tell you that they feel as though they do need more professional development, there needs to be more of a school-wide or district-wide emphasis.

**There are concerns with the curriculum that present challenges for instruction.** In addition to the lack of professional development administrators also commented on some curriculum concerns that impact writing instruction. The principal stated there is a need for a,
“continuum of what are the skills that we should teach for the different genres in each grade level.” She explained that she receives complaints from teachers that students don’t know how to write in certain genres even though they were taught that genre the year before. She further commented that instruction should be built on what students already know rather than teaching something totally new. She stated, “We need to continue to strengthen and build upon it every year and not giving them new things, new things. But I mean you can expand upon it, but without throwing everything out and making them start over. Because I just wonder if we’re confusing the kids.” The assistant principal had similar concerns about the curriculum. She felt that instruction should build upon what students already know so that instruction is not the same for students year after year. She explained:

I think we need to do a better job of having that vertical alignment and that cohesiveness from grade to grade or the expectation that this is what these kids should be able to do when they come to you and don’t go back to reteach it. We don’t teach addition in every grade. We build upon what kids already know. I don’t know that we do the best job of doing that in writing and I think sometimes that exacerbates our struggles because we keep teaching the things that we’re already doing and then we never get to the things that we’re not doing so well.

Sub-question #6: How are these teachers supported by administrators as they instruct struggling writers?

This sub-question was intended to gain further understanding of administrators’ perspectives of teachers’ instruction for struggling writers by determining the support they provide. A review of the administrator interviews provided findings related to this question and an overall theme emerged. According to the data, administrators provide some support for
teachers in their writing instruction, but there are also barriers impacting their ability to provide effective support. This theme is discussed in the following section.

**Administrators provide support, but barriers to doing so exist.** During the interviews the principal spoke to a greater degree about the supports that are provided to teachers in their instruction of struggling writers. She reported a variety of ways that related to resources, the analysis of data, and personnel assistance. The principal explained that she has provided mentor texts, picture books that teachers can use to provide models of writing, for teachers to use in their instruction. Since teachers were often using the same texts, the principal has provided more mentor texts to avoid the repetition across grade levels. She also explained that in fourth grade, she provided time for the teachers to administer a mock test, a practice version of the state long composition the students have to take, and time for them to grade it. She explained that teachers then use this data to determine areas that need to be addressed in their writing instruction as they prepare them for the state long composition test. Additionally, the principal noted that she has provided extra personnel for some classrooms. The literacy coach and the reading specialist have both spent time in fourth grade classrooms in order to model writing lessons for teachers and confer with students during writing instruction. Both of these support persons were placed in classrooms determined by the principal as needing additional support. The principal explained that the instructional modeling that the support personnel provided was beneficial. She stated:

So now I’ve noticed (teacher’s name) will bring the class over to the rug and will talk about different things, like, ‘oh gee you know, you said this and that but how can we make it better?’ So, I think that’s a way of showing them and hopefully they can feel more comfortable to lead things on their own.
Although the principal explained this support that she feels she provides struggling writers, the assistant principal discussed barriers that exist in providing supports specifically for struggling writers. She explained that teachers were provided with professional development concerning writing instruction in the past, but she feels that the focus has not been on how to target struggling students. She stated, “We’ve given professional development on how to run the workshop model. We’ve given professional development on how to write an effective unit, but lacking from that is what specific strategies, what specific things can we do for struggling students.” The principal explained that there are some barriers to her ability to engage teachers in professional development. She bought a resource for teachers to use in their lesson planning and had hoped to incorporate some of the work of learning to use this resource into teachers’ common planning meetings, but is not able to direct these meetings due to district mandates. She also felt that the school and district has involved teachers in a number of other initiatives for the past few years so she hasn’t wanted to overload teachers with writing professional development.

In addition, a few others barriers to their ability to provide teachers support were noted by administrators. The assistant principal discussed the lack of interventions that exist for struggling writers. She explained that interventions can be provided in reading and math more easily than in writing. She stated, “I don’t know that there’s as many cut and dry interventions. You might have an LLI kit for reading, or you might have a re-teaching group that you can go back and do a specific thing for math.” She further stated, “There’s so many things that go into writing that I think it’s hard to tease out what the intervention is.” Also, the principal stated that the feedback she provides teachers through her formal observations can be a support in their instruction, but that this includes barriers as well. She explained that writing lessons aren’t observed as often because the focus of evaluations has been comprehension lessons.
Additionally, administrators also do mini walk-throughs of teachers’ classrooms, but this also presents a challenge because they aren’t always able to see enough of the lesson to provide useful feedback.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings of this research were based on data compiled from interviews, observations, and a review of teacher lesson plans. The four teachers who participated provided insight into how struggling elementary writers are supported as they reflected on their instruction and opened their classrooms to observations. The two administrators provided further insight into these teachers’ support and instruction of struggling writers. In summary, the data gathered throughout this study indicated that:

1. Teachers perceive writing to be a challenge for many students, especially struggling writers, who they identify as having a range of needs and requiring additional classroom support in order to help them be successful with writing tasks. Providing the instruction struggling writers need to become independent presents a challenge for teachers.

2. Teachers provide struggling writers with instruction focused on the writing process. Teachers have knowledge of the components of the writers’ workshop model, as evidenced through their interview responses, but observations indicated that they implement some components more consistently than others. Additionally, administrators perceive writers’ workshop to be a beneficial model, but feel teachers could strengthen this instructional practice through increased teacher feedback and more small group instruction.

3. Teachers provide some aspects of explicit teaching in their instruction for struggling writers. The explanation of writing qualities and strategies and the use of models as exemplars are instructional practices emphasized within teachers’ instruction.
4. Teachers provide supports for struggling writers in their instruction, through the use of tools, such as graphic organizers, language related to writing and the writing process, exemplars of writing, and peer interaction. In addition, administrators perceive teachers’ support for struggling writers, through the use of graphic organizers and exemplars, to be strengths in their writing instruction.

5. Both teachers and administrators believed that instruction for struggling writers could be strengthened through a variety of factors. These factors include the need for increased time for writing instruction, more professional development, and improvements to the writing curriculum.

Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

This chapter will review the problem of practice, methodology, and major findings. The findings of this study will also be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature review. Additional sections will include a discussion of implications for educational practice, limitations, conclusion, future research and final reflections.

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Writing instruction begins in the elementary grades and is supported by teachers who have knowledge of effective practices for teaching writing. According to a national assessment of students’ writing achievement, which measured the abilities of students in grades eight and twelve to communicate effectively through writing, only twenty-four percent scored at the proficient level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Based on these results, the majority of students do not have adequate writing skills. Students who do not learn to write well will face academic challenges in the classroom since writing is a tool that is useful in learning
content knowledge and is necessary for demonstrating learning (Graham, et al., 2007). Writing is a skill that is valued by employers and helpful in seeking jobs and promotions, making it a necessary skill beyond a students’ academic career (National Commission on Writing, 2004). For these reasons students must learn to become proficient writers. If students can write well, they will be more likely to have success in their academic careers and in the work setting.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have been adopted by the majority of states, outline a set of standards for English Language Arts (National Governors Association for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Within these standards there is a strong focus on ensuring that students become proficient in a variety of writing genres. The expectation within these standards, which applies to all students, is that they must be able to write for a variety of purposes, including to persuade, inform, and narrate experiences and they must also use writing to analyze and build knowledge of texts and content area learning (Graham, & Harris, 2013). In addition, many schools are being held accountable for ensuring that students move towards proficiency in a number of subject areas including writing. Educators must ensure that all students make gains in their writing achievement to meet the demands of these standards and accountability measures.

Elementary teachers have the responsibility of providing writing instruction that helps all writers, including those who struggle, move towards proficiency, but typically, writing has not been a major curriculum focus within classrooms and instruction in this area has been weak (Applebee, & Langer, 2011; Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, & Olinghouse, 2014). Research has also shown that teachers are challenged by how to best meet the needs of struggling writers (Ganske, et al., 2003). Even though they received some professional development related to writing instruction, the teachers within the school where this study was conducted have also
expressed concerns about how to meet the needs of struggling writers. This study was designed to gain insight concerning the process teachers engage in as they support struggling writers by exploring the following central question:

- How do grade four and five teachers at a public elementary school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers as they learn to write through a process approach?

The following sub-questions were developed to clarify the central question:

- What are these teachers’ perceptions of struggling writers’ difficulties and how to support them in learning to write?
- What instructional practices do these teachers implement to support struggling writers and scaffold their learning?
- How do these teachers structure the classroom environment to support struggling writers?
- What do teachers perceive needs to occur to further support struggling writers?
- How is teachers’ instruction for struggling writers perceived by administrators?
- How are these teachers supported by administrators as they instruct struggling writers?

**Review of the Methodology**

To address the research questions a descriptive case study was designed and conducted with four teachers and two administrators at an elementary school in Massachusetts. This site was selected based on the researcher’s accessibility. Data were collected through teacher and administrator interviews, teacher observations and a review of teacher lesson plans. A forty-five minute interview was conducted with each participant. Teachers were observed in their classrooms during writing lessons twice over the course of a two-week period. The duration of
the lessons observed covered the entire writing block, varying in time from forty-five minutes to just over an hour. The lesson plans that teachers provided covered a two-week period. The data collected were coded and analyzed to determine common themes.

Summary of Major Findings

Based on a careful analysis of data from interviews, observations, and lesson plan documents several themes emerged in this study. The following is a summary of the most salient themes.

1. Struggling writers have a variety of difficulties with learning to write, require additional instructional support, and present an instructional challenge.

   The data collected in this study indicated that teachers perceive struggling writers to have a variety of difficulties with learning to write that must be addressed through their instruction. Teachers reported to have many different types of struggling writers who often have concerns in more than one area. Struggling writers have difficulties with the basics of writing, such as sentence construction, mechanics, and grammar. A limited vocabulary also presents a difficulty for struggling writers because they don’t have the complex word choice necessary to elaborate. Additionally, struggling writers have difficulties with the writing process. Teachers reported struggling writers to have difficulties with skills such as planning, organizing, and developing a topic. Teachers also felt that writing is a challenging skill for young students to learn and they see many students, including their higher ability students, struggle with various aspects of writing.

   Teachers also reported they need to provide struggling writers additional instructional support to address the various difficulties they have. More frequent conferencing and check-ins and small group instruction were stated as necessary in supporting struggling writers’ needs.
Furthermore, teachers explained the need to break down skills and strategies into more manageable steps for their struggling writers. Parts of the writing process, such as planning, or even drafting an entire piece have to be taught one step at a time through the use of small group instruction or with the help of graphic organizers. The instruction of struggling writers presents a challenge for teachers. Even with the additional support, teachers are concerned with students’ abilities to independently use the skills they are taught. Often struggling writers still have difficulty with writing tasks after they are provided with instructional support.

2. **Teachers provide instruction in the writing process, but implement some components of the writers’ workshop model more consistently than others.** One of the findings in this study indicated that teachers provide instruction related to the writing process. This was evident through the teacher interviews, as well as classroom observations. They also support struggling writers so they are able to be more successful with the process of writing. When teachers were observed they were either teaching lessons related to the drafting or the revising process. Lessons focused on drafting involved students in learning about qualities of writing that students should include in their compositions.

Teachers taught the writing process through a writers’ workshop model, but implementation of components varied. The components of this model include a mini-lesson, writing and conferencing, and sharing. Teachers referred to these components and described benefits of these components during interviews, but not all components were observed to occur during lessons. All teachers provided a mini-lesson and time for writing, but the conferencing and sharing components did not always occur. Conferencing with individual or small groups was not a consistent instructional practice across classrooms. Some teachers briefly checked in with students, but only one teacher incorporated formal individual and small group conferencing
into her lessons. All teachers had reported conferencing as a useful strategy for supporting struggling writers.

Administrator’s perceptions of teachers’ instruction for struggling writers supports the finding that teachers implement a varying approach to the writers’ workshop. Administrators felt that teachers were implementing a writers’ workshop in their classrooms but there was a need to strengthen the implementation of this instructional practice. They feel that instruction could be improved if teachers provide more specific feedback during conferencing and increase the use of small group instruction that targets specific students’ needs.

3. **Teachers implement some explicit teaching strategies.** Teachers discussed the use of and provided explicit instruction within their lessons. Teachers focused much of their instruction on the explanation of writing techniques. During lessons teachers explained aspects of the writing process or writing qualities in various ways. Teachers often involved the students in discussion through questioning and prompting. During interviews, teachers also discussed the importance of the use of models and this was observed to occur in classrooms. Teachers usually transitioned students directly to writing time, which involved independent practice, after the direct instruction was provided.

4. **Teachers provide a variety of supports for struggling writers.** Teachers discussed their use of supports that benefit struggling writers. They discussed the use of tools such as graphic organizers, sentence starters, and paragraphs frames. One teacher explained that one of these tools, a checklist, supports her struggling writers because it helps them remember what they need to include in their writing. Teachers also discussed the necessity of providing students with exemplars of writing. They felt that this enabled struggling writers to see what they are working towards accomplishing. In addition, teachers discussed the opportunities that struggling writers
have for peer interaction. This included peer editing, peer revising, peer conferencing, and time to talk to partners about writing. Teachers discussed these opportunities to be beneficial to struggling writers. They felt that struggling writers are able to get feedback from their peers. Also, struggling writers benefit from hearing other students’ writing. Administrators reported on the use of tools, such as graphic organizers, and the use of writing exemplars as beneficial in teachers’ instruction of struggling writers.

During observations, teachers involved students in talk and dialogue about writing and the writing process. They exposed students to language within discussions to help students understand and engage in the writing process. They explained and elaborated on language and vocabulary related to writing and the writing process. They also involved students in their discussions of writing through questioning and prompting. Students were asked to elaborate and provide examples, helping them to retrieve their own knowledge related to the topic of the lesson.

5. Instruction for struggling writers could be strengthened. The findings in this study revealed that teachers and administrators feel there are several factors that could play a role in strengthening writing instruction for struggling writers. All teachers discussed time as a barrier to their abilities to effectively support struggling writers. Teachers reported that more time to teach writing would enable them to increase the amount of time they spend conferencing or teaching small groups. One teacher also noted that developmentally students have different needs and more time is necessary to effectively teach the skills that individual students need to learn. Two teachers also explained that there are many demands placed on them as far as their instruction, but they don’t have enough time to adequately address them. During interviews, administrators acknowledged that teachers find time to be a constraining factor in their writing
instruction. They explained that teachers are challenged with determining how to fit conferencing into the time they have to teach writing.

Both teachers and administrators also discussed professional development as a need in strengthening writing instruction for struggling writers. Teachers all stated that they would benefit from increasing their knowledge of teaching writing and struggling writers. They suggested various ways this could be done including workshops, webinars, modeling provided by an instructional coach, and time to collaborate with colleagues. One administrator also suggested peer observations as a way to provide teachers with professional development. The principal explained that the lack of professional development has been due to a focus on other curriculum areas.

In addition, teachers and administrators reported that there are curriculum areas that need to be improved in order to strengthen writing instruction for struggling writers. This related to district requirements that genres be taught at certain times of the year and that all students complete a finished piece by a certain date. They felt that their instruction becomes too focused on the end product rather than on the process and the skills that students need. Some teachers also felt that being allowed to provide their students choice in the genres they write would benefit struggling writers. One teacher felt that they lack of a writing program provides a need for an increased focus on writing and feels a scope and sequence would be beneficial. Administrators also discussed the need for curriculum improvements. They suggested the creation of a continuum of skills, vertically aligned between grade levels, as a way to strengthen writing instruction.

**Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by sociocultural theory. This theory provided a framework for
understanding the context in which struggling writers learn to write in order to gain insight into how teachers support these students through their instruction. The theory, which has implications for educational practices, provided a lens through which to analyze teachers’ perceptions of struggling writers and the instructional practices they implement.

Sociocultural theory, which grew from the work of Vygotsky, stresses the importance of social interaction in children’s cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, learning is a socially and culturally based phenomenon and occurs through interactions with others in the child’s environment (Vygotsky, 1978). A child develops through participation in activities with a more competent other, in which they gain knowledge and advance to a higher level of cognitive functioning (Miller, 2011). The process of development doesn’t occur solely within the child, but must be guided through support of others within the child’s learning environment. From this perspective, children must be involved in interaction and collaboration for learning to occur, placing emphasis on the role of the teacher in guiding and supporting students’ learning.

This idea that learning occurs through social interaction and a more competent other, such as a teacher, who guides development and learning, was evident in the findings of this study. Teachers’ perceptions of instruction for struggling writers indicated that they felt these students needed additional support in order to make progress with learning to write. Teachers described various ways that they provide support to their struggle writers, such as conferencing, small group instruction, and reteaching of lessons. They also reported that they must break down tasks into more manageable steps so struggling writers can be successful. Teachers described teaching practices, which involved providing struggling writers additional support and instruction that walks them through the writing process. In addition, teachers were observed to provide instruction related to the writing process and qualities of writing through mini-lessons.
This supports the notion that in order for learning to occur, those with knowledge must share it with others (Miller, 2011). In order to improve writing skills, writers need instruction in those skills, not just simply time to practice writing (Gibson, 2008; Englert, 1992). The teacher provides this instruction in various ways as she interacts with students, providing them instruction concerning the skills they will then be expected to practice. Teachers in this study were aware of the need to provide instruction for struggling writers, as was evidenced through their perception of how to support them and through observations of their teaching.

The importance of social interaction for struggling writers’ development was also evident through the finding that teachers provide opportunities for peer interaction. The interactions that guide and support students’ learning include those that take place with peers. A more capable peer can provide the collaboration that is necessary to move a child to a higher level of understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, teachers discussed the opportunities that struggling writers have to interact with their peers and also noted that these opportunities were beneficial. Teachers reported that they provide struggling writers with opportunities to work through parts of the writing process with each other and talk about writing with one another. Peer interaction, such as peer revision and peer conferencing provide students with the opportunity to receive feedback concerning their writing. Teachers felt that struggling writers benefit from peer feedback because they are often more receptive to the thoughts of their peers than the teacher and they also are able to hear their peers’ writing, which provides an example of good writing. One teacher also felt that struggling writers benefit from peer interaction because of the opportunity for them to talk and use language. Although, students were not engaged in peer interactions during all of the lessons observed, all teachers reported that they include these opportunities during their writing instruction.
Children’s development is also supported within social interactions through the use of tools that help them internalize behavior that is necessary for a higher level of cognitive functioning (Vygotsky, 1978). Procedural facilitators, such as mnemonics, cue cards, and graphic organizers are a type of tool that teachers can use to scaffold students’ writing performance (Englert, et al., 2006). These tools support the cognitive process of writing by enabling writers to work through a task that they are not yet capable of achieving independently. Evidence in this study indicated that teachers placed value on the use of tools, which serve as procedural facilitators, in order to support struggling writers. Teachers either discussed the use of tools, such as graphic organizers, sentence starters, or checklists, or were observed using them during lessons. Although teachers often provided these tools for all of their students, some were more specifically used for struggling writers. These tools were noted to be beneficial since they provide struggling writers with a way to more easily structure their writing and, also, relieve them of some of the cognitive activity that is necessary to work through the writing process. Administrators also believed teachers’ use of these tools to be beneficial to struggling writers.

Teachers’ use of language also indicated that they were supporting struggling writers through the use of tools. Language has been identified as the most important psychological tool because it helps children direct thinking, make sense of their world, and internalize knowledge (Miller, 2011). Teachers used the language of the writing process and involved students in discussions related to what they were learning about writing. They often questioned students and asked them to provide examples related to vocabulary they were using. This served to help students learn the language that represents the processes and thinking that writers should engage in when writing. Another critical aspect of teachers’ use of language as a tool to help students direct their thinking and internalize the cognitive behaviors necessary for writing is the need to
model the talk and thinking of writing (Englert, et al., 1992). When teachers model their use of writing strategies through a “think aloud” they make the writing process visible to students (Englert, et al., 1991). When students are further engaged in collaborative dialogue and encouraged to use similar self-talk as that which was modeled they learn to internalize the language and behaviors necessary for the writing process. The evidence in this study indicated that teachers’ language use was limited in that it did not extend to this instructional practice. Although one teacher noted that she had previously modeled the use of the revision process, teachers were not observed to model any of their self-talk as they engaged in the writing process. Struggling writers have been shown to be able to internalize the self-talk they are taught (Englert, et al., 1991) so scaffolding struggling writers through modeling may be an instructional strategy these teachers could have implemented to further support their writing performance.

Modeling, by making the self-talk of writing visible, is a form of scaffolding that is important to a central concept of sociocultural theory, that of the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky (1978) described the zone of proximal development as the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what the child can achieve through assistance of a more competent other. In order for learning to occur a student participates in collaborative activities with others, a teacher or peers, which allow him to accomplish what he could not yet do independently. Through this collaboration, a child’s cognitive behavior moves from being other-regulated to self-regulated (Miller, 2011). The goal of instruction matched to a child’s zone of proximal development is to support the child in attaining independence with the task. A suggested principle of writing instruction that aligns teaching to the zone of proximal development is that of sociocognitive apprenticeships (Englert, et al., 2006). Within this approach teachers scaffold student learning through prompting and modeling and involve them
in instruction that gradually release more responsibility to the learner (Englert, 1992). In addition to modeling, students are provided with guided practice, in which they have support in accomplishing a task, before they are expected to be independent.

Although teachers provided instruction for struggling writers and described the need to provide them with various types of support, teachers’ instruction was limited in the use of scaffolding through methods that create sociocognitive apprenticeships, and the guided practice students require in order to become independent. Although teachers discussed the need to provide small group instruction this was not a frequent practice during observations. Providing students with opportunities for guided practice, during mini-lessons or through small group instruction, in which teachers model, prompt, and assist students in writing could support them in internalizing the behaviors necessary for accomplishing writing tasks. Teachers in this study discussed their concerns about students’ abilities to independently apply what they are taught. Increasing the amount of guidance offered to students through collaborative practice, which includes prompting and modeling of strategies, may further support struggling writers in internalizing the cognitive processes necessary for writing leading to their ability to apply skills and strategies on their own.

Through the lens of sociocultural theory, the analysis of teachers’ instruction for struggling writers indicates that they utilize some instructional practices to support these students’ writing achievement. Teachers are aware of the need to provide instruction and they implement instructional practices to help struggling writers be successful, such as the use of tools to mediate learning and opportunities for peer interaction. Analyzing instruction through sociocultural theory also indicated that there are areas of instruction that can be improved upon in order to further support struggling writers. The incorporation of modeling and “thinking
aloud” about how to use writing strategies and increasing struggling writers’ involvement in guided practice can support them in internalizing knowledge of the writing process and gradually taking on more responsibility to become independent writers. The following section will discuss the findings of this study in relation to the literature review.

**Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

This section presents the findings as they relate to the literature review presented in chapter two. The literature review in this study presented three bodies of research concerning: a.) the writing process, b.) the process approach to writing instruction, and c.) struggling writers. The findings will be discussed in relation to each of these bodies of literature.

**The writing process.** Researchers, such as Emig (1971) and Graves (1975) examined the process that students engaged in while writing providing knowledge of the components of the process. Hayes and Flower (1980) further examined the processes of writing revealing that it’s a cognitively demanding task involving the coordination of mental strategies and problem solving. Teachers indicated an understanding of the writing process as the findings in the study showed they taught the processes of writing, such as planning, drafting, and revising. Teachers’ discussion of the support they need to provide struggling writers in learning the writing process also indicated their awareness that writing is a complex and difficult task for their students. Teachers’ comments that they observe many of their students, even those who are higher achieving, to struggle with various aspects of writing further indicates that the writing process is complex and places many demands on elementary writers.

Although teachers indicated an understanding of the components of the writing process, there was little evidence of their awareness of specific cognitive strategies that writers need to coordinate the cognitive demands associated with writing. Less skilled writers often have an
inability to plan and coordinate ideas and instead use a knowledge telling strategy in which they simply write everything they know about a topic (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987) and lack the ability to self-regulate their writing performance (Zimmerman & Risemberg, 1997). Teachers involved students in planning strategies, such as brainstorming, and revising, but this was the extent of instruction focused on strategies to support the cognitive demands of writing. Other strategies that would help students self-regulate their writing performance, such as self-monitoring, self-verbalizing, self-assessing, and goal setting, were not discussed by teachers during interviews or observed to be taught. If teachers lack the knowledge of specific strategies that students need to engage in the components of the writing process, struggling writers will be challenged with the complexity of the task of writing.

Writing is a cognitive process, but also a social process due to its dependence on the social context. The writing process occurs within a social setting and is a communicative act, which is influenced by others including the audience for one’s writing and those with whom the writer collaborates (Hayes, 2004). Collaboration with others shapes a writer’s knowledge and development. Teachers in this study provided some opportunities for peers to interact with one another, indicating their awareness of the influence of the social aspect of learning to write. Teachers in the study provided students with opportunities to peer edit, peer revise, and peer confer. Through these activities students are involved in talking with each other and providing each other feedback. Teachers believed these peer opportunities to influence the writing performance of struggling writers. Another indication that teachers addressed the social aspect of learning to write was their mention of the share component of the writers’ workshop. Although all teachers were not observed to provide their students with time to share their writing with their peers, they discussed this practice as beneficial for struggling writers. One teacher
explained that through the sharing component of writers’ workshop struggling writers are hearing models of good writing and another explained that students develop enthusiasm for their writing. Collaborative writing in which students write texts side-by-side in groups or pairs or write one text together has been shown to positively contribute to students writing development (Schult, 1997), but there was not evidence that these types of activities frequently occurred in teachers’ classrooms. In one classroom, students were paired to conduct research for the reports they writing, but other collaborative writing activities were not discussed by teachers or observed.

**The process approach to writing instruction.** The process approach to writing instruction, which emphasizes the teaching of the processes that writers use when composing, is implemented in some form by the majority of teachers (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). The findings of this study indicated that teachers engage students in learning the writing process. All teachers referred to instruction that addressed the components of the writing process. They also discussed how they support struggling writers through parts of the process such as planning. When teachers were observed they taught either a lesson relating to the drafting or revising components of the writing process. Teachers in this study were aware of the components of the writing process and recognized the need to address these through instruction. The process approach to writing instruction has been identified as an effective practice for teaching writing (Graham, et al., 2012; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Sandmel, 2011). The emphasis that teachers place on teaching the process approach to writing suggests that their instruction includes a foundation that serves to support struggling writers’ development.

A common framework for implementing the process approach, the writers’ workshop model, is based on three routines that are incorporated into daily lessons: 1.) mini-lesson, 2.)
writing and conferencing, and 3.) sharing. Each of these components is intended to provide instruction that benefits students’ writing development. Although all teachers had knowledge of the components of the writers’ workshop model they were observed to implement this model in varying ways. Although all teachers were observed to present a mini-lesson during lessons, they varied the structure of the writers’ workshop. Time for writing varied amongst the lessons and the conferencing and sharing components were not always present. Only one teacher provided conferencing that involved a focused conversation with. Although some teachers referred to their small group instruction during the interviews, only one teacher was observed to work with students in a small group format. The variability in the teaching of the writers’ workshop model may influence the quality of the instruction students are receiving. Administrators’ perception of the implementation of writers’ workshop indicated a need to increase its effectiveness. They specifically referred to the need for increased student feedback and the use of small group instruction to meet students’ individual needs. This finding aligns with research that indicates that there is variability in how teachers implement the process approach (Troia, et al., 2011). The variability that exists in implementing the process approach influences the quality and effectiveness of writing instruction (Troia, et al., 2009). Teachers need knowledge of the most effective practices for teaching the process approach and the implementation of these practices should be evident within their teaching. The findings in this study indicate that teachers are familiar with the components of the writers’ workshop, but this doesn’t always translate to classroom practice. The support of struggling writers could be enhanced through a stronger emphasis on consistent implementation of the components of the process approach.

Best practices for teaching a process approach have been identified and involve creating a positive environment, focusing on helping students understand the writing process, teaching
cognitive strategies for engaging in the process, providing opportunities for peer collaboration, and building students’ knowledge of language (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007). Teachers discussed their efforts to create a positive environment as a strength in their teaching of struggling writers. Teachers also encouraged peers to provide each other with positive feedback to further support a positive environment. During lessons teachers discussed vocabulary associated with the writing process indicating their efforts to enhance students’ language. Teachers provided opportunities for peers to interact through peer revising and conferencing but there wasn’t evidence of more extensive collaborative activities. Although teachers involved students in learning the writing process there was limited evidence of explicit teaching of strategies for engaging in this process. For example, explicit teaching of self-regulation strategies to monitor writing, which has been shown to be an effective practice in teaching the process approach (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2007) weren’t discussed or observed in teachers’ lessons. Teachers recognize some of the best practices identified for teaching the process approach and implement them, but the use of other best practices was not as evident in the data collected in this study. In order to address the needs of struggling writers, teachers should consider additional instructional practices, including extending peer collaboration and a focus on the explicit teaching of self-regulation strategies.

The process approach has been shown to be more effective in improving students’ writing when teachers have received professional development related to teaching this approach (Graham & Perin, 2007). Both, teachers and administrators indicated a need for professional development in order to further support struggling writers. Teachers stated that they would benefit from increasing their knowledge of how to teach writing and how to effectively address struggling writers. Administrators believed that teachers would be further supported in their
instruction for struggling writers if there were a greater focus on professional development for writing. Through this professional development teachers could be supported in learning best practices for improving their instruction through a process approach in order to increase their effectiveness in helping struggling writers become proficient.

Struggling writers. The research does not clearly define the “struggling writer” but provides an understanding of the characteristics and behaviors they face, indicating the difficulties they have with learning to write. The data in this study indicated that teachers believe struggling writers to have a range of difficulties. The written products of struggling writers have been shown to be of a lesser quality than their more skilled peers because they tend to write short sentences lacking in complexity and a varied vocabulary (Saddler, et al., 2008) and their writing is disorganized and contains many mechanical and spelling errors (Tompkins, 2002). Teachers described many of their struggling writers as having difficulties that would impact their written product, including difficulties with the basics of writing, such as sentence construction, grammar, and mechanics. Research has also indicated that struggling writers do not purposefully and effectively engage in the steps of the writing process (Graham, et al., 1995; MacArthur, et al., 1991; McCutchen, 1995; Saddler, et al., 2004). Teachers confirmed this when they described the challenges their struggling writers face in planning, organizing their ideas, and developing and elaborating on their topic. Teachers further explained that writing is a challenge in various ways for many of the students they teach.

Teachers also explained that they have to provide additional support for their struggling writers because of the difficulties they have with writing. They discussed the need to confer and check-in with them more frequently and to support them by breaking down skills into more manageable steps. Knowing the areas of difficulty that struggling writers have with writing,
such as their difficulty with the writing process, can enable teachers to provide the support they need. In addition, knowing the cause of these difficulties can also be beneficial to teachers in their instruction. Research indicates that struggling writers have difficulty engaging in the writing process because they lack metacognitive knowledge, the awareness and ability to control the strategies that will help them write effectively (Englert, et al., 1988). Teaching students strategies for engaging in the process and the knowledge needed to manage those strategies can provide a further support for struggling writers. The findings of this study did not indicate that teachers support struggling writers through explicit instruction in strategies to help them self-regulate their writing. Struggling writers have been shown to make gains in their writing performance when the process approach is supplemented with explicit instruction in strategies, specifically through the self-regulated strategy development model (Harris & Graham, 1996). Through this explicit model strategies and procedures for self-regulating the writing process are taught through a routine that involves discussion, modeling, scaffolded practice, and independent practice. Teachers’ instruction involved explanations of writing qualities, the use of models to show students what good writing looks like, and independent practice but there was not an emphasis on the modeling of how to engage in strategies or scaffolded practice. Teachers’ perception that struggling writers have great difficulty applying writing skills independently suggests the need for increased attention to explicit instruction in strategies and the routines to provide this instruction in order to help students gain the knowledge of how to engage in the writing process with less support.

The findings in this study indicated that teachers provide some instructional scaffolding for struggling writers. Scaffolded instruction, which is based on Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, is intended to provide students with the supports they need in order to achieve a task they
are not yet capable of achieving on their own (Winn, 1994). Teachers use some forms of scaffolding as evidenced through their use of tools to support struggling writers, such as graphic organizers and sentence starters. They also provided their struggling writers with some opportunities to interact with peers, specifically through peer revising and conferencing activities. Teachers and administrators also felt the use of exemplars of writing helped to support struggling writers by providing them a model and an understanding of what good writing should look like.

In addition to scaffolding techniques that teachers used within this study, the gradual release of responsibility model in which the teacher designs instruction so that the student gradually takes on more responsibility for a task can support struggling writers in becoming independent (Fisher & Frey, 2003). Writing instruction through a gradual release of responsibility would involve methods such as shared writing, collaborative writing, and guided writing, in which the teacher and students have a varying amount of responsibility, in order to prepare them to write independently. Data in this study did not provide strong evidence of the use of scaffolding through these instructional approaches. The findings indicating that teachers perceive many writers to struggle and need additional support to make progress with their writing and have concerns about the ability of struggling writers to engage in the writing process independently points to the need for increased instructional scaffolding. Teachers in this study also discussed the need for small group instruction, but this practice was only observed in one teacher’s classroom. Furthermore, administrators felt that teachers should implement more small group instruction to target the individual needs of struggling writers. Instructional approaches that align with the gradual release of responsibility model could be incorporated into small group
instruction in order to support the individual needs of struggling writers and help them to become independent writers.

The writing instruction that teachers provide can positively impact the performance of struggling writers if the instruction is of high quality (Moats, et al., 2006). Teachers and administrators in this study both felt that more professional development was necessary in order to further support struggling writers. Furthering teachers’ professional knowledge with the goal to increase the quality of instruction would help to support struggling writers. The limited amount of time spent on writing instruction has also been found to be a factor impacting students’ writing performance (Moats, et al., 2006; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Cutler & Graham, 2008). In this study, teachers also noted that they felt additional time is necessary to further support struggling writers. Teachers and administrators also reported that the writing curriculum presented barriers to their instruction for struggling writers. Teachers explained that restrictions on the genres they teach lead to a greater emphasis on the product rather than the process and impacts struggling writers’ abilities to make progress. Administrators explained a need for a strengthened curriculum that allows students to build on their writing knowledge across grade levels. The writing curriculum, reflecting the content of teachers’ instruction, can impact the quality of writing instruction. An emphasis on the quality of instruction through attention to professional development, time, and curriculum can impact the achievement of struggling writers.

**Summary of the findings in relation to the literature review.** The findings in this study revealed many connections to the literature, but there were also some limitations. Connections to the literature were evident in teachers’ understanding of the complexity of the writing process and their instruction, which engaged struggling writers in learning the writing
process. They also addressed the social aspect of writing by providing struggling writers with the opportunity to interact with their peers through peer revising and conferencing. Teachers implemented a process approach through the writers’ workshop model, but the ways in which this practice was implemented varied across classrooms. Although teachers’ implemented some best practices, revealed in the literature as effective for teaching struggling writers, there were other practices that were not evident within the findings of the study. A disconnect from the literature was apparent as the findings indicated a lack of emphasis on the teaching related to cognitive strategies and the self-regulation of writing. Teachers weren’t observed to explicitly teach the use of strategies for self-regulation and engaging in the writing process in order to enhance the effectiveness of writing process instruction. In addition, although teachers implemented strategies to scaffold instruction, there wasn’t strong evidence for the implementation of a gradual release of responsibility model. The literature concerning teachers of struggling writers points to the need for high-quality instruction. The findings of this study indicated that teachers perceive barriers to their instruction for struggling writers related to factors such as professional development and curriculum. Based on the findings of this study there are several implications for educational practice. These will be discussed in the following section.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

Based on the findings of this study there are several recommendations for educators. First, instruction of the process approach to writing should include opportunities for struggling writers to gain knowledge of strategies to control and manage the writing process. Teachers of struggling writers should have an understanding of the cognitive strategies young writers need to engage in the writing process and explicitly teach these. In addition to using language to explain
aspects of the writing process and being shown models of good writing, explicit teaching should involve the modeling of strategies to engage in the writing process. As teachers model they should extend the use of language by thinking aloud, making the process visible to students. The self-regulated strategy development model (Harris & Graham, 1996) is one model that involves the explicit teaching of strategies to provide struggling writers with the cognitive tools they need to engage in the writing process. Second, educators should ensure that the writers’ workshop model is implemented in a consistent, but flexible manner. Instruction based on the individual needs of struggling writers should be included in the writers’ workshop on a regular basis. This instruction should be flexible allowing for individual conferencing, as well as small group instruction, so that teachers can provide specific feedback and targeted instruction based on students’ needs. The instruction that is provided within these contexts should extend teachers’ use of scaffolding techniques through a gradual release of responsibility model (Fisher & Frey, 2003). Through collaborative structures with the teacher and peers, such as shared and guided writing, struggling writers should be supported in gradually taking on more responsibility for writing tasks in order to promote their independence. Third, professional development should be provided to teachers to enhance their knowledge related to teaching writing and how to effectively support struggling writers. This professional development should help teachers integrate best practices, such as the explicit teaching of strategies, within the process approach they are currently implementing. Fourth, educators need to place a focus on writing instruction. In order to make progress struggling writers need time to learn to write and to independently practice their skills. Schools should provide an adequate block of time for students to engage in daily writing lessons. The instruction that is provided should follow a comprehensive curriculum so that struggling writers are continuously building on their learning as they progress through the
grades. A comprehensive curriculum should emphasize a common language to be used to teach the writing process and a scope and sequence of skills to be taught at each grade level. This will help to ensure that struggling writers learn the skills they need to become proficient writers.

**Limitations**

Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because it was a complex issue that needed to be explored and required in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2007). There are limitations that exist in qualitative research because of the nature of the process. A purposeful sample is selected for a qualitative case study in order to understand a phenomenon in depth, but this limits the ability to generalize the findings (Merriam, 2009). The participants in this study were chosen based on a convenience sample because this is the setting to which the researcher had access. Although the nature of qualitative research impacts the generalizability of the findings, the detailed descriptions of the participants and setting can provide others insight into the context of the study.

The researcher in a qualitative study, as the primary instrument of data collection, brings biases and subjectivity that may influence the findings of the study (Merriam, 2009). Observer bias, which results from biases that influence what a researcher actually sees as happening can also create a limitation (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). The researcher can try to be as impartial as possible, but some slight bias will always exist. Attempts to minimize these biases, such as offering a clarification of assumptions, were made, but they cannot be totally eliminated. There is also the possibility that participants may have behaved in a way that they felt was desired, creating an observer effect (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). In conducting this study, the researcher was also a co-worker of the participants. The researcher’s familiarity with participants could have influenced their behavior or responses. Participants were assured that
their responses would be confidential and measures to create a relaxed interview setting were taken in order to address this issue.

Another limitation concerns the small sample size that was selected for the study. Only teachers from two grade levels, fourth and fifth, were asked to participate in this study and this study only incorporated the perspective of teachers in the upper elementary grades. Although all the teachers in fourth and fifth grade were asked to participate, only four volunteered. The findings of this study represented the perspective and experiences of only half of the teachers who could have possibly participated. Including more participants within the study could result in more variation within the sample, therefore making transfer of the findings applicable to a wider context (Merriam, 2009). For this reason the sample size remains a limitation to be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.

The amount of time that teachers were observed also presents a limitation. There was limited time that the researcher was able to devote to observations because of professional obligations within the research setting. Each teacher was only observed two times over the course of two weeks. This allowed the researcher to only see a snapshot of the writing instruction that occurs within classrooms. There is the possibility that the observations did not fully capture the extent of teachers’ instruction for struggling writers. Increased time in which to conduct observations may have yielded additional findings.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study has provided insight into how upper elementary teachers at a public school in Massachusetts support struggling elementary writers. Teaching struggling writers is a challenge for many teachers. Since writing development begins in elementary school, it is important for these teachers to have the knowledge of effective practices that will
support struggling writers in becoming proficient writers. This study provided an understanding of four upper elementary teachers’ instruction and support for struggling writers. The study revealed teachers’ understanding of struggling writers’ needs, their concerns about teaching struggling writers, and the instructional supports they provide. In addition, the study revealed what further needs to occur in order for teachers to help struggling writers be successful. This information is useful to educators who strive to increase their knowledge of effective practices and improve the instruction that is provided for struggling writers.

**Future Research**

This study added to the body of literature related to teachers’ instruction for struggling writers. The current research that exists is minimal suggesting the need for future research concerning this topic. Future research could include a larger sample of teachers in order to validate and extend the findings of this study. In addition, studies that involve more extensive observation of teachers as they instruct struggling writers could provide a greater understanding of the support they provide. Further study of the quality of specific components of teachers’ instruction, such as mini-lessons or conferencing would be beneficial. This would provide further insight into how teachers make these instructional practices effective for struggling writers. Additionally, the effectiveness of professional development concerning writing instruction could be explored to determine the impact on the quality of teachers’ instruction for struggling writers.

**Reflection**

The teaching of writing is a topic I have been passionate about throughout my teaching career. I consider writing to be a valuable and necessary skill; I use this skill in my profession, as an educator, in my work as a student earning an advanced degree, and in my personal life. I
have had to work through my own struggles with writing as I have often found myself searching for the just-right words, grappling with how to organize my thoughts, or wondering if I have used correct punctuation and grammar. Part of my passion stems from my understanding of the difficulties that writers can face and my desire to provide young students with the skills that will help them become competent writers who can effectively communicate their thoughts through writing. This study has allowed me to investigate instruction for struggling writers and gain insight into how these students can be further supported. This has been a worthwhile experience, as the findings of this study have revealed to me beneficial information that can be used to increase the quality of instruction for struggling writers.

Through this study I have also gained much knowledge about different aspects of the research process. The learning curve has felt mammoth through almost every step of the process. At the beginning of this process I struggled with narrowing down a problem of practice and developing research questions. Identifying a theoretical framework and learning how to use this theory to guide my research was challenging as well. Designing a study that would allow me to answer my research questions involved so many critical decisions that I often questioned whether I was on the right track with my methodology. Collecting and analyzing data was a time consuming process, but provided me with an understanding of how patterns in data can reveal insight concerning a problem of practice. Although an experience that presented many challenges, I have learned how to engage in research and now have first hand knowledge of just how valuable the process can be.

Throughout this study, I have also had the opportunity to work with colleagues in a different capacity than what my job normally requires. Having the opportunity to sit with teachers and hear their thoughts about the topic of this study provided me with knowledge of
teachers’ understanding of their writing instruction. Their willingness to participate in my study also revealed their commitment to teaching and their interest in supporting struggling writers. I enjoyed my time observing in their classrooms, in which I witnessed their efforts to provide quality instruction for all their students, including their struggling writers. Although through my study, I have found that there are ways to further impact the achievement of struggling writers, I believe that all the teachers who participated are committed to providing the best instruction for their students. The need for professional development that was found in this study supports the fact that there are barriers that exist in teachers’ ability to be most effective in their instruction for struggling writers. My hope is that, as educators, we can use the findings of this study to continue to improve our efforts to help struggling writers become proficient.

References


Appendix A
Letter of Permission

Dartmouth Public Schools
Office of the Superintendent
8 Bush Street
Dartmouth, Massachusetts 02748
Telephone: 508-997-3391 Fax: 508-991-4184 Website: dartmouthps.schoolfusion.us

Ana C. Riley, M.Ed.
Superintendent

Jana M. McHenry, Ed.D.
Assistant Superintendent

James A. Kiely, M.B.A.
School Business Administrator

November 27, 2013

Dear Ms. Mancione,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I grant you permission to conduct your study, concerning teachers of struggling writers in the elementary grades, within Dartmouth Public Schools. As stated in your proposal, teacher and administrator participants will be recruited on a voluntary basis. I also understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential. I confirm that I have the authority to approve the research that you are proposing to conduct in this setting.

Sincerely,

Jana M. McHenry
Assistant Superintendent

“Quality Education for All Learners”

The Dartmouth Public Schools, in partnership with parents and the community, will deliver challenging, standards-based instruction for all students that fosters academic, physical, social and emotional development. Utilizing data analysis to drive instruction, we will implement specific strategies to support every student to think critically, solve problems and become a responsible, contributing citizen. Our high school graduates will possess the required skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in their academic and vocational ambitions.
Appendix B
Recruitment Letters

Date

Dear Colleagues,

As most of you know I am a doctoral student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. I would like you to consider participating in the research study I am conducting in order to meet the requirements for my doctoral program. The purpose of my study is to examine grade four and five teachers’ understanding and support for struggling writers as they learn to write within a process approach. I am looking for teachers who instruct struggling writers. I have defined struggling writers as students who teachers perceive as having greater difficulty than their peers and who are not producing the quality of writing that is typical of their grade level. If you agree to be a participant, you will participate in an interview lasting 45-60 minutes, you and your classroom will be observed during a writing lesson two times, and your lesson plans from a two-week time period will be collected. The interview will occur in your classroom before or after school, depending on what is convenient for you. You will not receive compensation for this study other than a $10 gift card for a bookstore in exchange for the time you provided me, as the researcher.

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate and if you do decide to participate you can stop at any time. All information collected within this study will be kept confidential. Any reports or publications based on this research will use pseudonyms and will not identify you, your school, your school district, or anyone else affiliated with this study.

If you are interested or have any questions about this study, please see me or contact me by email. My email is Maucione.l@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lisa Maucione
Date

Dear Administrator,

As you know, I am a doctoral student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. I would like you to consider participating in the research study I am conducting in order to meet the requirements for my doctoral program. The purpose of my study is to examine grade four and five teachers’ understanding and support for struggling writers as they learn to write within a process approach. I will be interviewing and observing teachers who instruct struggling writers. In order to gain another perspective on my research topic, I would like to include the voice of administrators who support teachers of struggling writers. If you agree to participate in my study, you will be involved in an interview lasting 45-60 minutes. The interview will occur in your office or any other place that is convenient for you.

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. You will not receive compensation for this study. You do not have to participate and if you do decide to participate you can stop at any time. All information collected within this study will be kept confidential. Any reports or publications based on this research will use pseudonyms and will not identify you, your school, your school district, or anyone else affiliated with this study.

If you are interested or have any questions about this study, please see me or contact me by email. My email is Maucione.l@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lisa Maucione
Appendix C
Informed Consent Forms

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigator’s Name:

- Dr. Susan Gracia, Principal Investigator
- Lisa Maucione, Doctor of Education Student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University

Title of Project: Teachers of Struggling Writers in the Upper Elementary Grades

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why are you being asked to take part in this research study? You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an elementary teacher who teaches writing and in a classroom in which there are struggling writers.

Why is this research being done? The purpose of this research is to gather information about how elementary teachers understand and support struggling writers.

What will I be asked to do? If you decide to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one audio-recorded interview with the researcher. The interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes only. After participation in the interview, the researcher will observe you teaching writing in your classroom during two observation sessions. There will be a short debriefing session after each observation. You will also be asked to provide a copy of a sample of your lesson plans.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take? The interview will take place in your classroom either before or after school or at another time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes. Observations will take place in your classroom for about 45 minutes or the length of a writing lesson for a total of 2 lessons. Debriefing sessions, which will last approximately 5 minutes, will take place immediately after or at a time later in the day that is convenient for you. You will collect your daily writing lesson plans for a two-week period. If you do not have a copy, the researcher will copy them for you.
**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?** There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort anticipated.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?** There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study other than a $10 gift card to a bookstore to be given at the end of the study in compensation for the time you provide. In addition, the information learned from this study is intended to help teachers and administrators know more effective ways for supporting struggling writers.

**Who will see the information about me?** As a participant in this study, the information you provide will be confidential. Only the researcher of this study will see the information about you. In the transcripts and the report of the findings you will be given a pseudonym to protect your identity. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you, your school district, or any individual in any way. The researcher will keep the data collected for the study and will not share it with others. The audio recordings will be provided to a transcription service to be transcribed, but will be destroyed afterwards.

In some rare instances, authorized people may request to see the data collected from you and other people in this study. This is done only to ensure that the research was conducted properly. Only those authorized by Northeastern University Institutional Review Board would be permitted to see this information. No identifying information will ever be shared with anyone within the Dartmouth public schools system.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?** Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you have the right to withdraw at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to withdraw, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions or problems you can contact the person mainly responsible for this research: Lisa Maucione, Doctor of Education Student, 189 Forge Road, Westport, MA 02790, telephone: 508-813-1888, email: Maucione.l@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact the principal investigator: Dr. Susan Gracia, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington, Avenue, Boston, MA 02115, telephone: 617.373.2000, email: s.gracia@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?** If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 1135 Tremont Street, 960 Renaissance Park, Boston, MA 02120, telephone: (617) 373-4588, email: n.regina@neu.edu.
Will I be paid for my participation? There is no monetary compensation for participation in this study. You will receive a $10 gift card for a bookstore in compensation for the time you provide at the end of the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate? There is no cost to participate.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature of my involvement in this research and the potential risks. I agree to volunteer to be a participant in this study.

___________________________________________________________
Research Participant (signature)  Date

___________________________________________________________
Research Participant (printed)

___________________________________________________________
Researcher obtaining consent (signature)  Date

___________________________________________________________
Researcher obtaining consent (printed)
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigator’s Name:

- Susan Gracia, Principal Investigator
- Lisa Maucione, Doctor of Education Student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University

Title of Project:

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why are you being asked to take part in this research study? You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an administrator who supervises teachers of struggling writers.

Why is this research being done? The purpose of this research is to gather information about how elementary teachers understand and support struggling writers.

What will I be asked to do? If you decide to take part in this study you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one audio-recorded interview with the researcher. The interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes only.

Where will this take place and how much time will it take? The interview will take place in your office, or another place that is convenient for you, at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me? There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort anticipated.

Will I benefit by being in this research? There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. The information learned from this study is intended to help teachers and administrators know more effective ways for supporting struggling writers.

Who will see the information about me? As a participant in this study, the information you provide will be confidential. Only the researcher of this study will see the information about you. In the transcripts and the report of the findings you will be given a pseudonym to protect
your identity. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you, your school district, or any individual in any way. The researcher will keep the data collected for the study and will not share it with others. The audio recordings will be provided to a transcription service to be transcribed, but will be destroyed afterwards.

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Can I stop my participation in this study? Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you have the right to withdraw at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to withdraw, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

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Who can I contact about my rights as a participant? If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 1135 Tremont Street, 960 Renaissance Park, Boston, MA 02120, telephone: (617) 373-4588, email: n.regina@neu.edu.

Will I be paid for my participation? There is no monetary compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate? There is no cost to participate.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature of my involvement in this research and the potential risks. I agree to volunteer to be a participant in this study.

__________________________ __________________________ _________________________
Research Participant (signature) Date
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Appendix D
Interview Protocol:
Individual Teacher Interview Questions

Interviewer’s Name:
Interviewee’s Name: Grade:
Date:
Location of Interview:

Part I: Introduction (5-7 minutes). This part of the interview is intended to build rapport, describe the study, answer any participant questions, and to gain consent to conduct the interview and audio record it.

Introductory Protocol

As you know I am a student in a doctoral program at Northeastern University researching how teachers understand and support struggling writers. I have selected you to speak with me today because as a teacher of struggling writers you can share information about your experiences instructing those writers. This is a topic of interest to me since I believe writing is a challenging process to teach and also a challenging process for young, struggling writers to learn. Through my study, I hope to gain insight into how teachers are effective with these students as well as what they are challenged by so that I can determine ways teachers could be further supported in helping struggling writers become proficient.

Your responses are vital to my research and I want to make sure I capture everything you say. I would like to audio record our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all of your responses will be confidential. The audio recording will be sent to a transcription service in order to be transcribed, but other than that I will be the only person who has access to the audio recording. It will also be destroyed after being transcribed. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym on the transcripts and this pseudonym will be used when writing my report. To meet the human subjects requirements at Northeastern University, you must sign the form I have with me. This document essentially states that: 1.) all information provided to me will be confidential, 2.) you agree to be audio recorded 3.) your participation is voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time, and 4.) I do not intend to inflict any harm.

Do you have any questions about the interview process or the form?

I plan for this interview to last for about 45 minutes to an hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. I want to be considerate of your time so if we are beginning to run short, it may be necessary for me to interrupt you in order to move on to the next question. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part 2: Research-Focus Questions (40-50 minutes): This part of the interview is intended to obtain the participants’ perspective into how they understand struggling writers, the experiences they have had, and the instruction they provide these writers.

Primary Interview Questions
**Introductory Question:**

1.) Describe your experiences with teaching struggling writers within your classroom?

**Main Questions:**

2.) How would you define the difficulties of the struggling writer?
   Follow-up: To what do you attribute these difficulties?

3.) How does your writing instruction within writers’ workshop support struggling writers?

5.) Describe any strategies you use specifically for struggling writers to scaffold instruction of the writing process.
   Follow-up: What makes these strategies successful?

4.) How do you make the teaching of strategies for engaging in the writing process explicit for struggling writers?
   Follow-up: Which strategies most benefit these writers?

6.) What opportunities do struggling writers have for social interaction within your writers’ workshop teaching and how effective are these opportunities?

7.) What do you think you do well in supporting struggling writers and what do you have difficulty with?
   Follow-up: What makes this successful?

8.) If you could change something that would make it easier for struggling writers to learn to write, what would it be?
   Follow-up: What could make this happen?

9.) What would you like to know more about instruction for struggling writers or what could help you in your instruction of struggling writers?
   Follow-up: How could you find this out?
   Who could help you with this?
   How could you go about doing this?

**Concluding Question**

10.) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about in relation to struggling writers and instruction for these students?

**Part 3: Conclusion (2-3 minutes):** This part of the interview is intended to conclude the interview. Ask the participant if he/she has any more questions and thank him/her for participating in the interview.
Interview Protocol:  
Individual Administrator Interview Questions

Interviewer’s Name: 
Interviewee’s Name:  Position: 
Date: 
Location of Interview:

Part I: Introduction (5-7 minutes). This part of the interview is intended to build rapport, describe the study, answer any participant questions, and to gain consent to conduct the interview and audio record it.

Introductory Protocol

As you know I am a student in a doctoral program at Northeastern University researching how teachers understand and support struggling writers. I have selected you to speak with me today because you are an administrator who works with teachers of struggling writers and you can share information about your perceptions of these teachers instruction. This is a topic of interest to me since I believe writing is a challenging process to teach and also a challenging process for young, struggling writers to learn. Through my study, I hope to gain insight into how teachers are effective with these students as well as what they are challenged by so that I can determine ways teachers could be further supported in helping struggling writers become proficient.

Your responses are vital to my research and I want to make sure I capture everything you say. I would like to audio record our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all of your responses will be confidential. The audio recording will be sent to a transcription service in order to be transcribed, but other than that I will be the only person who has access to the audio recording. It will also be destroyed after being transcribed. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym on the transcriptions and this pseudonym will be used when writing my report. To meet the human subjects requirements at Northeastern University, you must sign the form I have with me. This document essentially states that: 1.) all information provided to me will be confidential, 2.) you agree to be audio recorded 3.) your participation is voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time, and 4.) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or the form?

I plan for this interview to last for about 45 minutes to an hour. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. I want to be considerate of your time so if we are beginning to run short, it may be necessary for me to interrupt you in order to move on to the next question. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part 2: Research-Focus Questions (35-40 minutes): This part of the interview is intended to obtain the participants’ perspective into how teachers support struggling writers. 

Primary Interview Questions
Introductory Question:

1.) Describe the instruction that occurs for struggling writers, in grades four and five.

Main Questions:

2.) Thinking about grade four and five teachers’, how does their writing instruction within the writers’ workshop help support struggling writers?

2.) How does the classroom environment of teachers in grades four and five support struggling writers?

3.) What do you think grade four and five teachers do well in their instruction for struggling writers?
   Follow-up: What makes this successful?

4.) What do you think grade four and five teachers have the most difficulty with in their instruction for struggling writers?
   Follow-up: What makes this difficult?

5.) What barriers to teachers’ effectiveness in helping struggling writers become proficient, if any, exist?
   Follow-up: How could this be addressed?

6.) What could help teachers be more effective in supporting struggling writers?
   Follow-up: How could this be achieved?

Concluding Question

7.) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about in relation to teachers’ instruction for struggling writers?

Part 3: Conclusion (2-3 minutes): This part of the interview is intended to conclude the interview. Ask the participant if he/she has any more questions and thank him/her for participating in the interview.
Appendix E
Observation Protocol:
Observation of Teacher Writing Lesson

Observer Name: ___________________________________________ Date: ____________
Teacher Name: __________________________________________ Grade: ______ Time of Lesson: ____________

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<td>Teacher/student interaction</td>
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Appendix F
Observation Debrief Protocol:
Teacher Questions

What did you have planned for today’s lesson? What happened during the lesson?

How do you feel about how struggling writers responded to the lesson?

What strategies/activities that you implemented in today’s lesson do you feel helped the writing performance of your struggling writers?

What concerns do you have about your struggling writers’ performance within this lesson?

How will you address these concerns?

What do you have planned for your writing lessons over the next week?

Is there anything else you would like to add related to this lesson and the performance of your struggling writers?
Appendix G
Document Analysis Form
Teacher Lesson Plans

Teacher Name:
Grade:
Date of Lesson:

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