IMPROVING WRITING INSTRUCTION THROUGH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLC’S): A CASE STUDY OF SIX TEACHERS AT A MIDDLE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Writing skills are crucial for student success in school. Students are assessed on their ability to write well using both lower (grammar, sentence structure) and higher (writing to respond to literature, demonstrate understanding of a topic) order skills. Writing is also important beyond the classrooms, as many jobs require the use of strong writing skills. Our children are overwhelmingly below proficient in the area of writing. According to The National Center for Education Statistics, 74 percent of 8th grade participants and 73 percent of 12th grade participants scored below proficiency. With only 3 percent of students in both grades achieving advanced status, which means only 24 percent of 8th and 12th graders are proficient in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). This trend continues beyond 12th grade with many college professors assessing their students’ writing as fair to poor, (Mo, Kopke, & Hawkins, 2014; Troia, & Olinghouse, 2014). Educators are clearly not doing enough to support writing in our classrooms. With the acceptance of Common Core State Standards, schools have to increase writing throughout all content areas for a variety of purposes. Teachers in all content areas are expected to have students write to demonstrate their knowledge and expand their understanding. Pair the preceding information with the fact that many teachers do not feel qualified or prepared to give writing instruction and it is evident why our writing instruction and practices are weak. Improving writing instruction at all grade levels is clearly needed if we want to create stronger writers. Teachers need to be given the skills and pedagogy necessary to effectively teach writing for their particular content areas. Districts and schools try to provide professional development workshops that target teachers’ needs in the area of writing instruction but based on national results, it’s clear that is not enough. This research will look beyond workshops and focus on professional development and professional learning communities (PLC’s), based on adult
learning principles, to appoint several teachers with current writing research strategies, like increasing student motivation and how to build self-efficacy in both the student and the teacher.

*Keywords:* Writing, writing instruction, Common Core State Standards, proficiency, student motivation, self-efficacy, professional development, PLC’s.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Writing is a necessary and critical skill in our communication driven world. Students are asked to write from kindergarten through high school. Writing helps express opinions, share thoughts and deepen understandings about the world. Writing is everywhere and though it is often informal on a day to day basis (notes, texts, memos), it is a skill that must be honed so that it can be used to acquire jobs, address problems, and simply communicate well. Unfortunately, as a nation, we are not producing competent writers. The National Center for Education Statistics released findings in 2011 that were troubling. The majority of 8th and 12th grade students were below proficient in writing with many students scoring well below basic ability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). If it is accepted that students are going to be assessed on their ability to write and that proficient writing is a necessity when entering the workforce, it is clear that schools are not doing enough to create strong writers.

Most researchers agree that writing is an extremely difficult task for many, that we are producing weak writers in our country, and that we as educators need to do something about that depressing fact, (Harris & Graham, 2006; Hidi, Berndorff, & Ainley, 2002; Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012).

Writing instruction needs to be improved on a national and local level. Though theories abound on how to improve writing instruction, and by implication, writing, no one theory has produced significant long term results. Concerns about student writing proficiency have grown over the last decade. According to The National Center for Education Statistics, 74 percent of 8th grade participants and 73 percent of 12th grade participants scored below proficiency on a standardized writing assessment, (NCES, 2011).
Educators are clearly not doing enough to support writing in our classrooms. With the acceptance of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), schools have to increase writing throughout all content areas for a variety of purposes. Teachers in all content areas are expected to have students write to demonstrate their knowledge and expand their understanding. Couple the preceding information with the fact that many teachers do not feel qualified or prepared to give writing instruction and it is evident why writing instruction and practices are weak. Improving writing instruction at all grade levels is needed to create stronger writers. Much of the current research focuses on student motivation, self-efficacy, and frequency of practice as indicators for more successful writing (Graham et al., 2014; Hidi et al, 2002). This research focused on giving teachers the skills they want and need to more effectively deliver writing instruction.

**Significance of the Problem**

Writing matters because it is one of the main avenues of communication for all people. Writing skills are crucial for student success in school. Students are assessed on their ability to write well using both lower (grammar, sentence structure) and higher (writing to respond to literature, demonstrate understanding of a topic) order skills. Writing is also important beyond the classrooms, as most jobs require the use of strong writing skills. In our country, we are expected to write for a variety of purposes, regardless of our economic or social position. Whether you are a stay-at-home parent or the CEO of a company, you must be able to express yourself in writing so that people can understand you. Writing is more than just a communication tool; it is also used to persuade, encourage, change, demand, inform, and entertain the world. The written word has brought people together for a cause, it has scared us, and it has changed worlds. Imagine a world without the written communication skills of Martin
Luther King, H.G. Wells, or Plato. We must all achieve a level of proficiency in writing in order to successfully communicate with the rest of the world.

What we know is that children are overwhelmingly below proficient in the area of writing (NCES, 2012). This is despite attempts at the national, state, and local level to improve student writing outcomes. Increased writing is taking place in all classes, not just content area classes, due to the acceptance of Common Core State Standards. CCSS asks students to create texts that persuade, inform, and narrate either from real or imagined events (CCSS, 2010). Students need to organize their writing, determine their audience, use appropriate language and collaborate with others to revise their work. The CCSS also focuses on using writing in the content area to deepen contextual understanding and develop research and inquiry skills. Students will still spend the majority of time improving and honing their writing skills in their English Language Arts classrooms, but now they are also expected to write essays in physical education, describing how movement is connected to learning or short open response answers in math explaining in words how they arrived at their numerical answer. With all this frequent and required writing in school, it might seem safe to assume that students are graduating from school and entering colleges or the work force with all the necessary writing skills they need to be successful. This is not the case. Educators have a responsibility to identify weaknesses in the area of writing instruction by looking at current research and individual practices. That data should be used to inform writing instruction in order prepare our with the necessary 21st century skills they need.

One area where there is potential to greatly impact teacher instruction and thus student performance is professional development. The purpose of this study was to describe ways to directly improve writing instruction by looking at professional development for teachers on writing instruction. The study’s participants were 6 middle school teachers: a 6th grade special
educator, an 8th grade social studies teacher, an 8th grade special educator, two 5th grade science teachers and a 7th grade social studies teacher The research will span at least one trimester but no more than two trimesters.

**Problem of Practice**

“Writing today is not a frill for the few but a skill for the many” (The National Commission on Writing, 2003). Writing instruction needs to be improved on a national, state, and local level. From elementary school through college, there is evidence that the majority of students write well below standard proficiency levels (Mo et al., 2014). Writing is both a foundational skill for students and a necessary skill for all who need to communicate in their lives. If schools do not teach the foundations for good writing than it follows that students will have weak writing both in and beyond the classroom. Theories abound on how to improve writing through instructional practices but no single theory has produced long term improvements in writing outcomes, (Graham, Early, & Wilcox, 2014). This study focused on teachers’ instructional practices and how those practices change based on professional development.

**Rationale**

The study will determine what writing instructional practices are currently used in grades 5 through 8 through observations and interviews. Focusing primarily on content area teachers, the study will attempt to determine: (1) if teachers feel prepared to teach writing and (2) if their self-efficacy improves after receiving targeted professional development. While there is a great deal of research about how to improve writing instruction across content areas and many research studies on student motivation in writing, there is limited research on teacher in-service
training and the impact it can have on teachers’ writing instruction and their self-efficacy toward teaching writing.

**Research Questions**

The driving research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How can targeted professional development, in the form of professional learning communities, change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?
2. What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes toward their writing instructional practices?

**Positionality Statement**

Writing skills are crucial for success in school, college, and the workplace. Students are expected to demonstrate their knowledge through creative and analytical writing and employees must be able to communicate in writing for a variety of purposes. When someone is unable to clearly and concisely produce a piece of writing, it could lead to a poor grade or a missed job opportunity. It could also lead to a judgment about that individual’s intellectual capability. Unfortunately, schools are not producing proficient writers based on testimony from college professors and The National Center for Education Statistics (Mo et al. 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Despite increased writing across curriculum to meet the demands of the Common Core State Standards (2010), students are still graduating from high school with weak writing skills. Schools, administrators, teachers and researchers need to assess past and current writing instructional practices, including pre-service and in-service training, to see how we can improve student writing.
**Researcher’s background.** As a white, well-educated, professional woman who lives and teaches in the suburbs of Massachusetts, this researcher enters into the task of improving writing instruction aware of her position of privilege. The researcher’s educational experience of a girl’s boarding school and several college degrees affords her some power and creates potential biases. The PLCs that will be used as research for this study will be created and run by the researcher as part of her current position as an instructional/curriculum coach in a middle school. While the researcher will play an active role in the research, she does not have evaluative power over the participants. Instead she works on the same contract and asked for volunteers who would be interested in improving their writing instruction. The researcher navigates the world with a somewhat feminist/educator viewpoint, believing that women are constantly struggling to be heard rather than just seen and that we can do a better job educating children than we currently do.

The researcher has the ability to communicate well with people, whether they are middle school students, concerned parents, workplace peers, or leaders in the field of academics. This is a powerful tool in any setting, but it is particularly helpful in public schools. The researcher can establish trust in her community because her education background often gets people to trust her opinions, simply because she sounds like she could be an expert. As the Humanities Instructional/Curriculum Coach for the middle school, the researcher uses her communication skills as well as content knowledge to influence others to buy into particular beliefs about education and improve teaching practices in school.

**Biases and beliefs.** As the instruction/curriculum coach for humanities at the middle school level and a researcher, an area of interest is creating and/or improving writing instruction for all students. The researcher believes that ELA teachers are more prepared to teach writing,
but does not believe that any teacher in any content area, including ELA, has received enough training in the teaching of writing and therefore, is not prepared to fully and correctly implement the new writing standards as outlined in CCSS. This research is approached with the belief that teachers are not properly prepared to teach writing and therefore, the outcome is that students are not good writers. The researcher is aware that the preceding statement puts teachers into the position of “other” (Briscoe, 2005). According to Briscoe, researchers have to be aware of their ability to create “the subordination of the other by characterizing the traits of the other as inferior and/or degenerate and by projecting negative characteristics to those one wants to subordinate” (p. 29).

While strong communication skills and knowledge base have led to the researcher’s current job and problem of practice, it does not change the positionality of other teachers. The researcher works with those teachers, they are the participants for this research. Both the researcher’s job and the actual research place her in a position of power (Briscoe, 2005). The researcher will challenge her belief that everyone can do what she can and wants to do. The teacher/participants have not received the same education, nor do they share the same professional goals. Their voice has not always been heard or respected. Based on personal experience from various schools, the researcher believes that many teachers are not driven to improve their practice nor do they see the value in being the best. However, the researcher cannot let that opinion taint the research. The researcher will actively listen and learn from teachers to gain insight into their perspectives as well as develop respect and learn from their positionality (Takacs, 2002). It is the responsibility of the researcher to provide teachers with an opportunity to share their voices and lend their experience to help understand the current strengths and weakness of various writing instruction practices. The researcher will put aside
personal biases and actively listen and learn from the participants by looking at data and observing classroom instruction. The following excerpts from Machi and McEvoy (2012) offers ways to remain neutral:

- The inquiring researcher knows that each person has biases, opinions, beliefs, values and experiences that will come together to create a unique perspective. While these are fundamental human traits, researchers set them aside during the research process.
- The inquiring researcher comes to the research with an open mind. This researcher is objective and has no predetermined conclusions. This researcher is open to seeing all results of the inquiry and weighs the value of each piece of evidence, (p. 7)

They go on to say that any “claims made [should be] based on strong-evidence based arguments” (p. 7). Using evidence to support findings will help the researcher remain unbiased despite personal beliefs and experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

Professional development that targets the writing instructional needs of teachers to improve student writing could be the answer to improving student writing outcomes. Successful PD should include opportunities for modeling, practice, and feedback. The goals of PD should be created by teachers and school leaders so that there is ownership on the part of the teachers. Ultimately, professional development should increase teacher knowledge, add to their skills, allow them to question their current practices, and promote self-reflection on their personal beliefs and abilities (OECD, 2009). Professional development, if done well, should have the capacity to shift teacher beliefs about themselves and their students, which should lead to improved student writing.
This research focused on ways to directly improve writing instruction by examining teacher professional development for writing instruction through an adult learning lens. Using interviews and observations, the researcher examined teachers’ learning experiences in professional development, which was in the form of a workshop and professional learning communities (PLC’s) and how those experiences are transferred to the classroom.

The philosophical base for this research is founded on the social learning ideas of Bandura (1986) and Vygotsky (1978, 1986). Both Bandura (1986) and Vygotsky (1978, 1986) believe that people make sense of the world through their interactions with others and in a variety of contexts. Bandura’s (1986) “reciprocal determinism” shows the process of meaning making and human growth. He identifies that through a combination of social and personal experiences, the environment, and behavior, humans experience growth.

The theoretical base for this research is primarily concerned with how adults make meaning and how they apply that meaning into their practice. Using the tenets of Malcolm Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory (Merriam et al. 2007), as well as the theory of self-directed learning, the researcher will examine how professional development can be structured to promote teacher growth and help the transference of their learning to their practice.

**Adult learning theory.** Malcolm Knowles introduced the idea of andragogy in the late 1960’s (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Merriam, 2001). Knowles theory is one of many adult learning models but his is the most renowned. The six tenets of Knowles’ theory are:

1. Adults mature into a self-directed, rather than dependent learner.
2. Adults’ experiences should be taken into account in their learning, can add to the learning process or become a foundation for learning.
3. Adults’ willingness to learn is tied to their social roles.

4. Adults want to find answers to problems through their learning rather than study concepts in theory.

5. Adults are motivated by internal factors more than external factors.

6. Adults need to know the purpose for their learning. (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, et al., 2007; Beavers, 2009)

Knowles contends that adults have learning needs and styles that differ from children and that those needs and styles should be taken into account when planning curriculum for adult learners, (Merriam et al., 2007). Self-directed learning (SDL), another adult learning model, arose around the same time as andragogy. While they are presented as separate theories, both are important to keep in mind when educating adults or promoting lifelong learning. The goals of self-directed learning are to develop adults’ ability to direct their own learning, critical reflection by the adults of the learning process, and the promotion of free-thinking and social action taken in response to learning (Merriam, 2001). Merriam (2001) points out that there are different goals aligned with SDL depending on one’s philosophy.

Self-directed learning will also provide some theoretical foundation as the outcome of successful professional development should result in changed beliefs and/or instructional practices in the classroom. Self-directed learning theory is constructivist in its approach and attempts to explain how people's experiences impact how they make meaning or learn. Professional development has proven to be more successful and impactful when they employ elements of adult learning theory, like andragogy and self-directed learning (Merriam et al., 2007; Terehoff, 2002; Sharvashidze & Bryant, 2011; Gravani, 2012).
In a study by Sharvashidze and Bryant (2011), the researchers compared two groups - a treatment group that was introduced to adult learning principles and professional development that used those principles and a control group did not get information on adult learning principles and received very traditional professional development (presenter centered and limited teacher choice of topic). They found that the teachers in the treatment group felt respected and empowered by the information they garnered (2011). Gravani (2012) reported similar findings from her study. She states that teachers who play an active role in their own development are more invested in the process. In addition, when teachers see their learning opportunities as tied to improving their careers as well as immediately useful, they buy into the importance of professional development (Gravani, 2012).

Professional development is often criticized because it is usually district directed, one and done (meaning there is not time for teachers to reflect on or practice new information and skills), and does not meet the needs of diverse learners and educators (Stewart, 2014; Beaver, 2009). Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s) are seen as an answer to many of the problems with professional development. They focus on the adult learners’ needs, allow adults to choose topics to study or pursue (often problems they have in their practice that they hope to find solutions for), and allow for the learners to be self-directed.

**The application of adult learning in professional development.** Each of the tenets of Knowles’ theory were applied in the research study (Knowles, 1980; Merriam et al. 2007). The professional learning communities identified a purpose at the start. Teachers were able to apply what they learned in professional development workshops in their classrooms immediately. The PLC’s agendas were created by the teachers based on their analysis of student needs to improve writing. The teachers owned the structure and the content of their PLCs so motivation was built
into the professional development. While the researcher was present, the teachers learning was self-directed. In the end, the hope is that there would be change in their writing instructional practices.
Introduction

The refrain of “These students cannot write” can be heard from elementary classroom teachers all the way to lecture hall professors. According to national standardized writing test results, the refrain is true. The National Center for Education Statistics (2011) reported their findings from national writing assessments and what they found supports the teachers’ concerns: students are not proficient writers. The majority of students performed below proficiency and, even more troubling, many students scored well below basic ability, (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Writing is a necessary skill for school and beyond. Proficient writing is a basic tool for communication and a necessity for most jobs. Writing helps express opinions, share thoughts, and deepen understanding about the world.

Students begin writing in kindergarten to demonstrate their ability to express themselves and that form of self-expression matures and continues on through high school and into college. Students are expected to write for a variety of purposes beyond self-expression. They are asked to write about a book they read, defend an argument, persuade an audience, and demonstrate their understanding of a topic. Students are assessed on their ability to write well, using both lower and higher order skills. With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010), students are expected to write every day in all content areas for a variety of purposes. The CCSS are a national framework for curriculum and have been accepted by 43 states. CCSS requires students to write to persuade, inform, and narrate from real or imagined events. Students should be able to organize their writing, establish purpose, determine audience, and work with their peers to edit and revise their work. The CCSS goes beyond writing in the English Language Arts classroom and promotes writing in all content areas to deepen contextual
understanding and develop research and inquiry skills, (CCSS, 2011). The CCSS is still too new to determine its impact on student writing proficiency but perhaps with its focus on process based writing and stress on writing in all content areas, student writing proficiency will increase and they will be prepared for both college academic writing and career writing.

By the time students enter college, writing should be more sophisticated and rarely in need of basic interventions for competency. Many college professors report that their students’ writing is fair to poor and that high school graduates lack basic skills (Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, & Olinghouse, 2014; Public Agenda, 2002). The need for proficient writing does not end with formal education, competent writing is required by most employers as well. It is crucial for success in most careers that employees can communicate in writing using proper grammar and spelling, as well as to reach a variety of audiences for different purposes. Writing is everywhere and though it is often informal on a day to day basis (notes, texts, memos), it is a skill that must be honed so that it can be used to acquire jobs, address problems, and simply communicate well. Unfortunately, as a nation, we are not producing competent writers.

It is clear that our schools are not doing enough to create strong writers. Students across the nation have shown little to no growth in the area of writing based on standardized writing tests and current research (NCES, 2011; Applebee & Langer, 2006). Writing scores are low even in high performing districts (NCES, 2011). This proposed study will discern how in-service training or professional development can improve writing instruction and therefore, student writing proficiency. The following literature review will look at several components related to this problem. The first section focuses on theories about writing. In the next section, current writing instruction practices are reviewed with attention paid to students with disabilities, gender, and race. In the third section, there is a review of literature on the Common Core State
Standards, specifically its strengths and weaknesses in the area of writing. The final section discusses teacher and student beliefs about writing and the impact of teacher in-service preparation programs or professional development on writing instruction.

Writing Theories

**Prior to 1970.** Long before Writer’s Workshop (Calkins, 1985) suggested the benefits of modeling writing for students, behaviorists believed in the power of modeling and explicit instruction. Preceding the 1970s, everything was modeled, from conventions to finished products (Peterson, 2012). Through this approach, students were expected to produce great writing simply by being exposed to great writers. What was lacking was instruction on how to achieve those great results. Students were explicitly taught grammar but it was not always applied to their own pieces of writing. Writing was ‘traditional’ in that it focused on grammar and five paragraph essays with three main points. It was formulaic, following that five paragraph format despite the topic or purpose (Nystrand, 2006). Some theorists began to see the flaws in this practice. Moffett (1968) proposed a move away from the formulaic toward a more individual based model that looked at recording, reporting, analyzing, and speculating for writing development. As time progressed, researchers and teachers realized that instruction, modeling and practice needed to be blended to produce better student outcomes (Moats, 2009).

**1970s-1980s.** In the 70s and 80s, researchers built on the work of Moffett and Chomsky and took a more cognitive approach to literacy and writing (Nystrand, 2006). Instead of explicit instruction for grammar and sentence composition, researchers placed emphasis on the actual thinking process that went into writing. Out of this thinking came the constructivist approach, which includes the work of Calkins and Graves, and numerous others (Peterson, 2012). The constructivist approach emphasizes the process of writing, rather than the final product. Process
writing gained ground in the 70s through the work of theorists like Emig, Britton, and Martin. They moved writing from the rules to the process (Nystrand, 2006). Flower and Hayes (1981), working from the constructivist approach, developed a linear process writing model which included the planning stage (generating ideas, goal setting, and organizing), the translation stage (putting ideas into writing), and the revision stage (reviewing, evaluating, and revising). They believed that long term memory was in important part of writing, thinking that the recollection of certain words or phrases would help students remember information necessary for them to write. The planning and revision stages of their model has merit, but writing has been shown to be a non-linear process. Assuming that students have the necessary information in their memories to produce writing is not good teaching. Students have to be provided with the necessary background knowledge needed to write on any given topic. Delpit (1988) sees additional weaknesses in process based writing, particularly for minority children or children from low socio-economic backgrounds. She claims:

Although the problem is not necessarily inherent in the method, in some instances adherents of process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them … If such explicitness is not provided to students, what it feels like to people who are old enough to judge is that there are secrets being kept, that time is being wasted, that the teacher is abdicating his or her duty to teach (Delpit, 1988, p. 286).

Delpit is not alone in her concern about process based writing. The process based approach, despite its many advocates, does not meet the needs of many students because of its lack of explicit instruction for writing skills and strategies.
1980s to the present. The field of psychology began to impact writing instruction in the 1980s (Hawthorne, 2007). Theorists in the 80s and 90s “argue that the process approach to writing presents an impoverished view of writing instruction because it does not take into account the cultural and political dimensions of writing” (Peterson, 2012, p. 264). While theorists did not completely dismiss the process approach, they believed literacy was dependent on an individual’s situational experiences and understanding. Current research leans toward a combination of the process approach blended with content knowledge, life experiences, motivation, and interest (Graham et al. 2014). Writing is a difficult skill for many students and often the process approach does not take into account their skill level, knowledge, or experiences. A good example of this blended approach comes from Ivanic (2004). He developed a framework for the beliefs about writing and learning to write based on Gee’s definition of discourse. Gee defines discourse as a “socially accepted association among ways of using language, other symbolic expressions, and artifacts, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing and acting which can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group,” (Ivanic, 2004, p. 224). Ivanic’s framework identifies six interrelated discourses: skills, creativity, process, genre, social practices, and sociopolitical. Some writing teachers choose to teach two or more of the discourses at a time, allowing students to move easily from one to the other in a nonlinear process (Peterson, 2012). Many of these theories presented above are currently used in classrooms across the country.

Current Writing Instruction

Research and practices. Many of the recent qualitative and quantitative studies focus on writing in general education classrooms, which include special education students due to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Most participant samples were representations of
rural, suburban and urban settings. There are also some studies on writing instruction primarily focusing on students with learning disabilities. All of the researchers agree that writing is an extremely difficult task for many, that our nation is producing weak writers in our country, and that educators need to do something about that depressing fact (Harris & Graham, 2006; Hidi et al, 2002; Berndorff, & Ainley; Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014; Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012).

Based on national and statewide assessment results, students struggle to achieve proficiency in writing (NCES, 2011). Researchers have not only tried to find out why the results are so poor, they also looked for ways to intervene and improve writing outcomes. Applebee and Langer (2009) reported that teachers need to spend more time on writing instruction and students need to spend more time writing. However, there is more to it than that. As was previously mentioned, writing is no longer viewed as a linear, memorized process. Each student brings with them their own skills and life experiences. Looking at writing with a social constructivist lens, researchers believe that the writing process is a good start as far as teaching writing skills but it does not provide students with all the tools they need to write, especially if they are struggling with motivation or ability (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006; Delpit, 1988). Social constructivists believe that students are more able to make meaning when they tap into their own social and academic experiences at the appropriate developmental level (Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1986).

**Student motivation.** One of the trends in research that stems from the social constructivist approach is that student motivation plays a critical role in whether or not students become proficient writers (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012; Troia, Shankland, & Wolbers, 2012). Motivation can be defined as an individual’s drive and purpose to accomplish a task and usually a “necessary ingredient for success,” (Troia, et al. 2012). The question is how are students
motivated, especially if they perceive themselves as poor writers? Behizadeh (2014) believes that authentic writing activities can increase student motivation. Following on the constructivist belief that writing is an individual process based on social and academic experiences, Behizadeh acknowledges that individual students will have different opinions of what might be authentic for him or her. She identifies three factors for increased student motivation in writing: choice of topic, real and impactful purpose, and the value of ideas over conventions (Behizadeh, 2014).

Similar findings were made by Troia, Shankland, and Wolbers (2012) who identified four necessary measures for achievement: “self-efficacy beliefs or perceived competence, mastery and performance goal orientations, task interest and value, and attributions for success and failure,” (p. 5). In other words, students need to believe they have the ability to write, must be writing for a purpose, have an interest in what they are writing and believe that if they put in enough effort they will succeed. The authors also note that students must have basic content knowledge to write well on a topic.

Troia et al. (2012) used the Writing Activity and Motivation Scale (WAMS) instrument to measure their findings on motivation. Their study found several variables for writing motivation. Writing improved from grade 6 to grade 10. Female students created better products than male students. They also found that poor writers had low motivation and poor output. One of the biggest determiners for motivational beliefs was frequency of writing. If students, male or female, wrote more often, both in and out of school, they had higher self-efficacy and motivation (Troia et al. 2012).

Other suggestions for motivating students to write include a pen pal program for lower elementary students, writing across disciplines to reach student interests, collaborative writing, teacher/student conferences, and inquiry based writing (Charron, Fenton, Harris, & Procek,
There are other factors that play into poor writing outcomes. The following section will briefly touch upon gender and race.

**Writing instruction for gender and race.** The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011) reported that 70% of 8th and 12th graders are not meeting national proficiency standards in writing. They also reported that girls do better than boys and whites scored higher than minorities by at least 20 points (NCES, 2011). Students with learning disabilities also perform poorly on standardized assessments and will be discussed later on in the literature. Writing instruction is clearly not meeting the needs of these groups.

The gap between boys and girls in writing is similar to the gap between minorities and whites (Newkirk, 2000). Boys typically develop language later than girls but that does not account for the discrepancy in assessment scores in middle and high school. Motivation may play into the development of writing due to gender stereotypes. Girls may write better because writing is a more ‘feminine’ activity, whereas boys are not as invested in it because it is considered more feminine (Pajares & Valiente, 2001). Newkirk (2000) suggests teachers allow boys to read and write about topics that are intensely appealing to their masculine side. He argues that literacy is not geared to boys and that in order to engage many of them in what they consider a female pursuit, there must be a “distinct culture of boys” in the classroom (Newkirk, 2000, p. 299). This culture would allow boys to write with partners about topics that appeal to them, even if they seem violent or outside of the norm.

The one area that researchers found where boys outperformed girls in writing was in their desire to succeed in writing so as to appear good at writing (Pajares & Valiente, 2001). Research also shows that the more opportunities boys have to write and build their self-efficacy around writing, the better their writing outcomes (Troia, et al. 2012; Newkirk, 2000; Pajares & Valiente,
Boys also showed significant growth in writing output and desire to write when they were able to collaborate with a partner or group (Hidi, Berndorff, & Ainley, 2002).

Looking at the National Report Card on Writing, a disturbing picture about the writing performance of minorities arises. There is no denying the gap that exists between white students and minority students. What is open to debate is why it exists. When there is evidence that many minority students struggle to achieve the same or higher proficiency levels in writing as white students, it seems that writing instruction and curriculum must be improved. Writing is a complex process for all students as there are so many facets to it: generating ideas, retrieving background knowledge, providing structure and organization, using knowledge of conventions, revising and editing, and collaborating (Dunn, 2011). Similar to Newkirk’s idea of a culture of boys (2000), there is Ladson-Billings (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy. This is a “theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenges inequities that schools perpetuate,” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). The idea is that if students can recognize themselves in the curriculum, they will feel more accepted and comfortable. Students who feel that their culture and language are valued are more like to experience success in the classroom. Some ways to do this are to introduce multicultural writing examples in the classroom, allow students to write about topics that impact their lives, and accept language differences if English is not the student’s standard language (Williams, 2013). Delpit (1988) also recommends explicit writing instruction for those students who may have grown up outside the “culture of power,” those students who come to schools without linguistic norms of the white middle-class students.

Motivation, gender and race play a part in writing performance outcomes. Allowing students to pursue personal interests, valuing their cultures and language, and providing access to
the rules and norms of writing, teachers can increase student engagement and performance. Helping students to develop their self-efficacy for writing regardless of race and gender has been seen to improve writing.

**Writing instruction for students with disabilities.** The following studies focus on writing instruction for students with learning disabilities. All of the researchers expressed concern about the lack of explicit and differentiated writing instruction for students with learning disabilities in the general education classroom setting (Bray, Mrachko, & Lemons, 2014; Graham & Harris, 2013). Students with learning disabilities (LD) often struggle with writing and have motivational issues when it comes to performing writing tasks. Struggling students lack motivation even though they have high self-efficacy (Troia, Shankland, & Wolbers, 2012). Students with LD may think they are better writers than they actually are because they have difficulty identifying necessary tasks and their own abilities to perform these tasks. This means that when they see their grades do not reflect their self-efficacy beliefs, they will be unmotivated to write more. In the qualitative study of Bray et al. (2014), they found that although it is necessary for students with LD’s to receive “high-quality, evidence-based, and responsive writing instruction” (p. 2), many classrooms were giving students with learning disabilities the same writing instruction and writing time as students without disabilities.

Students with disabilities, whether they have attention issues, hearing loss, or cognitive impairment, all benefit from direct instruction and active participation. Wright and O’Dell (2013) found that students made great gains in their ability to revise their own writing after direct instruction. They gave students a pretest as a benchmark before providing the intervention. Students received 10 minute blocks of direct instruction focusing on writing conventions. Most students showed significant gains when given the posttest (Wright & O’Dell, 2013). Kim
Wolbers (2007) looked at the benefits of balanced and interactive writing instruction for deaf students. She found that deaf students, like all students, need to be “active participants in writing instruction,” (p. 257) because then they can internalize and strengthen their writing skills. The students who received the Morning Message intervention, which Wolbers defines as an “instructional practice that is balanced and interactive,” (p. 258), showed growth in higher and lower level writing skills. Wolbers believes students need to have good writing modeled but more importantly, they need to discuss and identify good writing practices with teachers and peers so that they can become good writers through a collaborative process (Wolbers, 2007). The previously mentioned self-regulated strategy development model (SRSD) has been applied in several studies with a great deal of positive findings for students with learning disabilities (Graham & Harris, 1993; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006).

It is interesting to note that the research, whether focused on general or special education students, believes that good writing is a result of strong evidence-based instruction, discussion, and strategies. Tapping into student motivation, increasing knowledge about writing and content, teaching explicit writing strategies, scaffolding, discussion, and collaboration all increase the quality of student writing (Graham & Harris, 2013; Graham & Harris, 1993; de la Paz & Graham, 2002; Troia, et al., 2012; Wolbers, 2007; Kirkpatrick & Klein, 2008; Defazio, Jones, Tennant & Hook, 2010).

**Interventions.** Interventions, like explicit instructions on writing activities, motivational factors, and peer collaboration, can greatly and positively impact student writing (Hidi, Berndorf, & Ainley, 2002; de la Paz & Graham, 2002; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). Hidi, Berndorff, and Ainley (2002) found that “being interested in writing, enjoying writing in various genres, and having a sense of being able to do so…may have reciprocal developmental influences on
De La Paz and Graham (2002) worked with two groups of general education middle school students to determine the impact of teaching explicit writing strategies. In their control group, no explicit writing strategies were taught. In their experimental group, they taught explicit strategies using the Self-regulated Strategy Development model (SRSD), (Graham & Harris 1993). SRSD has been used successfully in the past to improve the writing performance of struggling writers but not typical middle school writers. De La Paz and Graham found that focusing on planning and revising, as well as including procedures for regulating those processes, like goal-setting and self-monitoring, student writing improved (2002). In another study that used SRSD as well as peer support, Harris et al. (2006) compared the outcomes of using Writer’s Workshop (Calkins, 1986) to SRSD.

Writer’s Workshop and SRSD have some similarities; they are both process-based and require frequent writing practice in a variety of genres. However, Writer’s Workshop presents a skill in a mini-lesson and does not often revisit that skill. The SRSD group received instruction that was “concerted, systematic, and extended effort over time …to ensure that the participating students did in fact master target strategies and could use them independently” (Harris et al., 2006, p. 301). They found that in their experimental group, students knew more about the writing process and the genres they wrote in than the Writer’s Workshop group. The students in the experimental group wrote higher quality texts that were stronger than those of the students in Writer’s Workshop. The study found that discussion with peers helped students maintain the writing strategies they used.

**Changes in the Classrooms**

**Technology.** Technology is becoming more and more a part of everyday classroom routines. Students are expected to use technology to not only produce writing but also improve
writing. The National Commission on Writing (2003) recommended that technology be used to support student writing and writing instruction. Technology can help students generate ideas, research topics, check spelling and grammar. It can support teacher instruction by making modeling easy and giving feedback is immediate and focused when using shared documents (Peterson-Karlan, 2011).

A recent study focused on a middle school writing program called Writing Matters (Goldenberg, Meade, Midouhas, & Cooperman, 2011). Writing Matters is similar to the aforementioned Writer’s Workshop program but it uses technology to support students and teacher instruction. The authors believe that Writer’s Workshop is a difficult model for teachers because it lacks instructional tools making it hard to implement in the classroom. Writing Matters has built in online resources for teachers. It also has “animations, samples of student writing and online exercises that allow students to share ideas,” (p. 76). They found that Writing Matters had no significant impact on regular, developing students but did show promising results for underperforming and struggling writers (Goldenberg et al., 2011).

Technology can and should be used to support students with learning disabilities who struggle with writing. Students who have dysgraphia or dyslexia often struggle with writing output to the point where they get frustrated. Speech to text technology allows them to dictate their thoughts and frees them from the struggles of forming words on paper. This allows students to focus on the content and can significantly improve their self-efficacy and motivation toward writing (Fedora, 2015).

There are programs to support students with composition, like Read and Write and Draftbuilding. There are speech recognition programs, like Dragin, which can help students with physical limitations that may inhibit the actual act of writing. Students can blog, text, write
journals, enter discussion groups - all activities allowing students to practice writing for a variety of purposes. Even standard word processing programs can increase and improve student writing. All technology tools can and should be used to support writing for all students to increase their 21st century skills, but it may have the most positive impact on students with disabilities (Peterson-Karlan, 2011).

**Implementation of the Common Core State Standards.** The National Commission on Writing (2003) referred to writing as the “neglected r” in our classrooms and even claimed that “the nation’s leaders must place writing solely at the center of the school agenda,” (p. 3). Perhaps with the implementation of the Common Core, the Commission will see increased focus on writing in the nation’s classrooms. As of March, 2014, 45 states have accepted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) as their framework for curriculum (Mo et al. 2014). The CCSS (2011) emphasizes the importance of written expression and recommends that writing take place in all content areas on a consistent basis. CCSS requires students to write to persuade, inform, and narrate real or imagined experiences. From kindergarten through 12th grade, students are expected to write in English, science, and history. Their writing skills should expand and improve each year, according to the standards. “An important advantage of CCSS is that there is a considerable emphasis on teaching students how to be better writers and how to use writing to enhance comprehension of text and facilitate learning of content materials” (Graham & Harris, 2013, p. 29).

The CCSS is a shift from current writing practices and that is a good thing. Many college students require remediation for writing, which means our schools are not doing enough to prepare them for the rigors of college (Shanahan, 2015). Clearly the former standards were lacking or 70% of students would not be meeting proficiency on standardized writing
assessments (NCES, 2011). CCSS ask for schools to explicitly teach the writing process, for students to write for a variety of purposes in a variety of genres, and to write across the curriculum to develop both skills and understanding. While this is a good start toward improving the current state of instruction, it is not the complete answer. The CCSS does not fix the inequities in classroom instruction that exist due to teacher preparedness or skill and student ability.

The strengths of the CCSS are that they provide a consistency of expectations from one grade to the next, often only changing a word or two to allow for growth as students progress through grades (Troia and Olinghouse, 2013). The CCSS call for more instruction on writing conventions in the lower grades and a shift to following the writing process and adding varied components for writing in the higher grades. This spiraling of instruction allows students to master the basics at an earlier stage so they can move to writing that demonstrates and extends their knowledge. The CCSS expects students to go through the writing process - gather and organize information, revise, and publish - at every grade level. Students are required to use technology in some aspects of writing, composition and research. The standards also highlight the need to write for a specific audience and purpose.

There are some weaknesses, as with any set of standards. They were created by educators and policy makers and therefore are not bias free. The standards should be reviewed for evidence of bias: What they leave out or what do they assume? Are the standards attainable for all students, including at risk populations? Accepting them at face value could impact student learning (Mo et al. 2014). Another area of weakness is that although they require more explicit instruction of grammar in the lower grades, they do not recommend instructional strategies, which may lead teachers to present grammar in a non-contextual manner, like drill worksheets,
instead of teaching it through student writing or mentor texts (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013; Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012). Teacher feedback is one of the research based strategies found to improve student writing and there is no mention of feedback in the CCSS after 1st grade (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). Another weakness with the writing standards is that they do not take into consideration student motivation. There is no mention of it yet based on the literature, motivation has a huge impact on the success of students’ writing. If teachers or other concerned parties expect the CCSS to explain how to deliver all of this information to students, they will be disappointed. The CCSS is just a guide for what to teach not how to teach it.

Practices and Beliefs

Student practices and beliefs. One of the themes that recurs in the literature on writing is the role the student practices and beliefs play in the level of proficiency they achieve. It makes sense that if students do not write often, they will not believe that writing is something they are good at. It’s suggested by some that boys tend to struggle with writing because many of them see it as a feminine pursuit and it does not appeal to them (Newkirk, 2000). Minorities and low-income student often find writing challenging as they may not have access to the linguistic norms that schools expect them to have and writing instruction is not explicit enough to allow them access to those norms (Williams, 2013; Delpit, 1988).

The CCSS (2010) recommends that students write for a variety of purposes and audiences on a regular basis. Writing programs like Writer’s Workshop and Writing Matters require students to write every day for a significant amount of time (Calkins, 1986). While these process-based approaches to writing work well in elementary schools, where there is typically a longer English Language Arts class time, middle and high school teachers must teach writing during their other content area classes. Many students only write in their ELA classes despite
CCSS’s call for increased writing across content areas (Mo et al., 2014; Troia & Olinghouse, 2013).

Students’ self-efficacy is important for their production of writing. Self-efficacy is one’s belief in one’s own ability to perform a task successfully (Sanders-Reio, Alexander, Reio, & Newman, 2014). Students need to believe that they can write for a sustained amount of time and produce a worthwhile product. Graham, Schwartz, & MacArthur (1993) added other components for successful writing and stated, “The knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs that students hold about writing play an important part in determining how the composing process is carried out and what the eventual shape of the written product will be” (p. 246). This echoes information presented earlier in the review, which stated that students need to have enough background knowledge and skills to write. They need to believe they can write and they also need to have a positive view of writing.

There is a connection between a positive opinion of writing and a student’s relationship with the teacher. In a qualitative study of students with learning disabilities, Spencer and Boone (2006) reported that students like a subject if they have a close relationship with the teacher. The students were not as concerned about their grades as they were about their connection with teachers. If they were socializing, whether with teachers or peers while learning, it was fun. If not, they thought the class was “boring” (p. 247). Students said that teachers who stood and talked at them and gave little activity choice or time for collaboration were boring (Spencer & Boone, 2006). In another study, gifted and talented students gave their opinions about writing (Olthouse, 2012). She found that “students needed teachers who provided structured writing time and clear deadlines, valued the message of the work more than the format, used books as models, developed a sense of community, gave constructive feedback, honored students’
personal writing goals, specifically assessed creativity, and recognized that sometimes writing was therapeutic rather than productive” (p. 117). Another sample of students, when asked their views about writing across the curriculum, looked more positively on writing in ELA than in the content areas of history or science (Jeffrey & Wilcox, 2013). Students liked writing in ELA more because it allowed them more choice and creativity as opposed to just writing about facts in the other classes.

Much of this research concurs with current studies; students perform better in writing when they are motivated (socially, personally, and academically), believe in their own abilities, collaborate, discuss, see value and develop goals. There is plenty of research outlining how to motivate students and what they need to produce better writing. Why is our nation producing such poor writers? A look at teachers’ practices and beliefs about writing instruction may offer some insight.

**Teacher practices and beliefs.** The role of the teacher can be one of the biggest determining factors in student achievement (Delpit, 1988, Ladson-Billings, 1995). In a national survey, Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert and Morphy (2013) noted the impact, both positive and negative, that teacher’ beliefs and practices can have on student writing proficiency. Teachers who believe their students can write often have students who will write. Teachers who teach English Language Arts (ELA) are much more likely to deliver writing instruction than history or science teachers (Applebee & Langer, 2011). The reason for this is that ELA teachers likely feel more qualified to teach the writing process and strategies. If teachers taught ELA, they believed it was their responsibility to teach writing and spent more time on writing instruction, while teachers in the other science and history felt writing was not their job nor did they spend much time teaching it. However, even in English classes, Applebee and Langer (2011) found there
was not much writing happening. Students spent far more time on short answers, fill in the blank worksheets, and note-taking. Only 19% of class time was spent on extended writing activities (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Teachers are not giving students enough opportunities to write and they are not actually teaching writing.

Teachers are aware of the deficiencies in student writing and often comment that there is not enough time to authentically and explicitly teach writing. One finding that was somewhat troubling was that teachers reported high stakes assessments hurt their writing instruction but at the same time, teachers did not use the data from those assessments to support their instruction practices (Graham et al., 2013).

Some identified problems with writing instruction are infrequent writing practice, limited writing instruction, weak writing instruction, little scaffolding or differentiation, a focus on short writing assignments (worksheets) with little to no critical value, and lack of time spent on the writing process (Mo et al., 2014; Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012). Zumbrunn and Krause (2012) interviewed leading authorities in the field of writing to get their opinions on effective writing instruction. Five themes arose from their interviews:

1. Effective writing instructors realize the impact of their own writing beliefs, experiences, and practices.
2. Effective writing instruction encourages student motivation and engagement.
3. Effective writing instruction begins with clear and deliberate planning, but is also flexible.
4. Effective writing instruction and practice happens every day.
5. Effective writing instruction is a collaboration between teachers and students.

(Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012, p. 3)
Their interviews reinforce research findings about improving the quality of writing. In their study, Graham et al. (2013) expressed concern about the state of writing instruction in middle schools. They found that while some schools are teaching writing, many students do not write for an extended time, teachers did not use technology to support writing instruction, and evidence-based practices (like the writing process, scaffolded instruction, conferencing) were used inconsistently (Graham et al., 2013). A look at the following teacher training may help to explain why and where the gaps exist in writing instruction.

**Pre-service and in-service training.** In their quantitative study, Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, and Morphy (2013) asked a sample of middle school teachers from five states in the disciplines of language arts, science, and social studies about “their preparation to teach writing, beliefs about responsibilities for teaching writing, use of evidence-based writing practices, assessment of writing, use of technology, and adaptations for struggling writers,” (p. 1015). Their findings concur with other research and add to the concern about writing instruction in public school classrooms (Mo et al., 2014; Applebee & Langer, 2011). Most middle school teachers, including ELA teachers, feel unprepared to teach writing. Slightly less than half of the teachers reported taking no writing instruction classes at the college level. Most teachers reported having one class on teaching writing (Graham et al., 2013). Dr. Gary Troia, another researcher in the field of writing echoes concerns about teacher pre-service and in-service programs and goes on to add:

> When teachers do teach writing, they do not teach it explicitly and we do not see them using the research-based strategies that we know they should be using.

> Teacher modeling, attending to student motivation, conferencing, peer collaboration all have evidence to support their use in the classroom. Part of why
teachers are not very good at teaching writing is that they don’t have good professional development, either pre-service or in-service, in the area of writing instruction and assessment. Teachers often don’t feel comfortable with writing or view themselves as writers. (Troia, G., personal communication, November 2014)

There is evidence that providing quality professional development for content area teachers, particularly in the area of science writing, that teachers are more able and willing to promote writing in their curriculum if they are shown how to do it and the impact it will have on student achievement (Anthony, Tippet & Yore, 2010). Teachers who felt more qualified to teach writing used more evidence-based strategies, like RAFT or SWoRD (Senn, McMurtie & Coleman, 2013; Cho & Schunn, 2005). Correnti (2007) offers more evidence that professional development can have a positive impact on teacher instruction. He found that teachers who had targeted workshops on writing instruction offered 13% more instruction and 12% more writing time than teachers who had not received the training (Correnti, 2007). While those percentages seem small, it may be possible to greatly improve those percentages with increased targeted professional development. Pre-service and in-service programs need to prepare all content area teachers to deliver writing instruction appropriate for their content so that students leave their classrooms ready for college or career writing.

The Need for Professional Development

Professional development, as a way to advance teacher knowledge and improve instructional practices, has become a necessary aspect of education (Editorial Projects, 2011). Teachers are met with constantly changing challenges every day. They are expected to differentiate instruction for all students, regardless of student ability and emotional state. They
are expected to write and develop curriculum for their content areas and also teach reading and writing in their content areas due to the acceptance of Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2011). New initiatives and directives are introduced regularly from the state and the district and teachers must implement them into their practice. Teachers need to keep current with evidence-based instructional practices and they need to collaborate with their peers (Harward et al. 2011). Many must create and meet both student and professional goals for their yearly evaluations.

Then there is the day to day work: standards-based lesson planning, meetings, parent communications, behavioral problems, classroom management, test preparation, instruction, and co-teaching and planning. The list goes on and on. Teachers are faced with a tremendous amount of work and responsibility. Teachers can feel overwhelmed and underprepared to meet the many challenges they face (Dierking & Fox, 2015; Sun et al., 2013; Strahan & Hedt, 2009).

The need for in-service professional development for teachers cannot be understated.

Professional development (PD) is on-going training that can take place on-site or elsewhere. In-service means that it takes place while teachers are working in schools. Pre-service training refers to undergraduate and graduate classes and experiences (Cornu & Ewing, 2008).

Professional development can come in the form of workshops, online classes, or professional learning communities. PD should include opportunities for modeling, practice, and feedback. The goals of PD should be created by teachers and school leaders so that there is ownership on the part of the teachers. Ultimately, professional development should increase teacher knowledge, add to their skills, allow them to question their current practices, and promote self-reflection on their personal beliefs and abilities (OECD, 2009). Professional development, if done well, should have the capacity to shift teacher beliefs about themselves and their students.
In their quantitative study, Graham, et al. (2014) asked a sample of middle school teachers from five states in the disciplines of language arts, science, and social studies about “their preparation to teach writing, beliefs about responsibilities for teaching writing, use of evidence-based writing practices, assessment of writing, use of technology, and adaptations for struggling writers” (p.1015). Their findings concur with other research and add to the concern about writing instruction in public school classrooms (Mo et al., 2014; Applebee & Langer, 2011). Most middle school teachers, including ELA teachers, feel unprepared to teach writing. Slightly less than half of the teachers reported taking no writing instruction classes at the college level. Most teachers reported having one class on teaching writing (Graham et al., 2014). There is evidence that providing quality professional development for content area teachers, particularly in the area of science writing, creates teachers who are more able and willing to promote writing in their curriculum. If they are shown how to do it and the impact it will have on student achievement (Anthony, Tippett & Yore, 2010). Teachers who felt more qualified to teach writing used more evidence-based strategies, like RAFT (role, audience, format, topic) or SWoRD (scaffolded writing and rewriting in the discipline), (Senn, McMurtie & Coleman, 2013; Cho & Schunn, 2005). Correnti (2007) offers more evidence that professional development can have a positive impact on teacher instruction. He found that teachers who had targeted workshops on writing instruction offered 13% more instruction and 12% more writing time than teachers who had not received the training (Correnti, 2007). While those percentages seem small, it may be possible to greatly improve those percentages with increased targeted professional development. Pre-service and in-service programs need to prepare all content area teachers to deliver writing instruction appropriate for their content so that students leave their classrooms ready for college or career writing.
The Impact of PD on Teachers and Students

**Teachers.** With the acceptance of Common Core State Standards, all content area teachers are expected to also be teachers of reading and writing. Most teachers have received little to no pre-service or in-service training for either area of instruction. A great deal of research has shown that teachers will be far less likely to teach something if they do not feel confident about their content knowledge or skill set (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Harward et al., 2014; Klehm, 2014; Mosenthal, 1995). It is worth noting that it is important for teachers to believe in their own abilities because the role of the teacher can be one of the biggest determining factors in student achievement (Delpit, 1988, Ladson- Billings, 1995).

Teachers are aware of the deficiencies in student writing and often comment that there is not enough time to authentically and explicitly teach writing (Baker et al., 2008). One finding that was somewhat troubling was that teachers reported high stakes assessments hurt their writing instruction but at the same time, teachers did not use the data from those assessments to support their instructional practices. This study also found that teachers used limited technology in their writing instruction. The study stated that the four most common writing activities assigned by teachers were “short- answer responses, note-taking, completing worksheets, and writing in response to material read” (Graham et al., 2014). As far as accommodations, teachers used them infrequently throughout the year (Graham et al., 2014). Dunn (2011) performed a qualitative study of teachers and found that while they do engage in best- teaching and research based practices (modeling, process instruction, and writing frequency), teachers believe they do not have enough time for complete writing instruction and they do not have enough resources to support all students. Teachers admit to not feeling comfortable teaching writing, due to little training or professional development, and many are not comfortable modeling writing in
different genres (Goldenberg, Meade, Midouhaus, & Cooperman, 2011). With the implementation of CCSS, there is a push for writing across the curriculum. ELA teachers are struggling to teach writing, which leads to the assumption that math, science, and history teachers will not fare much better. Teachers in the content area view writing as a secondary responsibility. They also identify time constraints (fitting writing into their already packed curriculum) and assessments (creation of and feedback for) as problems with writing across the curriculum (Baker, Barstack, Clark, Hull, Goodman, & Kook, 2008).

In a national survey, Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert and Morphy (2014) noted the impact, both positive and negative, that teacher’s beliefs and practices can have on student writing proficiency. Teachers play a crucial role in creating strong writers. Practicing teachers are aware of how poorly many students write. They see it in the classrooms year after year, hear about it from college professors and employers, and read the reports. Most teachers know that “writing research and achievement data indicate that we must do a better job preparing writers,” (Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, Olinghouse, 2014, p. 446). Some identified problems with writing instruction are infrequent writing practice, limited writing instruction, weak writing instruction, little scaffolding or differentiation, a focus on short writing assignments (worksheets) with little to no critical value, and lack of time spent on the writing process (Mo et al., 2014; Richards, Sturm, & Cali, 2012). Looking at the identified problems creates a picture of instructional weaknesses. Teachers will resort to worksheets and limited writing time if they are not comfortable or prepared to teach that subject. If teachers do not know how to deliver quality writing instruction or if they have not gained knowledge over the course of their career on how to embed writing instruction in their content area, they cannot be expected to competently deliver the information students need in order to write well.
Professional development can promote growth of both knowledge and skills and support teachers as they try evidence-based practices in their classrooms, in other words build their teacher efficacy (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). Cantrell and Hughes (2008) define teacher efficacy as “a type of self-efficacy in that teachers are strongly affected by their beliefs about their potential to impact student learning, and those beliefs relate directly to their effort and persistence with students,” (p.100). Accepting that schools are producing students who are not meeting writing proficiency standards, teacher practices must be considered. Teachers who do not feel like they have the knowledge or skill to teach writing will avoid that practice and focus on other areas where they feel more adept (Harward et al., 2014). Research by Troia and Maddox (2004) showed that when teachers of any content area receive professional development on writing instruction, those teachers are more likely to deliver writing instruction daily and allow time for students to write using the process approach. In a study by James Mosenthal (1995), participants engaged in summer workshops for math and writing. Bonnie, who participated in the Writing Project, found that the information presented in the workshop helped her feel more comfortable teaching writing. She also mentioned feeling relieved that she was not the only one responsible for giving feedback. Once she knew how to teach students to give quality feedback to each other, she felt giving feedback on writing was less of a burden and she was less reluctant to assign writing to her students (1995). Bonnie not only gained knowledge about teaching writing, she shifted her beliefs about writing as well.

**Students.** Student writing is dependent on their motivation (which involves a variety of factors, like connections with the teacher and teacher beliefs in student ability), self-efficacy, content knowledge, writing skill and strategy knowledge, topic interest, discussion, value and perceived importance (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Hidi, Berndorff, &
Ainley, 2002; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006; Troia, Harbaugh, Shankland, Wolbers, & Lawrence, 2012). Professional development in the area of writing needs to support teacher knowledge in the aforementioned areas. In a study by Harris et al. (2012), researchers who were experienced with Self-Regulated Strategies Development (SRSD) and presenting professional development, worked with a group of teachers to develop their use of SRSD in their instruction. Teachers used the SRSD strategies over a period of time, with opportunities to get feedback from the researchers. All teachers felt more comfortable using the strategies after the workshops and student writing improved in the areas of length, transition words, and quality (Harris et al., 2012).

While writing is a struggle for many students, it is particularly challenging for students with disabilities (SWD) (Klehm, 2014). Klehm (2014) found that SWD produce stronger writing and can sustain writing if they think their teachers believe they can write. Unfortunately, many teachers have lower expectations for SWD than typical students (Troia & Maddox, 2004). Special education teachers tend to work more closely with the SWD than the general education teachers do and thus develop stronger rapport with the students and are more supportive of their abilities. However, general education teachers tend to be more knowledgeable about writing instruction (Troia & Maddox, 2004). Troia and Maddox (2004) recommend that general education and special education teachers attend writing workshops together to build confidence in their own instructional practices for SWD and to support each other.

Professional development centered on writing instruction and teacher beliefs about students with disabilities may improve SWD’s writing outcomes (Klehm, 2014; Troia & Maddox, 2004). Another way to support student writing and have teachers collaborate and
develop their writing instruction practices could be through personal learning communities (PLC’s).

**PLCs as Professional Development**

**Definition of a PLC.** Professional development is necessary for teachers to develop their content knowledge, instructional strategies, and keep current with new research that they can use in their classrooms (McQuitty, 2012; Peterson & McClay, 2014). Many teachers find that their teacher training programs did not sufficiently prepare them to teach writing and that their instruction is not improving student writing (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Harward et al., 2014). Most teaching programs do not have a required writing instruction class as those are not mandated by the state (McQuitty, 2012). The answer from many schools has been to provide professional development on writing instruction. There have been limitations to the success of professional development on teacher instruction and student outcomes due to lack of modeling, discussion, and follow-up (Meth & Azano, 2012; Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). A solution for the deficiencies can be found in professional learning communities. Pella (2011) defines professional learning communities as a learning model for teachers where they can “meet regularly to increase their learning and the learning of their students” (p. 107). Stewart (2014) adds to that definition by stating that PLCs are a shift from the one and done professional development model to “that which is active, consistent, based in the teaching environment, and supported by peers,” (p. 28). Professional learning communities address the need for ongoing discussion, feedback, modeling, and sharing that teachers need to promote their learning. Professional learning communities can take many forms: they can be book studies that teachers sign up for based on interest, they can be formed by department or content, they can be online discussion groups, and/or lesson studies or other workshop models that are ongoing, like the National Writing Project Workshop model
(Pella, 2011; De Kramer et al., 2012). PLCs can be made up of all new teachers or all veteran teachers or a combination of both. They can also be part of larger groups that have broken off to pursue solutions to problems or identified areas of teacher interest, (Masuda & Ebersole, 2012). There are both benefits and problems with the PLC model as professional development.

**Potential benefits and problems.** Professional learning communities can be successful as professional development tools when they are done well. Mizell, as quoted by Drago-Severson comments, “The more often educators are engaged with their peers in effective professional learning, the more they will learn and the more likely it is that their practice will improve,” (Drago-Severson, 2009, p. 479). Drago-Severson (2009) recommends creating communities where teachers and other educators encourage each other to think and question their practices. A PLC will have an established protocol, regularly scheduled meetings, and members who are committed to achieving common goals (Stewart, 2014). Those are the basics for a PLC. For the PLC to be truly successful in increasing teacher knowledge and therefore improving student learning, PLCs need to represent teachers’ stated needs and empower their voices. The learning teachers engage in must apply to their practice and allow for choice. Teachers must have a chance to see new techniques modeled, they must practice those techniques on their own and then receive constructive feedback from their peers (Stewart, 2014). When a PLC is working well, it can support both teacher and student learning (Drago-Severson, 2012).

In PLCs, teachers have the opportunity to collaborate with their peers on student work, analyze data to inform instruction, and identify challenges as well as possible solutions for students. Teachers can share what works well for them or what they have struggled with in the past. PLCs can provide opportunities for teachers to focus on what area of instruction to improve student learning. In a recent study by Pella (2011) on developing writing pedagogy in
PLCs, she found that teachers in PLCs have the chance to use and share a variety of resources “from diverse theoretical frameworks in teaching and learning writing” (p. 123). She also found that teachers shifted their thinking about students from deficit stance to a one more focused on how to deliver instruction to meet students’ needs.

In another study, focused on PLCs for new teachers, Masuda and Ebersole (2012) found that teachers were able to self-reflect on their own teaching practices and increase their content and pedagogical knowledge through discussion and interaction with their peers. This research is worth noting because not only can it improve student learning, it can help to develop professional knowledge and comfort with instructional practices for new teachers, lessening attrition rates. That same study showed that teachers in PLCs believed they had a voice in discussion topics and proposed agendas (Masuda & Ebersole, 2012). PLC’s seem to provide the opportunity for teacher growth through ongoing discussion, reflection, modeling, practice, and feedback.

Meeting face to face is the common PLC model but professional learning communities have been successful in the virtual world as well. While online PLCs are not the norm in many schools, they do exist and provide an opportunity for teachers to connect with their peers from a variety of school settings. Online PLCs also open up a vast network of expertise for teachers (DeKramer et al., 2012). As there is no established school culture to navigate, online PLCs have the added benefit of teachers who really want to be there to share their knowledge and expertise as well as their inquiries about how to improve their instruction (Pella, 2011; DeKramer et al. 2012).

PLCs as professional development can provide teachers with content knowledge, feedback from peers, a voice in what they need and want to learn, collaboration with peers,
ongoing practice with new skills, and a sense of belonging. A great deal of research shows that PLCs are often better suited at meeting the needs of adult learners than traditional professional development models, like a one-day workshop (Strahan & Hedt, 2009; Pella, 2011; Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Dierking & Fox, 2015; Meth & Azano, 2012). However, PLCs can be unsuccessful if not implemented well and if there is not teacher buy-in.

PLCs have become very popular in the past few years and are present in many schools across the nation (DuFour, 2004). If PLCs are not implemented in a way that allows for teacher choice and voice as well as respecting individual learning styles and developmental diversity, they may not work (Drago-Severson, 2009; Stewart, 2014). If members of the PLC do not see the need for the work they are doing or if they are uncomfortable in their groups, they will be unlikely to fully participate in the learning process (Stewart, 2014). Teachers need to buy into the process in order to expand their knowledge and shift their thinking. It is a challenge for school leaders to properly introduce PLCs as a means to improve instruction, collaborate with peers, and meet student needs. The culture of the school needs to be focused on teachers as learners and student success as the goal in order for PLC’s to be truly successful (DuFour, 2004). As with all professional development, teachers need to be willing to learn, collaborate, listen and accept feedback, and shift their beliefs about their practices and student learning. The proof of successful professional development can be seen in changes in teacher beliefs about their ability and student ability and the growth of teachers as leaders.

**Outcomes of PD**

**Shifting teacher perceptions.** The desired outcomes of professional development are, ultimately, improved student learning and engagement. In order to achieve those results, many teachers need to make fundamental shifts in practice to develop self-efficacy (Whitney &
Friedrich, 2013). Teacher efficacy, defined by Cantrell and Hughes (2008), is their belief that they can impact all students’ learning. Teacher efficacy has been connected to the efficacy of the whole school, effective classroom instruction, and student achievement (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). The professional development models that seem to most positively increase teacher efficacy in the area of writing are those that allow for peer collaboration, like PLCs, those that allow teachers to write, those that were ongoing throughout the school year, those that allow for follow-up through coaching, and those that are relevant to teacher needs (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Whitney & Friedrich, 2013; Dierking & Fox, 2012).

Mosenthal (1995) found that one teacher who attended the Teacher College Writing Project on writing was able to solve student writing problems as well as change her approach to providing student feedback. Her attitude about teaching writing shifted from one of reluctant to teach writing because of feeling overwhelmed to a more positive one of being excited to implement some of the new techniques she had learned, including peer feedback (Mosenthal, 1995). Likewise, Cantrell & Hughes (2008) found that extended professional development can help teachers believe that they can teach all students and positively impact their learning. Other studies have found that teachers who participate in professional development have a renewed interest in teaching and are willing to try new strategies in their classrooms (Dierking & Fox, 2012; Peterson & McClay, 2014). Teachers who increase their knowledge in a particular area are often more comfortable teaching in that area. Peterson and McClay (2014) report that the teachers in their research wrote on a regular basis and developed their understanding of what it takes to be a good writer as well as what good writing looks like. These teachers reported being enthusiastic about teaching and motivating students to write. Bifuh-Ambe (2013) found that teachers who received professional development that increased their own writing skills were able
to improve student writing through their instruction. The reverse was true as well, when teachers felt unprepared to teach writing due to their training or personal experiences with writing, they were less likely to teach writing or writing strategies (Harward et al. 2014).

Shifting teacher beliefs is a desire outcome of professional development as this can rejuvenate their practice and improve their instruction, leading to increased student achievement. Another potential outcome of professional development is the cultivation of teachers as school leaders.

**Teachers as leaders.** As much leadership research shows, school administrators cannot do it all due to lack of training and time-constraints (Spillane, 2006; Drago--Severson, 2009). Therefore many schools do well with a distributed leadership model. Before leadership can be distributed among staff, there has to be an identified capacity for leadership among the teachers. Teacher leadership is when teachers can share their knowledge with others, wield influence over others on instructional practice and curriculum development, contribute to a positive school climate, and promote student achievement (Pasternak et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2013). Professional development can create and further develop leadership abilities in the area of writing instruction for teachers (Pasternak et al., 2012).

Teachers who receive quality, extended professional development often develop an expertise on the topic discussed and are willing to share that expertise with others (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Sun et al., 2013). Teachers who have received targeted professional development can disseminate their knowledge of best instructional practices and “stimulate new innovations,” (Sun et al., 2012). In their study of induction year teachers, Pasternak et al. (2012) found that professional development not only decreased attrition rates for new teachers, it developed leadership skills in the area of writing instruction for their participants. Their teachers felt
comfortable sharing their expertise in writing with other, more veteran teachers because they believed in themselves and their content knowledge. Sun et al. (2013) also found that professional development can build “internal capacity to support the implementation of ambitious whole-school reforms,” (p. 361). As education moves toward a distributed or shared leadership model, it makes sense to offer professional development opportunities that would develop leadership skills in teachers.

Spillane (2006) stated “Educators must be supported in pursuing adult learning and development” (p. 488, Kindle location). Professional development is at its best “collegial inquiry” which Spillane (2006) believes is one of the pillars of a school leadership model. Professional development can come in many forms, from the traditional one-day workshops to the trendy professional learning communities. Much of the literature reviewed here focuses on professional development as a tool for improving writing instruction and raising student achievement in writing. Some of the literature discusses professional learning communities as an alternative to traditional professional development models. Other articles looked at professional development as a means to shift teacher perspectives and create teacher leaders. Some common themes arose when looking at the literature as a whole. Some of the themes are that professional development workshops need to be on topics that teachers have identified as areas they would like to grow in research. PD needs to allow time for teacher practice, collaboration, reflection, and feedback. In order for teachers to buy into professional development, it has to apply to issues they see in their classroom and it has to provide immediate solutions for those issues. Teachers must have a voice in PD because they all have different needs and learning styles; PD cannot be one size fits all.
Summary

Students need to be motivated to write; they need to write often, and they need to place value and set goals on their writing assignments. These ideals concur with effective writing instruction strategies identified by leaders in the field of writing. While many teachers want to create better writers through clear and evidence-based instruction, it is not happening for a variety of reasons. Teachers feel unprepared and unsupported in their practice of teaching writing instruction. Other teacher identified constraints are lack of time and limited technology. Common Core State Standards stress the need for increased writing in our schools. It is worth noting that standards are never the complete answer to instruction deficiencies; however, the CCSS may provide some guidance and support to improve and increase writing instruction and writing in our schools. The Common Core State Standards make writing the responsibility of all teachers, not just English teachers. Many teachers, including English teachers, feel unprepared and unqualified to deliver adequate writing instruction. Many other teachers believe they just don’t have the time to spend on writing instruction or practice.

Much of the writing that is happening in our schools is infrequent and simplistic and unfortunately, as a result, children are suffering. Writing is a critical skill for college and many careers. Schools must prepare our children to succeed in the 21st century. Schools need to improve writing instruction.

The implications for this researcher were to provide professional development workshops to teachers on current findings in research as well as evidence-based practices. Giving teacher quality professional development and allowing them time to implement and practice evidence-based strategies may improve the quality of their writing instruction and, hopefully, student writing. Students must be prepared to communicate in writing to succeed in the 21st century.
Educators have a responsibility to deliver appropriate, targeted writing instruction to help students achieve that success. The researcher hopes that in-service training will have a positive impact on teacher practices and student performance.
Chapter III: Research Design

This chapter describes the design of this qualitative research study. As was stated in Chapter I, students are not proficient writers in this country. With the implementation of Common Core, all teachers are expected to teach writing whether or not they have received formal or even informal training in writing instruction. This study will examine the possibility of improving student writing through professional development and PLC’s focused on writing strategies and writing instruction. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?

2. What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them?

The researcher explored how teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices changed over time as a result of the professional development, aligned with the tenets of Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory (1980). The research began with the start of the 2016 school year at a specific middle school. Six teachers participated in professional development targeted on improving writing instruction. Teachers were initially interviewed by the researcher to determine a baseline for where the teachers’ writing instruction skills and their beliefs about their ability to teach writing were before professional development workshop and PLC work. The initial interview questions can be seen in Appendix A.

The teachers attended one ½ day workshop (Appendix B) on writing instruction and attended weekly PLC meetings, facilitated by the researcher, focused on writing instruction. Before and after the study, the researcher conducted interviews with the participants. The interviews were recorded using the digital tool Voice Record and the data was stored on the
researcher’s computer. The questions centered on how, if at all, the PD and PLC’s have helped them change their practices and how self-directed learning allows them to discover their own beliefs about writing and writing instruction. Through discussion and hands on practice in the classroom, teachers demonstrated whether or not they have changed their practice. The researcher facilitated the workshops and the PLC’s and observed the classroom instruction. The final phase of the research was the closing interviews with the participants to determine how much change has taken place in their day to day writing instruction, how effective the PD was when aligned with adult learning principles as compared to other PD, and how the self-directed learning in PLCs changed or transformed their practices. During the final interviews, teachers shared their perspectives on how their improved writing instruction improved student work. All interviews were no more than an hour in duration to respect the other commitments of the participants.

**Case Study Methodology**

The types of case studies are exploratory, descriptive, intrinsic, instrumental, and collective (Baxter & Jack, 2008). All case studies examine a phenomenon within a specific context. Yin (2002), Merriam (1988), and Stake (Merriam, 1988) agree that cases need to be bound - meaning that there is a set time and place for the research and a specific number of participants. Stake notes four traits of case studies. They are: holistic, empirical, interpretive, and emphatic. Case study methodologies, regardless of the type, call for the use of multiple data sources which allows the researcher to look at the phenomenon through a variety of lenses. Another defining factor of case studies is the explicit statement of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the context (Hyett et al., 2014). There are several working definitions of case studies as qualitative research. Yin claims that case study is an “empirical
inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident,” (Merriam, 1988, p. 27; Yin, 2002). Stake (Merriam, 1988) another voice in the case study field, presents the idea that case study research is bounded and sees it as an “object rather than a process,” (Yazan, 2015). Both Yin (2002) and Stake (Merriam, 1988) believe that case studies are suited to examining programs and people (2015). Merriam presents a less restricted view of the case study than Yin and Stake in that she sees case studies as an appropriate research method for studying a person, group, or policy (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). Another definition comes from Hartley (Kohlbacher, 2006) and leaves room for a variety of theoretical interpretations. Hartley sees case study research as an investigation of phenomena within their context in order to analyze the “context and processes, which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied” (Kohlbacher, 2006).

This research study used individual interviews and observations of PD activities to identify the degree to which six teachers’ participation in the PD has impacted their attitudes toward writing instruction, their skills to teaching writing, and their students’ writing as perceived by them. As mentioned earlier, one element of case studies is the clear statement of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and the context (Hyett et al., 2014). The researcher played an active role in the research as the planner and facilitator of the professional development workshops and as a member of the weekly PLC meetings.

**Philosophical underpinnings.** As with most research methods, there is no one philosophy that defines case studies. Stake and Merriam view case study research from a social constructivist approach, which means that the researcher interacts with the participants to make meaning of the phenomena (Hyett et al., 2014). Hyett et al., (2014) claim that Yin (2002) takes a
more post-positivist approach, creating a study protocol that can be readily validated and accounts for researcher bias. Baxter and Jack (2008) see case study methodology as constructivist overall, despite some theoretical differences in the approaches of researchers. Constructivists emphasize the importance of how participants make meaning based on their perspective and how they interact with the world (Yazan, 2015). People make meaning based on their experiences with others within a variety of social contexts. In a case study, the context of the participants and the phenomena to be studied are looked at by the researcher as intertwined with one another. Each part contributes to the whole of the study. In a recent study by Hsieh (2015), she used comparative case study methodology to examine the identity orientations of three teachers based on their pre-service and in-service experiences and how those orientations could be understood in relation to classroom instruction or practice. Through interviews and observations, Hsieh (2015) was able to determine how each teacher’s professional identity was established: schooling or practice. From there she compared how those orientations impacted their instruction in the classroom, again through interviews and observation. One teacher based his teaching identity on what he learned in the classroom, while another claimed she learned through trial and error in the classroom. The third participant claimed she created her teacher identity through the study of theories, noting Vygotsky (2015) as influential. Hsieh’s (2015) research compared the participants’ created identities based on specific contexts and looked at how those identities influenced their instruction in the context of the classroom. While Yin (2002) and Stake (Merriam, 1988) have some influence over this study - it is bound and examines a group of people, the researcher aligns closely with Merriam’s (1988) ideas of case studies. The researcher actively took part in the research as the facilitator for the writing PLCs and requires a social constructivist approach to make meaning of the data collected. The
teachers who participated in the research volunteered and self-identified as needing professional development in writing instruction.

**Methodology**

The focus of this study was on how professional development and professional learning communities can impact teachers’ perceptions of their ability to teach writing to students. The researcher’s intent was to discern if teachers felt prepared to teach writing to students based on their education and experience and whether or not they felt more prepared for writing instruction after participating in PD and PLCs focused on adult learning. The researcher is a member of the participants’ work community and made every attempt to keep personal biases and beliefs out of the research. This was done in part by choosing participants who are content area teachers other than English Language Arts teachers.

**Study Context**

The study began after the start of the 2016 school year at a specific middle school in the metrowest area of Massachusetts. The researcher and teachers created goals and objectives for PLCs as well as identified writing strategies for teachers to try in the classroom. These strategies were based on the self-identified needs of the teachers and the teachers’ perceived needs of the students. Six teachers participated in professional development targeted on improving writing instruction as well as weekly PLC meetings. While there were other teachers attending the PD, these six teachers were the focus of the research.

The researcher developed the PD and the PLCs in alignment with the tenets of Adult Learning Theory and self-directed learning. The participants all work in the same middle school and have taken part in district presented workshops and school mandated PLCs. The district offers full day professional development and half day workshops a few times throughout the
year. Often these workshops are tied to the district improvement plan or the school improvement plan and all teachers attend, whether the content is relevant to their practice or not. Teachers do have some choice but the district chooses what is offered during professional development and it is almost always lead by other teachers. It is not uncommon to see music teachers looking at data from a statewide science test. It is also the norm that teachers are introduced to something new, that they may be interested in trying, but they are never given follow-up support or time to practice with the new technology, curriculum or instructional practice. The workshop that the researcher developed was voluntary and teachers signed up for it knowing that it was focused on improving and supporting their writing instruction practices. There was time for teachers to read through a variety of resources, try one or two strategies in their classrooms, and ask questions that applied specifically to their struggles with writing instruction. All of their work was supported in the PLCs that followed the workshop.

The traditional, school provided PLCs are weekly and by department. There is an agenda set by teachers but no clear or required school topics. Teachers often spend the time in PLCs writing lessons, discussing student concerns, and sharing personal stories. Rarely is the work focused on new instructional skills or practices. Looking at student works does occur but that analysis does not lead to changes in instruction or curriculum. The PLCs that the researcher facilitated were focused on writing instruction and supporting student writing. Teachers identified their largest areas of need, like providing quality feedback and writing to demonstrate content understanding, and then would share strategies, analyze how to present the information in class, and even how to motivate students.
The following table outlines the schedule of professional development sessions and PLC meetings, as well as the interviews with the research participants.

Table 1

*Timeline of data collection activities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December, 2016</td>
<td>Initial interviews with participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January, 15, 2017</td>
<td>Professional development workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – February, 2017</td>
<td>Weekly PLC meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January – February, 2017</td>
<td>Classroom and weekly PLC observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February, 2017</td>
<td>Final interviews with participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participants.** The participants were six teachers from a middle school. The teachers were from different grade levels and different content/specialty areas. One teacher was a 6th grade special educator and one was an eighth grade special educator. There were two social studies teachers, one from 7th grade and one from 8th. The last two participants were 5th grade science teachers. This range of content and grades provided multiple lenses to understand the phenomenon.

The teachers agreed to be a part of a PLC that met twice a week for an hour for 1 month and attended one extended professional development session on writing instruction and research based practices. The professional development session was 2 ½ hours in duration.

**Recruitment and access.** Each of the teacher participants self-identified themselves as in need of professional development in the area of writing. The participants all work at the same school so they were easily accessed by the researcher. Permission to work with these teachers in a PLC was obtained from the building administrator.
The six teachers from the middle school were observed and interviewed at the school in meetings and in their classrooms. The teachers attended one ½ day workshop (2 1/2 hours in duration) on writing instruction and attended PLC meetings that they ran, focused on writing instruction. The researcher observed the workshops and the meetings, taking field notes to record data. During the study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants ranging from 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were digitally recorded with Voice Record Pro. The interview questions centered on how the PD helped them change their practices and how self-directed learning allows them to discover their own beliefs about writing and writing instruction. The researcher organized and coded the data using coding software when applicable, developing patterns and trends as well as noting outliers and what those might indicate about the research.

Protection of human subjects. The research participants were all teachers at the researcher’s middle school in Massachusetts. The interview questions were developed before the participants agreed to the research. The researcher used pseudonyms for each teacher to protect their anonymity so that teachers felt free to respond truthfully to interviews. The researcher ensured accuracy by digitally recording interviews and presenting the transcripts to teachers to approve. The researcher also made it clear to all participants that their participation was completely voluntary and they could stop at any time.

The researcher completed IRB training through the National Institutes of Health’s online training program and has the corresponding IRB certification. The researcher also asked participants to sign an informed consent form outlining the research.
Data Collection

As with other qualitative research, interviews are used to gather information. In case studies, researchers also use observations, field notes, journal entries, questionnaires, records, and documents as well as many other sources to discover and gather information (Hsieh, 2004; Yin, 2002). This broad range of data allows researchers to examine several different aspects of their participants and their experiences. Stake (Merriam, 1988) and Merriam (1988) place more importance on the qualitative, seeing interviews and observations as the stronger technique for case studies (Yazan, 2015; Merriam, 1998). Yin sees a place for both qualitative and quantitative data in case studies (Yazan, 2015). Dryden and Anderson (2014), in their study of writing instruction in fourth grade, collected five sources of data: classroom observations, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, samples of students’ work, and classroom writing artifacts. While multiple data sources can provide important information for many different facets of the research, they can also lead to an overwhelming amount of data, creating time-consuming organization and analysis on the part of the researcher (Yin, 2002). The use of technology, in the form of a data-collection database, can keep the multitude of data manageable (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The data collection process for case studies varies. Yin (2002) recommends a very planned, structured process, while Stake (Merriam, 1988) has a more fluid approach, believing that as data is collected it may alter the inquiry process (Yazan, 2015). Merriam (2015) provides more structure for the actual interviews and creates a detailed process for case study research. Once the researcher identifies the how or what the data needs to answer, the researcher should identify an interesting case within a specific context. Many researchers begin with field or direct observations as data collection, while others focus on both observations and interviews. As the
context plays an important role in case studies, it follows that observing participants within that context would add necessary insights to the research. Observations can take place in a classroom, during meetings, or even an office and can be of the participant or the participant’s context. Observations can provide a great deal of data but interviews are needed to develop a more comprehensive picture of the data. There are different types of interviews that can be used. In-depth interviews provide the participants’ insights into facts as well as their opinion about those facts. These interviews differ from focused interviews as they make take place over long periods of time while focused interviews are short and usually adhere to specific questions (Yin, 2002). All interviews have to be transcribed and often those transcriptions should be shared with participants to check for accuracy. Researchers might also use surveys for data. As mentioned earlier, researchers can also examine artifacts, documents, notes, work samples, etc. to develop their case study. Yin suggests creating a pilot case study to pare down the data to what will be most useful and appropriate (Kohlbacher, 2006). There are several ways to gather data as well as many data sources to choose from. Just as there is no one recommended method for data collection, there is not one way to analyze the data.

Data collection began with the initial one on one interviews of the participants and then included observations and conversations that took place during the professional development session. Participants were observed in their classrooms and the researcher recorded those observations in field notes. The final piece of data came from the final interviews with participants. These data points helped the researcher begin to answer the research questions. Interviews were the primary source of data for this qualitative study but the researcher used observations, field notes, and discussions as well. This research studied six teachers from a middle school who were observed and interviewed at the school, in meetings and in their
classrooms. The teachers attended one ½ day workshop (3 hours in duration) on writing instruction and attended 5 weekly PLC meetings focused on writing instruction. The researcher and teachers created goals and objectives for the PLCs as well as identified writing strategies for teachers to try in the classroom. These strategies were based on the self-identified needs of the teachers and the identified needs of the students.

The researcher observed and facilitated the workshops and the meetings, taking field notes to record data. During the study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) with the participants ranging from 15 (midpoint) to 60 minutes (final). The questions centered on how the PD has helped them change their practices, if at all, and how self-directed learning allows them to discover their own beliefs about writing and writing instruction. If teachers reported that there was no or minimal change in teachers’ practices or beliefs, it was noted and future PLC work will address these findings.

All data (field notes, student work, recorded observations) and interview transcripts were stored on the researcher’s personal computer and no one will have access to the data except the researcher.

**Analytic Methods**

Researchers spend hours observing, interviewing, reviewing artifacts and documents, and then organizing all that information. That is just the beginning. They choose and gather data and then must make meaning out of it. Researchers note commonalities, patterns, or trends, as well as outliers among the data and then have to decide what this means and how it relates or answers the research question. Some researchers, like Hartley (Kohlbacher, 2006), believe that data collection and analysis should take place concurrently (Miles et al., 2014). This combined process allows the researcher to adjust questions and data sources as they go through the inquiry.
process. Yin (2002, p.109) recommends “examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study” (Kohlbacher, 2006; Yazan, 2015). Stake in Yazan takes a more open/ended approach, suggesting that creating categories as well as interpretations are general strategies but that each researcher needs to determine what works for them as they go through the analysis process (Yazan, 2015; Baxter & Jack, 2008).

In a case study by Nesbitt (2013), he examined nurses at two different sites to look at their experiences in professional development. Data was analyzed through cross comparisons in tables and used Creswell’s (2013) data analysis spiral. Creswell’s (2007) process includes reading and memoing, classifying, interpreting, and representing. As mentioned earlier, there is no one right way to analyze the data and the researcher will use a variety of approaches to determine what works. One caution presented by Baxter and Jack (2008) is that each strand of the data be looked at as a part of the whole and not examined as independent of other evidence (2008).

**Data Analysis**

The aggregate data from this study will be summarized and interpreted in Chapter IV. The researcher will use the interviews from the six participants to:

- Identify themes that arise from an analysis of all the data pertinent to each individual teacher in relationship to each research question
- Identify commonalities and differences across the teachers’ experiences as they pertain to each research question.

The researcher used field notes from the PLC discussions and the workshops to further the meaning gathered from the data. The field notes were compared and analyzed to note trends in
the data. In addition to these observations, the classroom checklists (Appendix B) were analyzed as well.

To arrive at themes from a review of the data across each individual teacher, the pre- and post-interview transcripts were reviewed in relationship to each research question. Teachers’ words and descriptions were captured, in keeping with descriptive and in-vivo first cycle coding. Their pre- and post-interviews were reviewed to look for changes in attitude toward writing instruction, impact on their writing instruction, and their commentary on perceived impact on their students’ writing as communicated through a review of their students’ work. The analysis also included a review of the researcher’s observations of the teachers during PLCs and the workshops, and in their classrooms, looking for affirming or disconfirming evidence.

Beyond a review of each participant’s “story,” the researcher reviewed the data from across the participants, looking for commonalities or discrepancies across the six participants in keeping with “pattern coding,” noting if there are any patterns in stated learning across the six participants, observations of their participation in PLCs, and outcomes in their instruction and their stated perspectives on impact on their students’ writing.

The analysis process for this research began by organizing the data from the interviews, the PD workshop, the PLCs, observations, and discussions. Following Creswell’s (2007) process of reading, classifying, interpreting and representing, the researcher read through the transcribed interviews several times before classifying the data into themes and identifying meaning in the participants’ responses. The researcher jotted down notes within the transcripts and underlined significant statements from the participants. The researcher began to note common themes and began in descriptive coding using one word or phrase that represented emerging themes (Saldana, 2014). The interviews were first coded for themes that seem to exist to some extent in
each of the participants’ interviews. As themes emerged, the researcher continually referred back to the interview transcripts to be sure to capture participants’ intent. Creswell (2003) recommends using more than one method to provide validation for a study. Through description coding and patterns, the researcher began to develop a picture of the deeper meaning of the data and began to form an explanation of how the data can answer the research questions.

**Presenting the Findings**

The final step in the data analysis process was for the researcher to determine the best way to present the findings from the data. Just as there are numerous data sources and methods to analyze that data, researchers using case studies present their findings in a variety of ways. Carr and Peters (2013) presented their case study findings about the experiences of team coaching through tables that identified themes as well as descriptive narratives for each of their research questions. In Anderson and Dryden’s (2014) research, they used tables to show information from questionnaires and descriptive narrative filled with participants’ quotes to represent their findings. Hsieh (2015) remained faithful to descriptive storytelling to share her findings about the professional identities of three teachers.

This research focuses heavily on storytelling to present the data but as mentioned above, graphs and tables are also used, in particular to note themes that arose from interviews with participants. Whenever possible, direct quotes are used from the participants to enhance the narrative. The teachers who participated in this research each had a story to tell about their journey as teachers of writing so a narrative representation is well-suited for this report. The researcher’s target audience is school administrators and districts who provide professional development for their faculty so the language used in the narrative is formal and at times, academic.
Trustworthiness

Morrow (2005) states, “All research is subject to researcher bias,” (p. 254). From the start of the research, the researcher has made every attempt to clarify personal biases so those biases do not impact the research findings. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher stated her positionality with participants by noting biases, connections to the teachers and the school, and by clearly stating how personal beliefs may impact the research findings. Participants self-identified themselves as in need of professional development to improve their writing instruction so the researcher did not play a part in choosing participants. They chose to be a part of the research in the hopes that it would benefit their instructional practices. The researcher had no prior knowledge as to how participants would answer interview questions nor was the researcher familiar with the participants’ instructional practices prior to the study.

When interviewing participants, the researcher was careful to ask all participants the same open-ended questions without leading the participants to their answers. The researcher asked clarifying questions if the participants’ responses were unclear. All classroom observations were recorded using the same checklist and field notes were taken during professional development and PLC meetings. All information was recorded without the researcher’s interpretation added. The researcher simply recorded participant statements and facts. Interpretation came later during the coding process.

To further validate the study, the researcher will have her advisor and second reader review the report to offer feedback and note possible differing interpretations of the data. This will provide opportunities for the researcher to acknowledge other ways of looking at the data beyond her own interpretation.
Summary

This chapter presented the design for this study as well as the data collection and analysis process used by the researcher to ensure the validity of the research. The two research questions that guided this qualitative study asked:

1. Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?

2. What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them?

This research asked participants to identify their own perceptions about their ability to teach writing and the researcher was a part of the research as both researcher and professional development facilitator. Due to the fact that the researcher was not independent of the research, an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm was employed throughout the study.

The participants all work as teachers who are required to teach writing and who believe they need additional support in order to teach writing to students. The participants were asked to give a pre and post interview as well as attend PLC meetings and one professional development workshop. To protect the participants from any harm, pseudonyms were used in the research and all interviews were digitally recorded and carefully transcribed to ensure accuracy of participants’ words. Data was analyzed using descriptive codes to identify themes and categories from interviews as well as classroom observations and field notes.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine whether or not professional development and PLCs created using the tenets of adult learning theory could change teachers’ perceptions of their writing instruction. With the onset of Common Core State Standards, many teachers who never had to teach writing are now required to do so. The participants in this study all teach writing and all self-identified as needing support to improve their writing instruction practices. The two questions that framed the research are:

1. Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?
2. What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them?

Initial findings from the research suggest that teachers who felt that they struggled to teach writing to students before professional development on writing instruction found that their participation in a workshop and professional learning communities focused only on writing instruction did impact their perceptions about their ability to teach writing.

Initial Interview - Participants

A total of six teachers participated in the initial interviews. Two of the teachers were male and four of the teachers were female. All of the participants were white. Their ages ranged from 24 to 56. The 24 year old was in her third year of teaching and the 56 year old was in her 20th year of teaching. Each of the participants has worked at their current location for at least three years. Only one of the teachers has teaching experience outside of their current district, not including pre-service teaching or practicums. All of the teachers teach writing to some extent in their classrooms. Each of the participants self-identified as needing support in their writing
instruction based on a questionnaire (Appendix H) sent to teachers at the middle school by the researcher. Each teacher responded that they struggled with writing instruction and would like professional development to improve their writing instruction practices. The researcher received permission from the building supervisor and the superintendent to carry out research in the building with the faculty members who asked for support with writing instruction.

The initial interviews were no more than 20 minutes in length and the researcher asked the questions from the initial interview protocol (Appendix A). The teachers met with the researcher one on one. The researcher asked clarifying questions only when the participant’s answer was unclear. The point of these initial interviews were to gather data about the teachers’ experience with writing instruction as well as their training for teaching writing instruction. Some of the data from these interviews was used to create the professional development workshop in January. Based on Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory (1980), adult learners are more likely to learn if they see the purpose for learning and that purpose impacts them professionally or socially. In keeping with adult learning theory and self-directed learning theory (Merriam, 2001), the professional development workshop and subsequent PLC meetings were created based on teachers’ identified needs and goals.

The following table provides an overview of the participants’ teaching background and experience. This information, while basic, created a starting point for the research study.
Table 2

Participants’ Background and Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (pseudonym) and age</th>
<th>Grade and Subject Taught</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Teaching Experience with writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>5th grade – Science</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>5th grade - Science</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>8th grade - Social Studies</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>7th grade - Social Studies</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>8th grade -Special Educator</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>6th grade - Special Educator</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Responses

Training for writing instruction. Each teacher was asked about their pre-service training for teaching writing. This question was intended to establish a baseline for teachers’ professional development needs. Five of the six teachers responded that they had no training in their college courses for teaching writing instruction. Katherine responded with some frustration, “I have received no formal training on how to teach writing, yet I am supposed to teach writing to some of the neediest students.” She is not alone in her lack of training. The other participants spoke to learning on the job and feeling ill-prepared to teach writing. Beth, the only teacher who reported some training for teaching writing, stated that she took an English Language Arts course in college where “we did our own writing and then talked about how we can support our students based on that. They would give us handouts and show examples of graphic organizers you could use with students.”
Tony, an eighth grade social studies teacher, said that he took a course on argument writing on his own time but that he never received formal training in college for teaching writing. Greg made an interesting point when he commented that “formally, I’ve been taught how to write but I haven’t been taught how to teach writing.” Two of the teachers, Jane and Jessie, claimed that their team teachers have given them ideas on how to teach writing which was helpful but not enough.

**Frequency of writing instruction.** Teachers were asked how often they taught writing. Answers varied from every day to once in a unit to once since the start of the year. Tony stated that his class does something with writing every day, even if it’s in the form of “Google Slides, the kids are writing every day.” Greg teaches writing once a unit which he equates to about once every three weeks. Katherine and Beth, the special educators, claim that there is more writing in the general education classroom than in their support classrooms. Katherine noted that, “Writing is not done on a consistent basis in the regular classroom or my support class.” Beth states that, “Open response writing happens every other week in English.”

The fifth grade science teacher, Jane, has only taught writing once this school year because “the kids are really not very good writers. They’re terrible at writing.” She acknowledged that if the students wrote more, they would probably improve but she felt that was the responsibility of the English Language Arts teacher.

**Types of writing instruction.** Teachers were asked to describe the type of writing instruction they provided and if they gave explicit directions on writing for a specific audience and purpose. They were also asked if they taught students the appropriate structure for the writing task they were assigning. None of the teachers reported teaching a specific structure so that information is not included in the table below. Teachers were unclear on what the
researcher meant by structure and this may be the reason for teachers stating they don’t teach it.

Responses are grouped in Table 3.

Table 3

*Types of Writing Instruction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Argument rebuttals, paragraph structure, introductions, graphic organizers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Open response writing, topic sentence and supporting details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Educators in Support</td>
<td>ACE strategy (answer, cite, extend) for open responses, paragraph structure, revision and editing process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were also asked if they taught students to write for a specific audience and purpose, two strategies that research shows can successfully motivate students to write (Troia & Olinhouse, 2013; Anthony, Tippet, & Yore, 2010). None of the teachers reported explicitly teaching students to write for an audience other than mentioning that the teacher was the audience. Tony was the only teacher who explicitly taught writing for a purpose. He said, “I would tell students that the purpose is going to be to create an argument for your topic.” Greg mentioned that he struggled with explicitly stating the purpose for writing but felt that he could do a better job of this if he tried.

**Feedback on student writing.** Each teacher was asked if they gave students feedback on how to improve their writing. All of the teachers except one reported giving some sort of feedback to their students on their writing. However, while they all provide feedback none of them felt that their feedback helped improve student writing due to the fact that students do not pay attention to the feedback and that the feedback is too general. Greg commented that this is a “huge area of need for me. A lot of comments are the same, I’ll make a general one and then I’ll
copy and paste it and either add or subtract based on the student.” Katherine responded with “I have a lot to learn for even giving feedback that might be slightly helpful.”

Jane, the one teacher who did not give feedback, claimed, “That’s what they’re (students) getting in ELA. That may be the wrong attitude but if I ask them to write a paragraph, I’m only looking for the scientific information, nothing else.”

Level of comfort with teaching writing. All teachers, with the exception of Beth, responded that they were not completely comfortable teaching writing. Beth felt that after three years of teaching open response writing with the English Language Arts teacher that she is comfortable with that type of writing instruction. When asked if she would be comfortable teaching other genres of writing, she said she would be less comfortable because she was less familiar with other genres of writing. Jessie, who teaches 5th grade science, would like to be able to use the same language that her teaching partner uses for writing. “I’m not comfortable teaching writing… I’m afraid I’m not going to use the same language Nettie (her teaching partner) uses. I want to make sure I’m using the same language and that I have the same expectations.”

Tony, who teaches 8th grade social studies, responded with “I was a little uncomfortable teaching informative writing because it was so new to me.” Greg said that he feels training would help him feel more comfortable with writing. Katherine agreed, stating that “any sort of training, any type of professional development would help because I have nothing.” Jane also believes that some training would help her teach scientific writing to her students.

Wants and needs for PD workshops and PLC meetings. Most of the participants agreed that they would like to learn specific writing strategies, like how to get students to write a concise summary or how to create voice in writing. Several of the teachers felt it would be beneficial if the PLC meetings were continuations of the professional development workshop so
that they could practice and discuss strategies with each other. Jane and Jessie, who teach a standardized tested subject, mentioned that it would be helpful if they could help their students improve their open response writing for the MCAS science test. Katherine felt that she wanted specific instruction on how to break down the writing process for struggling students. Greg would like to help support his students who really struggle to write in social studies but he “has no idea where to begin.”

**Professional Development Workshop and PLCs**

Based on participant responses, Adult Learning theory, and self-directed learning theory, the professional development workshop on improving writing instruction was created for the teachers who participated in the initial research interviews and agreed to participate in the research. The workshop was open to all content area middle school teachers, though the researcher stated at the opening of the workshop that it focused on the needs of the participants and that only the participant responses would be recorded by the researcher. There were 19 teachers at the workshop, including all 6 of the research participants. Please see Appendix I for the complete workshop presentation.

During the workshop teachers worked independently and small groups on the areas that they perceived most interesting or important to them. Based on field notes and observations from the researcher, the two social studies and two science teachers focused on writing strategies that applied to their content areas. The special educators spent more time on the feedback sections of the workshop. Jessie and Jane shared that while they wanted to teach writing more and felt that it would benefit their students, there was not enough time in the day to teach writing with all the content they had to cover. Katherine felt that she had the time but needed to practice more with the strategies from the workshop before she felt comfortable teaching writing.
Each participant was asked to try one of the strategies they learned about in their classroom and discuss it as the first PLC meeting.

Each PLC meeting focused on a different aspect of writing instruction that was identified as an area of concern by the participants, either in their initial interviews or at the professional development workshop. The PLCs followed the tenets of adult learning theory and self-directed learning (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001) in that each agenda was created by the teachers based on their needs and goals. See Table 4 for discussion topics/themes from PLCs.
Table 4

*Topics/Themes of Discussion at the PLCs*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Meeting</th>
<th>Discussion Topics/Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting #1</td>
<td>● Not enough time to teach writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Struggling with improving writing through feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Summary writing is a necessary skill but students tend to be too wordy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting #2</td>
<td>● Teachers tried RAFT writing and found it helpful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Questions about the explicitness of instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting #3</td>
<td>● How do you start teaching writing?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Looking at student work to help each other with feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Develop common language and expectations across district</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting #4</td>
<td>● Graphic organizers do not equal writing instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Revisiting student work with feedback improved from prior plc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Peer editing/revision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting #5</td>
<td>● Lessons for teaching the writing process: introduction, organization, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Shared what works, what does not work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting #6</td>
<td>● Next steps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At each PLC meeting, the researcher was just an observer taking notes. Teachers set their agendas prior to the meetings and tended to focus on one agenda item for the whole PLC, even if there were several items listed. Teachers shared student work and commented that the ideas generated in the PLC helped them improve the types of feedback they gave to students. Much of the PLC discussions centered around teachers’ frustrations with time constraints, student motivation, and their own ability to effect change.

Teachers who tried new strategies or created new tools shared them during the PLCs. Tony created a peer editing worksheet (Appendix G), after the 4th PLC where the group discussed how beneficial peer editing could be if students knew how to do it. Beth created a
feedback sheet (Appendix H) based on the discussions that took place during the workshop and the first and third PLC meetings.

During classroom observations, the researcher noted that teachers were applying some of the strategies they learned about during the workshop or others that they discussed during PLCs. Katherine developed a writing prompt for her support class and then modeled the whole writing process for her students, starting with brainstorming ideas and then creating an introduction all the way to writing a strong conclusion. She taught one mini lesson a day. The researcher was invited into the first two lessons to observe and the artifacts from the observations can be seen in Appendix I. Jane taught a lesson on writing a paragraph in science. She first had students read a passage and then asked them to identify the main ideas in writing. She gave them a graphic organizer and students wrote for ten to fifteen minutes. Each teacher stated that their work was a result of the workshop and the PLCs. The researcher observed two teachers trying strategies from the workshop or PLC (Appendix D and Appendix I).

Final Interviews

The final interviews took place after the workshop, all PLC meetings, and some of the classroom observations. All participants believe that they are more prepared to teach writing than before the workshop and PLCs. All teachers claimed to have increase the amount of writing that they require their students to perform and all teachers said they tries something new as a result of the PLCs and or the workshop. Katherine seemed to be the most adventurous in trying new things as a result of the workshop and the PLCs. The researcher had an opportunity to observe her writing lesson, which was very explicit and students developed strong answers to the prompt based on Katherine’s instruction. Katherine stated in her final interview:
My entire instruction is new. I didn’t have much of writing instruction prior to this because I wasn’t sure how to go about it and if I was even doing it right. As a special educator, I was more supporting students’ writing that they were doing in their core academic classes. Now I’m breaking down larger writing assignments into parts and explicitly teaching each part; taking it slow with the students. I’m using “modeling” more as a teaching strategy, which is something I did not do with writing prior to this process. Instead of students demonstrating their knowledge in a traditional open response style, I’ve used writing activities such as RAFT. This is an activity that I have never used prior to these PLCs. I’ve also used Strip Stories to practice summarizing. I’ve changed the feedback that I am providing to students. It’s more content based rather than editing based. I’ve also tried to be cognizant on the amount of feedback I am providing and not to give too much (this has also been possible since I’ve implemented more scaffolding).

Many of the participants felt this PLC model was more successful than other PLC models because the group was small and all participants had the same goal - to improve writing instruction. Jessie stated, “The workshop and meetings felt more genuine and purposeful.” Greg concurred and extended the explanation:

This PD was effective because it had a well-defined goal. We met in a small group and talked openly about our strength and struggles. We were given a small assignment to lead into the next class that wasn’t necessarily extra work, it was just added into our curriculum. It was also nice to get honest, solid feedback from peers.
Beth added, “It was nice being able to meet in small groups and discuss with other educators. I like that it was almost self-directed so that we could discuss whatever we needed to.” Each participant felt that their personal goals for improving writing instruction were either met or they were on their way to achieving their goals.

The following section delves into the themes that emerged from the interviews, the workshop, the PLCs, and classroom observations.

**Themes that Emerged from the Research**

The researcher analyzed interview transcripts, field notes from classroom observations, and field notes from the workshop presentation and PLC meetings to identify themes from the participants’ answers and discussions. This process involved reading and rereading transcripts and notes to code recurring concepts and identify themes. The researcher reviewed the notes from classroom observations as well as the PLCs to further identify general themes as well as develop broader concepts. The result was the emergence of four themes aligned to the two research questions. Two of the themes aligned with question one while two aligned more closely with question 2.

**Research Question 1: Can Professional Learning Communities Change Teachers’ Attitudes towards and improve their Instructional Skills for Writing?**

The first research question speaks to the possibility of professional learning communities as alternatives to more traditional professional development that is a one-time thing. Through ongoing work with a small group that has similar goals, teachers may perceive that their attitudes and abilities change. Professional learning communities are defined as a learning model for teachers where they can “meet regularly to increase their learning and the learning of their students,” (Pella, 2011, p. 107). Stewart (2014) adds to that definition by stating that PLCs are a
shift from the one and done professional development model to “that which is active, consistent, based in the teaching environment, and supported by peers,” (p. 28). The two themes that emerged in relation to this research question can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

*Themes emerging from the question: Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work focused on one topic - writing instruction - over an extended period of time rather than just once helped improve teachers’ beliefs in their skills to teach writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ willingness to try new practices is directly related to their belief that they are capable and that they are prepared.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Work focused on one topic - writing instruction - over an extended period of time rather than just once helped improve teachers’ belief in their skills to teach writing.** The researcher asked participants in the post-interview if they were more confident teaching writing after the PLC meetings and the professional development workshop. The teachers each responded in the affirmative. PLCs can provide opportunities for teachers to focus on an area of instruction to support student learning (Pella, 2011). The idea that they could have the workshop and then have follow-up meetings with the same people to work on the same topic seemed to be a positive for all participants. One of the participants said she felt more capable of teaching writing now that she knew it could be a short writing piece and not an extended time on writing. “Before the PLC meetings, I felt like I just didn’t have time. After the meetings, it’s more clear that any writing is helpful for the students.” Jessie, who feels that the PLC’s were helpful is looking forward to continuing the work, indicated, “I plan on working with this PLC for the rest of the year so I will feel more confident in my ability to teach writing.”
Jane, who has the most years teaching experience and taught writing the least prior to this study, said that “everyone was engaged and trying to better their writing instruction so it was easier to take chances and ask questions. This does not happen in our regular professional development workshops or for that matter our PLC meetings, which are one and done.” Beth appreciated that she was able to meet in a small group with other educators who had similar concerns and interests about writing instruction. Because the PLC meetings were more frequently held than traditional PLC meetings in the school, participants found that they were able to really focus on one or two strategies or problems and work together to find solutions. Katherine states that “frequency of the PLCs were effective because I could really work on one specific thing, rather than several general ideas.”

Teachers’ willingness to try new practices is directly related to their belief that they are capable and that they are prepared. Teachers who can develop their professional knowledge and increase their comfort with instructional practices through ongoing discussions with their peers are more likely to change their practices (Masuda & Ebersole, 2012). Each teacher in the study either added to their current instructional practices or changed a previous practice based on the PLC discussions. In Table 6, each participant’s changes in instruction are listed.
Table 6

*New Instructional Practices as a result of PLCs and PD*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>New or Changes in Instructional Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Jane    | - Introduced quick-writes as a daily activity  
          - Focus on content, not editing when correcting writing |
| Greg    | - Quick-writes as formative assessments  
          - Less formal writing more frequently  
          - Created a new feedback form for students  
          - Use Tony’s feedback form as well as his RAFT strategy |
| Tony    | - Chunking writing lessons  
          - RAFT strategy for informational writing  
          - Quick writes  
          - Word banks |
| Jessie  | - Quick-writes  
          - Journaling  
          - RAFT as assessment for a unit  
          - Increased daily writing |
| Beth    | - Editing sheet for students  
          - Writing for a variety of audiences  
          - Increased positivity in feedback  
          - More focused feedback |
| Katherine | - Everything!  
          - Modeling as a teaching strategy  
          - Explicitly teach each part of a writing assignment  
          - RAFT  
          - Strip Stories  
          - Content based feedback |

The RAFT strategy seemed to be popular with many participants and all either tried it or intended to try it in the future. RAFT is an acronym for Role, Audience, Format or Form, and Topic and is a successful research based writing strategy that can motivate students to write and improve their writing (Senn, McMurtie & Coleman, 2013). Teachers felt able to try this strategy after talking about it with their peers during the PLC. Greg said, “I never even knew about
RAFT before this but now I will use it often as it help my students be more descriptive and focused with their writing.” Other participants commented that knowing others had the same struggles with writing - lack of time, lack of skills/confidence, too many other things to teach - helped them be more open in discussions than they would normally have been. Tony mentioned “we were all comfortable enough to express ourselves and put ourselves out in the open. Usually if we try to have open discussion, we hold back out of fear or embarrassment.”

Research Question 2: What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them?

The second research question is more focused on traditional professional development which is defined as on-going training that can take place on-site or elsewhere. In-service means that it takes place while teachers are working in schools. Most schools offer both on and off site professional development as a means to enhance teachers’ content knowledge, pedagogy, and instructional practices (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). The two themes related to research question 2 are outlined in Table 7.
Table 7

Themes emerging from the question: What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them and evidenced in their students’ writing?

- Professional development that is teacher chosen and directed can be helpful in changing teachers’ instructional practices.
- Professional development that is one and done may not be helpful in improving or changing teachers’ practices and therefore may not impact student growth because teachers do not have time to practice or revisit new ideas beyond the workshop.

**Professional development that is teacher chosen and directed can be helpful in changing teachers’ instructional practices.** Professional development can build teachers’ self-efficacy for instructional practices if the workshops promoted growth of knowledge and skills and offered follow-up support (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). The participants in this study asked for help to improve their writing instruction and signed up for a workshop and PLC meetings with the hope that both would improve their writing instruction. Participants commented during the workshop that it was helpful to have writing instruction that was tailored to their needs and content areas. Beth stated during the workshop that “this was the first time in 3 years that I got to choose what I wanted to focus on for PD. It’s nice to be able to learn something that will help me teach my students tomorrow.”

Tony, who teaches 8th grade social studies, was able to work with Greg, 7th grade social studies teacher, during the workshop on informational and argumentative writing strategies, both necessary skills for historical writing. Tony and Greg used the workshop time to review materials provided but also develop a plan for how they would teach students to respond to DBQ’s (document based questions). Greg said, “It’s nice to align our work and also bounce ideas off of each other.”
Likewise, Jessie and Jane, 5th grade science teachers, found the workshop to be a great opportunity to develop a plan for implementing more writing into their classrooms and outlining what that might look like during the independent work portion of the workshop. Jessie noted that the work they did during the workshop led to increased writing in her classroom immediately after the workshop. “I plan to continue working on the plan that we (Jane and Jessie) came up with at PD. We will implement the nonfiction writing map and student tool kit into our new science curriculum.”

Beth and Katherine, the two special educators, worked with people who did not continue on in the research study but both agreed that they appreciated being able to self-direct their learning in the PLCs and during the workshop. Beth plans on working with Katherine and other special educators in the building to develop student exemplars for the students in their support classes. This was area of need that they identified during the workshop and pursued during the PLC meetings.

Professional development that is one and done may not be helpful in improving or changing teachers’ practices and therefore may not impact student growth because teachers do not have time to revisit new ideas or practices beyond the workshop. Based on discussions that took place during the PD workshop, the participants have not had many opportunities to pursue their own interests nor have they had a chance to revisit new things that have been introduced to them during previous workshops. Beth said that she “has come up with some new ideas from the workshop to help kids through the writing process and she’s excited to try them out.” Greg claims he’s more confident teaching writing because of what he learned during the workshop and the follow up work done during PLCs. He noted that “this PD was effective because it had a well-defined goal and all of us were invested in reaching that goal. We
were given small assignments to lead into the PLCs that wasn’t necessarily extra work, it just
added to our curriculum...writing instruction for the kids.”

During the workshop, teachers were given an overview of different strategies and then
given time to research the ones that interested them in more depth. Jane said:

In the group, I felt comfortable asking questions. Everyone was engaged and
trying to better their writing instruction. So it was easier to take chances and ask. The
topic was what the teachers needed versus what administration needs and this does not
happen usually.

After the workshop, Jane added that it was helpful to work on one thing over a period of
time rather than just have one workshop and never discuss that topic again. Katherine felt that
she learned some great strategies in the workshop and then had the support to actually try those
strategies out due to the PLC meetings. She stated, “In the past, I’ve never found PD workshops
very helpful for my instruction because they did not relate to me at all of if they did, I was never
give the time or the supports to actually try something out in the classroom.”

Summary of Findings

Teachers in this research admit to feeling ill-prepared to teach writing. All 6 participants
claimed to have little or no pre-service training for writing instruction. Only one teacher
reported taking a class in college that gave some information about writing instruction. They are
not alone. In a 2011 study by Goldberg et al, they found that many teachers do not feel
comfortable teaching writing due to little training or professional development. The participants
in this study all offered varying responses for how often they teach writing and how often their
students actually write, however, with training that extended beyond a one and done workshop,
participants in this study increased the frequency of their student writing, tried new instructional
strategies, and changed some of their writing instructional practices. When teachers are given professional development on a specific area, like writing instruction, they are more likely to deliver daily writing instruction and give students more opportunities to write using the writing process (Troia and Maddox, 2004).

During PLC meetings, participants were able to discuss their practices with their peers and share what they had tried in their classroom. Discussion focused on feedback for students that was concise and moved them up in proficiency levels, looking at student work to calibrate feedback, creating new lessons for the RAFT or other strategies, modeling writing as an instructional practice, and continuing struggles with finding time to teach and assess student writing.

Four themes arose from the research and tied back to the 2 research questions. The first research question is: Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing? The two themes that relate to this question are 1. Work focused on one topic - writing instruction - over an extended period of time rather than just once helped improve teachers’ beliefs in their skills to teach writing and 2. Teachers’ willingness to try new practices is directly related to their belief that they are capable and that they are prepared.

The second research question is: What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them? The two themes that emerged from this question are 1. Professional development that is teacher chosen and directed can be helpful in changing teachers’ instructional practices and 2. Professional development that is one and done may not
be helpful in improving or changing teachers’ practices and therefore may not impact student
growth because teachers do not have time to practice or revisit new ideas beyond the workshop.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

In the final chapter of this study, the researcher will discuss how the findings of the study answer the two guiding research questions. The researcher will present implications for future study and current practices. This chapter will also briefly review the problem of practice, case study methodology, and look at the significance of the study in relation to Adult Learning Theory and self-directed learning theory as well as the literature. The chapter will conclude by discussing limitations of the study as well as the researcher’s personal recommendations.

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

Writing is an area where many students struggle to achieve proficiency, yet it is a necessary skill in our communication driven society. Students, as well as adults, write every day for a variety of purposes and audiences, most of the writing in the form of informal memos or notes. Unfortunately, as a nation we are producing less than competent writers. In 2011, the National Center for Education Statistics presented the results of their study on student writing and it was troubling. Seventy four percent of 8th grade participants and seventy three percent of 12th grade participants scored below proficiency on a standardized writing test. For students and adults to achieve success in school and the workforce, they must be able to communicate in writing for a variety of purposes.

With the adoption of Common Core State Standards (2010), writing has increased in all classrooms, including those where writing was not traditionally taught, like science and social studies classes. Unfortunately, many teachers who are teaching writing or attempting to teach writing have received little to no training on how to deliver writing instruction (Mo et al., 2014; Applebee & Langer, 2011). Professional development in the form of workshops and PLCs could be the answer to teachers’ lack of writing instruction knowledge and practice.
There is evidence that teachers who receive quality professional development for writing instruction in their content area used more evidenced-based strategies, offer 13% more instruction than those who did not have professional development, and had improved self-efficacy for writing instruction (Anthony, Tippet, & Yore, 2010; Senn et al., 2013; Correnti, 2007). The most important idea here is that teachers who had professional development for writing instruction perceive that they are capable of teaching writing which can positively impact student achievement in the area of writing (Anthony et al., 2010).

The current study focused on six teachers from different content areas in middle school who acknowledged that they needed and wanted professional development for writing instruction to improve their practice and eventually improve student writing outcomes. The participants all have at least three years of teaching experience and believe that teaching writing is important. The study took over three months from start to finish and includes one on one interview, observations from the workshop, and field notes from PLC discussions and classroom observations. The two research questions that drove this study focus on the impact of targeted professional learning communities and professional development on teachers’ beliefs about their ability to teach writing and whether or not they teach writing in their classrooms.

**Review of Methodology**

This study was a qualitative case study that looked at how teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and practices changed over time as a result of professional development and professional learning communities that were focused on writing instruction. The phenomenon were studied at their work context over a period of three months. One of the defining factors of case studies is the explicit relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the context and that the
boundaries between the researcher and participants may not always be clear (Hyett et al., 2014; Yin, 2002).

The researcher had a prior and ongoing relationship with the participants. The researcher is the instructional coach at the middle school where the teachers work. While the researcher/coach facilitated the PLCs, the agendas were set by the teachers. The researcher did develop and present the workshop on improving writing instruction in the content areas to the participants and other teachers from the middle school. The researcher played an active role in the research as the planner and facilitator but was clear to be open about the primary role of researcher in this study.

The researcher used multiple data sources to look at the phenomenon through a variety of lenses (Yazan, 2015). One on one interviews with the participants allowed the researcher to gather data from the participants about their past experiences as well as insight into how their practices changed as a result of the workshop and PLCs. Field notes from observations, PLCs, and the workshop offered insight into the dynamics of the group working together to share their struggles and successes with writing instruction. It also provided a picture of the more typical professional development that occurred in this district. The case study methodology used for this research allowed for the researcher to observe the phenomenon within their real-life context and allowed the researcher to use a variety of lenses to gather data and make meaning of the research.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The two research questions guiding this study were:

1. Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?
2. What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them?

Four major themes emerged from the analysis of the data from the pre- and post-interviews, observations during the workshop, and observations from the PLC meetings. The four themes are:

1. Work focused on one topic - writing instruction - over an extended period of time rather than just once helped improve teachers’ belief in their skills to teach writing.

2. Teachers’ willingness to try new practices is directly related to their belief that they are capable and that they are prepared.

3. Professional development that is teacher chosen and directed can be helpful in changing teachers’ instructional practices.

4. Professional development that is one and done may not be helpful in improving or changing teachers’ practices and therefore may not impact student growth because teachers do not have time to practice or revisit new ideas beyond the workshop.

These themes were identified and discussed in Chapter IV.

In the initial interviews, it was clear that five out of the six participants felt that they had received no training to teach writing and that this greatly impacted how much they taught writing as well as how they taught writing. Beth, the one teacher who took a course in college that touched on writing instruction, still felt unqualified to teach writing. Most of the teachers felt that even though it was important to teach writing, they did it minimally and always questioned their ability to teach writing correctly.

Comments from the participants about their training from writing instruction include:

- “I’ve never had any formal training as far as to teach writing.”
"I took a class in college."

The only training I’ve had has been from my teaching partners, who teach ELA."

“I don’t recall any formal writing instruction class, even in my education classes.”

“I have had no formal training.”

“The only training I’ve had came from my team partner.”

The participants reflect the findings in many studies where teachers claim to have had little to no training on how to teach writing, yet are expected to teach it anyway (Graham et al. 2014; Mo et al., 2014).

Though all teachers had limited training for writing instruction, they attempted some type of writing instruction for their students. Some of the participants had students do some sort of writing every day while others did it once a week or once a unit. They all felt unprepared to give feedback that helped students grow as 5 out of 6 teachers felt that they were unable to help students who really struggled with writing. Teachers felt that they slightly improved in both areas after the professional development workshop.

Due to the lack of formal training for writing instruction, all of the participants signed up for the professional development workshop and subsequent PLCs for the purpose of learning about the teaching of writing and improving their instructional practices. Each teacher chose to participate in the research study, knowing that the focus would be on writing instruction.

During the professional development workshop, participants were able to pursue their own areas of interest with regards to writing instruction. They also collaborated with peers in their departments or content areas. The workshop was created using tenets of Knowles Adult Learning Theory as well as self-directed learning theory. Beth, one of the participants, mentioned during the workshop that it was great to look at strategies targeted for students with
writing disabilities rather than review information that does not apply to her immediate needs for her classroom. After the workshop, each teacher in the study reported trying either a strategy from the workshop or increasing the amount of time they had students write.

The researcher had the opportunity to visit two of the classrooms of the participants. In both classrooms, there was evidence that teachers were applying some of the writing instruction tools they learned about during the workshop or the PLC meetings. In Jane’s classroom, she explicitly delivered writing instruction and had students sustain their writing for at least 10 minutes (Appendix D). The researcher also observed Katherine explicitly deliver a lesson on brainstorming topics for writing and creating an introduction for that piece of writing (Appendix I).

During the PLCs, the six teachers discussed their struggles and successes with writing in the classroom. Each of them reported that they were more willing to try a new practice because they felt supported both by their peers and that they had time to develop instructional plans and get feedback on those plans during the PLC meetings. All of them appreciated the small size of the group, feeling that it made it easier to have open discussions about writing. One recurring theme from the participants was that they felt this type of professional development that allowed for practice in the classroom and follow up during the PLCs was more helpful than the traditional style of PD offered by the district. Some of their responses follow:

- “It was nice meeting with a small group.”
- “In the past, PD has been one and done. Even if something was good, I couldn’t try it because I didn’t have time to prepare and I didn’t feel that I knew enough.”
- “The increased frequency of the PLCs allowed us to focus on one thing, whereas other PD is more broad and general.”
- “We met in a small group and talked openly about our strength and our struggles.”
- “It felt more genuine and purposeful than other PD.”
- “Because we met so many times, we were able to follow up on what we had discussed/worked on at previous meetings. This does not happen in regular PD.”

It was clear from the participants’ interviews and discussions that they found the structure and frequency of the workshop and the professional learning community meetings a benefit to their writing instructional practices.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical base for the research study was concerned with how adults make meaning and then how they apply that meaning into their practice. Using the tenets of Malcolm Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory as well as the closely-related theory of self-directed learning, this research examined how professional development could promote teacher growth and self-efficacy in the area of writing instruction.

To revisit Adult Learning Theory, Knowles introduced the idea of andragogy or adult learning in the late 1960’s. The six tenets of the theory are:

1. Adults mature into a self-directed, rather than dependent learner.
2. Adults’ experiences should be taken into account in their learning, can add to the learning process or become a foundation for learning.
3. Adults’ willingness to learn is tied to their social roles.
4. Adults want to find answers to problems through their learning rather than study concepts in theory.
5. Adults are motivated by internal factors more than external factors.
6. Adults need to know the purpose for their learning. (Knowles, 1980; Merriam et al., 2007; Beavers, 2009)

Self-directed learning (SDL), like adult learning theory, focuses on independent or adult learners. SDL goals are for adults to direct their own learning and to critically reflect on that learning (Merriam, 2001).

The professional development workshop and the professional learning community meetings were created and introduced with these theories in mind. The professional development workshop (Appendix B and Appendix G) was developed based on the identified needs of the participants. The researcher asked them what they felt they needed based on their experience teaching writing, their past education opportunities, and their current needs in the classroom. Following some of the ideas from self-directed theory and adult learning theory, the researcher asked adults to use the materials provided to work on their perceived struggles with writing instruction. There were strategies tailored for specific content areas as well as information on how to give effective feedback in writing and how to write a summary in different content areas. The participants were asked to try some of the strategies they felt most related to their practice and then report back on those attempts during the PLC meetings. Both of the special educators, Beth and Katherine, appreciated that the workshop and PLC meetings addressed their needs as special educators. Katherine noted in one of the meetings that as a special educator, workshops and PD are usually geared for the regular classroom educator and often don’t relate to her needs. Beth said several times that she liked “that it was almost self-directed so that we could do whatever we needed to do.”

Both science teachers, Jane and Jessie, reported in their post interviews that they liked collaborating together in a small group for one purpose. Jane felt it was helpful to focus on
writing instruction only and believed that this gave her more confidence to teach writing in her classroom. As she said, “In a small group, I felt more comfortable asking questions. I wasn’t afraid to say something did not work because I knew that everyone else (the other participants) would have the same struggles or know how to help me.” Jessie agreed and mentioned that she still needed more time to read over all the material presented at the workshop but liked that she could do that independently and then discuss her findings with the members of the PLC.

The social studies teachers found their writing instruction increased as did student writing and both claimed in their post interviews that they believe the workshop was tailored for their needs and being able to work with colleagues in a small group increased their comfort level in discussing challenges and asking questions. They both report feeling more confident about teaching writing after the workshop and PLC meetings.

Adult Learning Theory and Self-directed Learning Theory seem to have applied to the participants in this study. They felt that having control over what they learned, how they learned it, and when they learned it was more beneficial to their practice than more traditional PD workshops and PLC meetings.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature**

The literature review found in Chapter II of this study looks at several different strands in regard to writing in our schools. It begins by looking at writing theories over the years, moves on to discussing current writing instruction practices, discusses how the acceptance of the Common Core has changed writing instruction, and ends with examining literature on professional development and professional learning communities as ways to build teachers’ instructional self-efficacy for writing. For the purpose of this chapter, the research findings will
be reported mostly in relation to the final section of the literature review on professional development and PLCs.

In the literature review, the researcher discusses how students have shown little growth in the area of writing in our country despite the call for increased writing in all content areas that resulted from the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (2011). Students seem to struggle to produce proficient writing all through secondary school and continuing into and beyond college (Mo et al., 2014).

Both Delpit (1988) and Ladson-Billings (1995) identify the teacher as one of the biggest indicators of student success in the classroom. Teachers who believe their students can write will have students who write. Teachers who do not think their students can write, often have students who struggle in writing (Graham et al., 2013). In a 2013 study by Graham et al., the researchers found that middle school teachers form 5 states feel unprepared to teach writing. Other studies reported similar findings (Mo et al., 2014; Applebee & Langer, 2011). The participants in this study align with the preceding findings with all but one of the teachers claiming to have had no formal preparation program to teach writing. Much of the literature suggests that quality professional development, whatever form that takes, can improve teacher self-efficacy for writing instruction (Correnti, 2007; Senn et al., 2013; Cho & Schunn, 2005).

Based on the findings from this research, professional development that has a clear goal and is focused on how adults learn can impact teachers’ beliefs about their ability to teach writing. The teachers in this study reported trying new strategies in class, more frequent writing instruction, and increased time on writing for their students. Teachers felt more prepared to teach writing due to the professional workshop and the following PLC meetings. Professional development can and should promote a teacher’s knowledge and skills to support their classroom
practices (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). Likewise, professional learning communities (PLCs) should foster ongoing discussion, provide feedback, offer modeling, and appeal to teachers’ interests so that teachers can continue to grow (Masuda & Ebersole, 2012). According to the participants in this study, they felt more prepared to teach writing after participating in the workshop and the PLCs.

According to the findings from this study and the literature reviewed, professional development that seems to be the most successful in improving teachers’ self-efficacy for writing instruction allows for peer collaboration, was ongoing, and allowed for follow up through coaching or peer feedback, and was relevant to teachers’ needs (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008; Whitney & Friedrich, 2013; Dierking & Fox, 2012).

**Implications for Practice**

The intended audience for this study is school districts and building administrators who are responsible for developing curriculum and choosing and developing professional development for faculty. This includes superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors of curriculum and instruction, instructional coaches, and building principals and assistant principals. Outside contractors who create professional development for educators may also find this research useful.

An important implication for practice that arose from this study is that teachers are unprepared to teach writing so they are reluctant to deliver writing instruction, offer feedback on student writing, and have students write on a regular basis. If teachers do not feel that they have the skill to teach writing, they will not teach it or they will not teach it using evidence-based strategies (Graham et al., 2013). They will end up using worksheets as an alternative to quality, explicit instruction that students need to become proficient writers (Graham et al., 2013).
Participants in this study work in one of the better middle schools in Massachusetts, according to the Massachusetts Department of Secondary and Elementary Education’s school rankings. Yet, many of our teachers feel they are unprepared for the instruction they are supposed to deliver according to The Common Core State Standards (2011).

This study showed that with targeted professional development on writing instruction, teachers can and will adjust their instruction practices. However, the more traditional approach of a professional development workshop being one and done is not enough to foster and promote teacher growth. Participants in this study stated on several occasions that professional development has to be more than “one and done” for it to be successful. Teachers want to have a choice in what they learn and how they learn it. They also want to be able to follow up the workshop by applying what they learned into their own classroom. Participants in this study were frustrated with the amount of professional development they have had in the past that they found unrelated to their practice or unimportant to them personally.

Another significant implication from this study is that when teachers can choose the topics covered in PD workshops they are more likely to be vested in the workshop and less likely to resent having to attend than those workshops that were created by the district and where the teachers can see no practical need for in their everyday practice. Districts spend thousands of dollars on professional development for their faculty. That money should not be wasted on workshops that teachers deem irrelevant to their practice. The question should be asked if they are indeed wasting their money by offering professional development that teachers have no voice in choosing and thus no desire to learn from the presentation. If the desired outcome of PD are to improve student learning through the advancement of teacher knowledge and skills, then the PD offerings need to meet the perceived needs of the teachers.
Perhaps the most significant implication that arose from this study is the participants’ belief that the PLC meetings that followed the professional development workshop had the greatest impact in changing teachers’ instructional practices for writing. District and building planners of professional development and organizers of professional learning communities should note that the culture of the school needs to be focused on teachers as learners in order for PLCs to be truly successful (Dufour, 2004). Teachers in this study wanted to improve their writing instruction and felt that they had not been supported by the district in this goal. Previous writing instruction offerings had either not addressed their individual needs or took place in too large a group to have quality discussions.

Districts and professional development creators should use the information presented in this study from its participants to plan workshops that represent the needs and wants of the teachers as well as create professional learning communities that are focused on the adult learning needs of the faculty. Teachers found that they changed their practices after the workshop and PLC meetings because they felt that they had both the knowledge and support to teach writing in their classrooms. Applying the tenets of Adult Learning Theory and self-directed learning can improve the outcomes of professional development as teachers in this study noted that they were more interested in learning because they chose the topic, had time to learn and practice skills that applied to their students, and were able to participate in small group discussions with other like-minded professionals who could offer feedback and suggestions on their writing instruction.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to examine how prepared teachers believe they are to teach writing and if they feel more capable after participating in professional development and
professional learning communities focused solely on improving writing instruction. Two main questions guided this study:

1. Can professional learning communities change teachers’ attitudes towards and improve their instructional skills for writing?
2. What is the impact of professional development on teachers’ attitudes and skills to effectively support the development of their students’ writing as perceived by them?

The researcher followed a qualitative case study for the research. The research took place over three months at the participants’ work cite. The researcher was involved in the study as both facilitator of the workshop, observer, and interviewer. The data collected in this study came from a pre- and post- interview as well as observations, discussions, and field notes from the professional development workshop, and the professional learning communities. The researcher analyzed the interviews, discussions, and notes to find emerging themes that described the participants’ experiences during the research.

The study produced several findings. The first is that although teachers are required to teach writing in their classrooms, very few of them have had actual training on how to teach writing and all of them struggle with improving student writing through instruction and feedback. The second finding is that through professional development and professional learning communities that is geared for adult learners to have choice and self-direction, teachers feel more engaged in their own learning. The third, and perhaps most important, finding is that teachers changed their instructional practices after the workshop and subsequent professional learning community meetings because they perceived that they were more prepared to teach writing and that they had more support from their colleagues in the form of feedback and discussions.
Limitations

This research took place over 3 months in a bound context with a small sampling of participants. The study did generate a great deal of data that answered the two guiding research questions. However, as with all research, there are always limitations.

The participants all worked in the same district and the same school. This may mean that this school does not hire teachers who have writing instruction experience while other districts might. The participants all voiced some negative perceptions about their district’s professional development offerings and the structure of their traditional professional learning communities. This could be attributed to many factors, such as discontent with their work environment, lack of quality professional development, poor implementation of professional learning communities, etc. Future research would do well to have a bigger sampling of participants from a variety of districts to see if the findings are similar to those found in this research.

Another potential limitation of this study can be identified in the case study methodology. If the researcher were not a part of the researcher and if the time was not so bound, results may have been somewhat different. The researcher had an opportunity to ask the participants what they felt would help them the most in improving their writing instruction and their answers lead to the development of the workshop. The researcher only had a limited time to perform interviews, deliver a workshop, and hold PLC meetings. With more time, teachers may have seen even more changes in their practice or possibly their interest could have waned. Future research might want to use a quantitative study to get a bigger sampling from a variety of districts over a longer period of time.
Validity

The validity of this study relies in part on its participants. Each one volunteered for the study and participated in two interviews, a 2 ½ hour professional development workshop on improving writing instruction, and professional learning community meetings. While the researcher knew all of the participants before the study, the researcher did not try to persuade them to participate. They self-identified as wanting to improve their writing instruction and were then asked if they would like to participate in the study.

As an instructional coach for the same district where the participants work, the researcher brought a bias to the study based on her experience in the district. To ensure that this bias was not present in the research, the researcher was careful to not influence participants’ answers and avoided asking leading questions. As a facilitator during the professional learning community meetings, the researcher took notes and asked clarifying questions. The participants created the agenda and discussion points for the meetings. The researcher feels confident that the participants would agree that the controlled the PLC meetings and that the researcher did not try to influence the discussions.

The researcher personally transcribed both sets of interviews with the participants and was careful to record every word accurately. The researcher took notes during the workshop and PLC meetings, often directly quoting participants when something seemed to resonate with the group, spoke to the research questions, and/or was a recurring thought or phrase among the participants.

Future Research

This qualitative case study took place over a three month span. Researchers interested in improving writing instruction may want to extend a study to cover teachers involved in
professional development for writing instruction for year or longer. It would be interesting to see if there was even more of a positive impact on teacher self-efficacy after sustained professional development. Researchers under different time constraints may also want to examine student work as part of a future study to see if there is improvement in their writing based on teachers’ experiences with professional development.

As mentioned in the limitations section in this chapter, future research would do well to look at a bigger sampling of participants from a variety of districts to see if the findings are similar to those found in this research. This qualitative study focused on six participants from the same middle school who all took part in the same workshop and professional learning communities. Widening the participant pool may present a more complete picture of the impact professional development can have on teachers’ instructional practices. A larger sampling may also provide insight into the success of different workshops and PLCs, providing more data for those who plan and present workshops. Researchers could also perform a quantitative study to survey participants with the goal of gathering more data about teacher preparation for writing instruction as well as the success of workshops and professional learning communities.

**Recommendations**

The more I learned through my research, the more I began to believe that we are not training our teachers to teach writing yet we have increased our expectations for all teachers to teach writing with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards. One of my recommendations that comes as a result of this research is that our teaching training programs must offer at least one required course on writing instruction for all prospective teachers. I think teachers of social studies and science should also be required to take a course on writing for their
specific content area. Special educators should also take additional classes on to teach writing to students with specific disabilities that may greatly impact their ability to write.

The second recommendation that has come out of research is my belief that professional development workshops are not meeting the needs of teachers and therefore have become something teachers dread. Professional development is a great opportunity to impact teachers’ practices and in turn improve student learning but teachers have to have a say in what they learn and how they learn it. Teachers need time to truly synthesize new information before they can present it to their class. They need to have the opportunity to discuss new ideas with their colleagues and then share their findings after they implement them into the classroom. Districts must value their teachers’ experiences and at the same time allow them to explore their own interests if they want professional development to have a positive impact on student learning.

**Personal Comments**

I began this journey of looking at writing practices and student writing long before I ever became a researcher. When I was a practicing English teacher, I was fascinated by the process of writing and how each of my colleagues had their own unique ways of teaching that process. Similarly, I found that students came to me either loving or hating writing. Over my years as a teacher, I found that I truly did have the potential to make all of my students writers but it depended on me giving them the skills they needed and building their self-efficacy around writing. As I began my time as a doctoral student, I also shifted into the role of instructional coach. As a researcher and a practitioner, I became troubled about the lack of proficiency our students possess in writing and I began to question the reason why our schools were producing such poor writers.
I am grateful to have had the opportunity to conduct this study. I have learned so much about writing instruction, adult learning, and my own passions along the way. Although I am excited to conclude this process, it has been such a big part of my life for such a long time that a part of me thinks I might just miss it – a little bit.
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Appendix A

Appendix A - Teacher Initial Interview

Participant
Date
Time

1. Please introduce yourself.
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. How long have you been teaching writing, if at all, in your classroom?
4. What sort of training, if any, have you had for writing instruction?
5. How often do you teach writing?
6. What sort of instruction do you provide? Do you give explicit directions on writing for an audience and a purpose?
7. Do you teach the structure of writing that is appropriate for the writing task?
8. How often do your students write? Is there opportunity for sustained writing?
9. Do you give feedback that shows the students how to improve their writing?
10. Are you comfortable teaching writing? If not, what do you think would increase your comfort level?
11. What do you hope to get out of the professional development workshops and PLCs?
Appendix B - Professional Development Workshop – Session 1

Content area teachers and special educators who have self-identified themselves as in need of professional development on writing instruction.

Objectives:

● Review Common Core State Standards on argument and research writing for Writing in Social Studies and Science:
  http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/WHST/6-8/1/
  http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/WHST/6-8/2/
● Identify learning goals for students – what they should know and be able to do by the end of the writing unit.
● Develop lessons as a group, targeting one of the standards, and using research based strategies presented in the workshop.
● Set agendas for upcoming PLC meetings

Agenda

1. Review CCSS and choose one to focus on in classroom for the next two to three weeks.
2. Jot down your struggles/successes with writing instruction. Share in with table group.
3. Review writing instruction practices and strategies: extended writing assignments, creating strong leads, how to identify purpose and audience and then choose appropriate style and language, supporting arguments or research with evidence, modeling writing through mentor texts and exemplars.
4. Create lessons for chosen standard, using the above tools.
5. What should the next PD look like based on today? Check in during PLC meetings to see what teachers need and want to improve instruction and student writing.
Appendix C - Final Interview Protocol

Participant
Date
Time

1. Are you more confident than you were in the first interview in your ability to teach writing?
2. Please describe how your writing instruction has changed, if at all, due to the workshops and PLC meetings where you were a participant.
3. How often do you explicitly teach writing? Has this changed from your previous practice?
4. How often do your students write? Has this changed from your previous practice?
5. Do your students write for a variety of purposes and audiences?
6. Share the improvements or changes that you have witnessed in your students’ work based on your changes in instruction.
7. Have you tried anything new as a result of the PD or the PLCs?
8. What are your struggles, if any, with writing instruction?
9. What further needs do you have for your continued growth in writing instruction?
10. Explain how this PD and subsequent PLCs differed from those you’ve participated in before, if at all?
Appendix D - Classroom Observation Notes

Jane

Teacher explicitly delivers instruction for the writing activity?

Yes, the teacher told students they were going to answer a prompt with a topic sentence and at least 3 supporting details.

Students write for sustained lengths of time?

Students wrote for at least 10 minutes and were redirected to continue writing if they stopped sooner.

Teacher provides immediate feedback for student writing either through discussion or via the computer?

Teacher provided feedback to some students in the moment but not all.

Teacher tries one or more of the strategies presented in the workshop?

Teacher asked students to create a topic sentence and details based on what they read. This came from the science information part of the workshop.

Teacher models writing expectations?

Teacher did not model expectations nor did she present an exemplar.

Teacher provides writing exemplars with explanations for the assigned writing tasks?

See above.

Teacher uses mentor texts to further model exemplary writing for students?

Teacher did not use a mentor text.

Other Observations: Teacher seemed comfortable instructing students and students seemed clear on what and how to write for the assignment.
Appendix E - Questionnaire for Teachers

1. Would you be interested in professional development about writing instruction?

2. Do you believe that you are prepared to teach writing in your content area to students?

3. What areas of writing instruction do you find challenging?
Appendix F - Professional Development Workshop Presentation

Please use the link to access the workshop materials. *Workshop Presentation*
Appendix G - Teacher Created Peer Editing Worksheet

Name of Author: ___________________ Name of Peer Reviewer: ____________________

Peer Editing Worksheet

I. Introduction Paragraph
1. Does the HOOK grab the reader’s attention? YES/NO
2. Does the introduction flow from BROAD to SPECIFIC? YES/NO
   a. Does the author use at least 3 steps to go from broad to specific? YES/NO
3. Does the introduction include a “preview of coming attractions” highlighting the main topics of the essay? YES/NO
4. Does the introduction end with a thesis statement? YES/NO
   a. Is the thesis a clear statement that includes the author’s topic? YES/NO
   b. Does the thesis have an actual argument to it? YES/NO
      i. What is the argument?

II. Background Paragraph
1. Does the paragraph start with a transition from how the intro ended? YES/NO
2. Does the paragraph do a good job quickly summarizing the main background information about the topic of the essay? YES/NO
3. Is all info cited with proper in-text citations? YES/NO
   a. How many citations are used? ________________
   b. How many different sources are used? ________________
4. Does the author avoid direct quotes and only use paraphrasing? YES/NO
5. Does the summary flow logically from one point to another, or is it a scattered list of details that don’t seem to really flow from one to the next?
III. **Main Body Paragraph 1**: What is the topic and argument of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

1. Is the first sentence of the paragraph a topic sentence AND a transition from the paragraph before it? **YES/NO**

2. What is the main idea of the 1st ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

   a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? **YES/NO**
   b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? **YES/NO**
   c. Is the evidence cited correctly? **YES/NO**
   d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? **YES/NO**

3. What is the main idea of the 2nd ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

   a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? **YES/NO**
   b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? **YES/NO**
   c. Is the evidence cited correctly? **YES/NO**
   d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? **YES/NO**

4. What is the main idea of the 3rd ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________

   a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? **YES/NO**
   b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? **YES/NO**
   c. Is the evidence cited correctly? **YES/NO**
   d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? **YES/NO**

5. How many direct quotations are used in this paragraph? ________________
6. How many DIFFERENT sources are used in this paragraph? _______________
7. Does the paragraph end with a 2-3 sentence concluding section that ties the main argument of THIS PARAGRAPH back to the overall thesis? YES/NO

IV. **Main Body Paragraph 2:** What is the topic and argument of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

1. Is the first sentence of the paragraph a topic sentence AND a transition from the paragraph before it? YES/NO

2. What is the main idea of the 1st ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

   a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? YES/NO
   b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? YES/NO
   c. Is the evidence cited correctly? YES/NO
   d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? YES/NO

3. What is the main idea of the 2nd ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

   a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? YES/NO
   b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? YES/NO
   c. Is the evidence cited correctly? YES/NO
   d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? YES/NO

4. What is the main idea of the 3rd ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

   a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? YES/NO
   b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? YES/NO
c. Is the evidence cited correctly? YES/NO

d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? YES/NO

5. How many direct quotations are used in this paragraph? ______________

6. How many DIFFERENT sources are used in this paragraph? ______________

7. Does the paragraph end with a 2-3 sentence concluding section that ties the main argument of THIS PARAGRAPH back to the overall thesis? YES/NO

V. **Main Body Paragraph 3:** What is the topic and argument of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

1. Is the first sentence of the paragraph a topic sentence AND a transition from the paragraph before it? YES/NO

2. What is the main idea of the 1st ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________

a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? YES/NO

b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? YES/NO

c. Is the evidence cited correctly? YES/NO

d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? YES/NO

3. What is the main idea of the 2nd ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?

________________________________________________________________________

a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? YES/NO

b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? YES/NO

c. Is the evidence cited correctly? YES/NO

d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? YES/NO
4. What is the main idea of the 3rd ICE (introduce-cite-explain) section of this paragraph?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

a. Does the author have good enough context before the citation? YES/NO
b. Does the author use a proper “lead-in” if using a direct quote? YES/NO
c. Is the evidence cited correctly? YES/NO
d. Does the author analyze what the evidence shows and how it proved the main argument of the paragraph? YES/NO

5. How many direct quotations are used in this paragraph? _______________

6. How many DIFFERENT sources are used in this paragraph? _______________

7. Does the paragraph end with a 2-3 sentence concluding section that ties the main argument of THIS PARAGRAPHS back to the overall thesis? YES/NO

VI. Conclusion Paragraph

1. Does the author transition into this paragraph? YES/NO

2. Does the author begin the paragraph, after transitioning, with a RE-PHRASED thesis? YES/NO
   a. Are you sure this is not too repetitive with the original thesis at the end of the introduction? YES/NO

3. Does the author spend 3-4 sentences explaining “So What?!” YES/NO
   a. What is the main idea of why their topic matters?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. Does the essay end with a “mic-drop” worthy HAMMER? YES/NO
Please list TWO things about the paper that were good:

Please list TWO things about the paper that can be improved:
Appendix H - Teacher Created Feedback Form

Student Name:

Assignment:

Feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Come see me</th>
<th>Need to edit (on own)</th>
<th>Proficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitalization</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
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<td>Open response structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paragraph structure</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Introducing citations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting citations</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Introductory sentences</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Transition sentences</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding sentences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You did well on:
  1. 
  2. 
  3. 

You need to go back and revise:
  1. 
  2. 
  3. 
Appendix I - Teacher Implemented Lesson: Student Work

Writing Prompt: We all have a place where we can imagine or go where we want to be alone and relax. Think of your favorite place. Now write a paragraph explaining why this place is your favorite.
**Writing Prompt:** We all have a place where we can imagine or go when we want to be alone and relax. Think of your favorite place. Now write an essay explaining why this place is your favorite.

- Bed, In my room,
  - riding my quad bike,
  - riding my NEW 2010 outside,
  - just riding all vehicles,
  - makes the yard messy and nice

- Quad/Backyard
  - (Four-wheeler)
  - fun to do donuts
  - burnouts on my driveway
  - makes cool skid marks that are satisfying and relaxing

- Takes my mind off everything - stressful
  - very relaxing because I have a lot of land to ride on