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Teacher's Block: Embracing the Challenge of Improving Students' Writing

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TEACHER'S BLOCK: EMBRACING THE CHALLENGE OF IMPROVING STUDENTS' WRITING

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“You may delay, but time will not.” –Benjamin Franklin

Abstract

This paper will explain the overall trend of worsening writing abilities in the past twenty years of education. The purpose of the paper is to analyze this downward trend, examine different methodologies for teaching writing, and propose solutions on how to better approach writing instruction. The challenges with teaching writing range from the difficulty of getting technology absorbed students to focus on one task for a long period of time to also the problem of giving each student individual feedback on their work – an essential element of writing instruction. The research reviewed shows this downward trend in writing assessment data, and in amount of time spent on writing instruction. The literature reviewed suggests that strategies-based writing instruction is effective with learners of all grade levels, and also effective with low-income and minority students.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Plight of the Writing Teacher

Teaching writing at a secondary level demands a unique challenge for both students and teachers. Students are expected to be able to organize their ideas into well-written thoughts and even attempt to think in an abstract or creative way that they are most likely not yet experienced with. They are expected to master their command of language and then use this command to formulate arguments, analysis, stories, and poems. Rather than a structure where there are clear right and wrong answers, students must explore themselves and begin to contemplate what ideas are right for them. Teachers, on the other hand, must facilitate this process without providing cut and dry right answers. They must be simultaneously encouraging and also critical. They also must give specific individual feedback, a daunting task with class sizes that are perpetually ballooning.

A successful teacher of writing must embrace the ideal of a "Romantic Pragmatist." The "Romantic" side says, "every student has a story and must find their own way to express it;" it's the side that says, "every student just needs a drop of inspiration to unleash the undercurrent of creativity into a waterfall;" it's the side that encourages students to think outside the box; it's the side that goes stargazing; it's the side that wants to explore, and get lost on purpose. But then there is pragmatism. The pragmatic side gets concerned about how to assess each written work by students, gets concerned about the time necessary to give meaningful individual feedback to students,

and gets concerned about the obscene amount of punctuation errors muddling up many students' work.

This thesis will analyze literature that examines ideas that apply to both sides of this coin. The teacher must encourage the student unceasingly like an unflappable romantic poet daily singing songs about each beautiful blade of grass in a field. The teacher must also adapt pragmatic methods to give feedback in a timely and effective manner – while also being clear and helpful. Additionally, the teacher must not crush the spirit of the student. Students often have a fragile disposition towards writing that is quick to quit when failure seems imminent. This is the plague of the "fixed mindset," which is what Dweck describes as, "believing that your qualities are carved in stone" (Dweck, 2016, p.6). In this mindset, one bit of negative feedback may set a student back from days of learning. Given the challenges that face teachers to reach their students with writing instruction, it is essential to embrace both the romantic side that encourages students to explore, and also the pragmatic side that gives students the clear guidelines for setting goals and analyzing how successful they are at achieving them. If both sides of this coin are not engaged, the danger is that students will settle for simply working to meet the bare minimum standards of writing, and fail to embrace the task of truly improving as a writer. Writing becomes a mundane task that is mostly about sentence structure and answering questions in a way they feel confident that the teacher will approve of.

To many students, writing is boring. It involves staring at a blank sheet of paper attempting to figure out a writing task for minutes sometimes stretching into hours.

That blank page scoffs at students as they attempt to string together words into phrases, always feeling the prickling of inadequacy when they start a sentence and quickly erase it in their mire of discontentment. When a classroom of 18 students was asked to write down the first word that popped into their head as a response to the word "writing," most of the responses were words with negative connotations. This word cloud depicts their responses; the words that are bigger in size are the words that were repeated the most.

The first challenge with teaching writing is to change the common perceptions about writing. The first common perception that must be shifted is that students are not

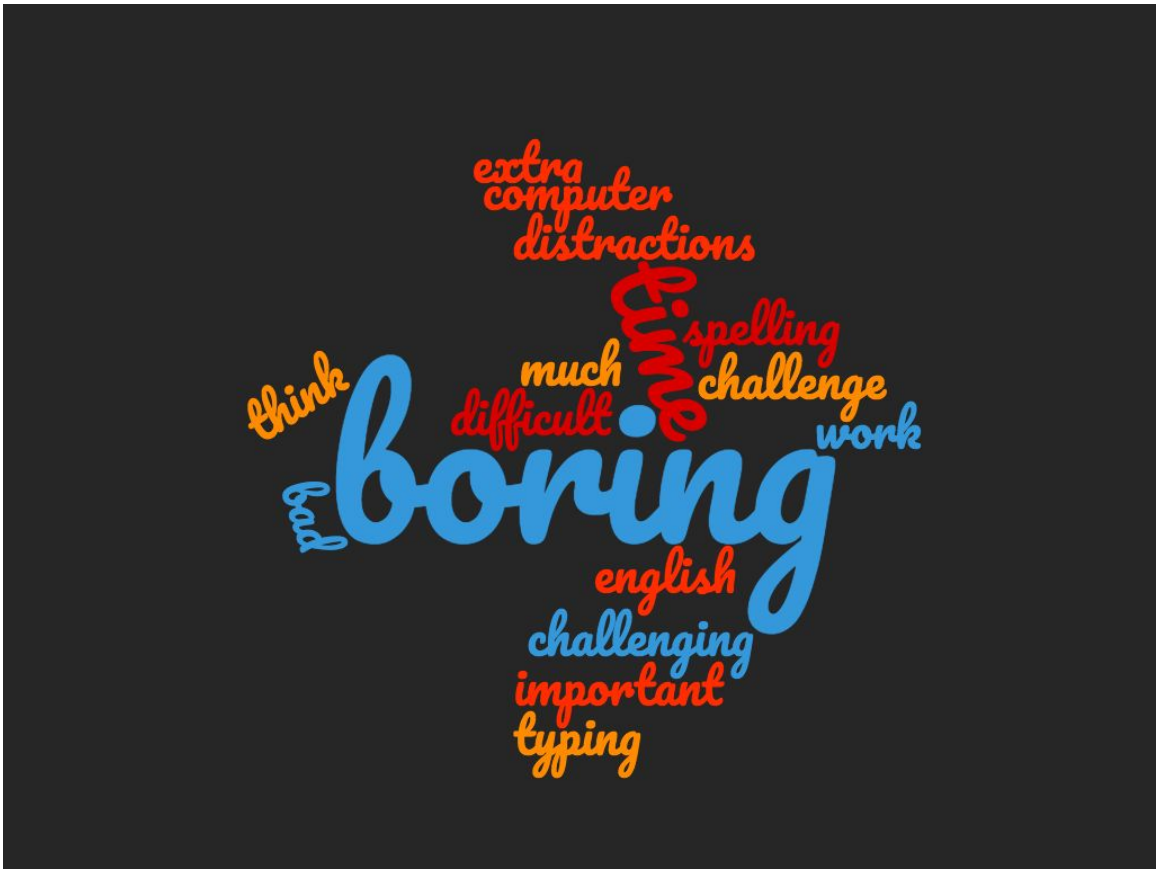

Figure 1: Word cloud on students' reactions to the term "writing."

capable of good writing. The teacher must believe that any student can achieve excellent writing. It may be that students' dislike of writing is sourced in feelings of inadequacy. With writing, the plague of perfectionism strikes harder than with other learning tasks.

Additionally, the purpose of writing has changed dramatically over the past 10-20 years. Writing assessments, like the ACT writing test, for example, require students to write for 40 minutes straight without any break. The sustained effort of writing that is commonly taught in classrooms, where students attempt to focus on one writing task for 15 minutes or more, is no longer the common/everyday use for writing especially in the lives of teenage students. Writing tasks today normally take the form of text messages and emails where complete sentences are unnecessary, and the task takes less than 5 minutes. Although students are communicating with written words constantly, they remain disconnected from the skill set necessary to produce organized writing over an extended period of time. While the purpose of writing has changed, it remains possible for teachers to bridge this gap from unstructured text message writing to organized and structured essays written over an extended period of time.

The State Of Writing Education

This paper will demonstrate how, over the past 20 years in the US, students' general writing abilities have declined steadily. A few of the sources used for this literature review explain the data trends of several writing assessments that generally show a negative trend in students' writing abilities. Additionally, the paper will also analyze sources that show this trend but also propose methods of instruction that have been successful in reaching students and improving their writing abilities. The focus of this paper is not simply to demonstrate the negative trend in writing instruction, but to sift through the various viewpoints about the causes and solutions to this trend.

A simple moment of reflection on the drastic technological changes of the past will cause a realization in regards to how students think about writing. Just a couple of decades ago, students would respect published writers as people who had honed their craft and reached a point where their words were published. Now, publishing is quick and easy, with no requirements placed on the quality of writing. The computer also assists with spelling and grammar rules, resulting in an overall complacency when it comes to writing as a practice where it is worthwhile to apply a regular work ethic in order to hone skills. This decline in writing could also be caused by higher levels of insecurities with students: perfectionism chokes out the budding flowers of "would-be" writers. It also could be the emphasis given to Math and Science that often leaves writing lagging behind. This paper will investigate the trend of declining writing abilities, and theorize into the potential causes. Although it is difficult to generalize or have a

conclusive answer in terms of the cause, an investigation into probable causes will help the educator in providing a curriculum that is best fit to work against the tide set against improving the writing skills of students.

While the current state of students' writing abilities is discouraging, there is reason for hope. Writing is an area of instruction where with a dose of romantic idealism and also some pragmatic tips to make the assessment/feedback process more efficient, a window can be opened for students to change their perception of writing. Good writing takes practice and commitment, but it starts with an assumption that success or at least improvement is possible. Anne Lamott (1997), a renowned writer known for guiding/teaching other writers states that, "Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul" (p. 237). This somewhat romanticized explanation of writing may not ring true to students, but it is the teacher's responsibility to show them that these words have underlying truth to back them up. On the more practical side, Lamott (1997) also encourages writers that, "Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere" (p. 25). Students often expect that their first draft will be "good enough," and it is the teacher's job to demonstrate that the first draft is essential, but only as a building block towards the final product. When students can get beyond their "fixed mindset" (Dweck, 2016, p.6) about writing, they can be able to get beyond that first draft and truly improve their writing skills. The literature reviewed in this paper will demonstrate various effective methods for working against this mindset of students

and using effective pedagogical methods to guide students away from tendencies towards poor writing.

Research Questions

The focus of this paper will be on three different research questions. The first question, and perhaps the most easy to answer and form direct conclusions around, is, what is the current state of writing abilities among high school students in America, and have students' writing abilities improved or worsened over the past 15 years? To answer this question, the paper will review various comprehensive writing assessment data that map out generally where students have scored with writing. To do this, a detailed examination of each assessment is necessary to show exactly what outcomes the assessment was assessing and what exactly the data shows about the state of high school students' writing abilities.

The second research question, as a natural follow up to the first is, what are the best pedagogical practices for teachers to help students improve their writing, especially considering how the environment for teaching writing has greatly changed over the past 15 years? For this question, there will be a review of more practical literature sources, sources that give teachers tips on how to more successfully reach students. For some of these sources, the practical tips will be based on specific studies done regarding the effectiveness of one method over another. A few of the sources reviewed take the form of an instruction manual for teachers where a teacher regarded as successful at

teaching writing shares his/her wisdom. Both types of sources are helpful in guiding teachers at improving pedagogical methods for teaching writing.

The final research question is intended to more specifically investigate the problem of poor/worsening writing abilities amongst students from low-income families or minority populations. The question is, how can writing be improved with students from low-income families or students in minority populations? A quick survey of the data will reveal that the problem of poor writing skills is most problematic amongst students on the wrong end of the "opportunity gap." This paper will analyze literature more directly intended for teachers engaged in settings with high numbers of low-income and minority students. This includes English Language learners because they tend to makeup a significant portion of low-income students.

Definition of Key Terms

Some key terms of this paper are the terms assessment, peer-supported, and teacher feedback. While all of these terms may be familiar, it is important to more specifically define their use in regards to the specific purposes of this paper. The term "assessment" will refer to any kind of check on students' writing, from a cursory read-over to a formalized writing test such as the ACT writing test. It is an umbrella term that will require each use to be more specifically defined in regards to the specific scope of the assessment. The term "peer-supported" has to do with a strategy for writing instruction where peers are taught how to read the writing of their peers, and ask appropriate questions about it. A "peer-supported" writing assignment is one where

interaction with peers around the assignment is built into the lesson, and required as part of the writing process. Finally, “teacher feedback” is another umbrella term that includes both written and oral feedback given to students about their writing. Teacher feedback can be simply putting a “smiley face” on a written assignment, or it could be an extended conversation with a student about their work, or also circling boxes on a rubric to grade an essay. This term will be used more generally in this paper, as many types of teacher feedback can be effective to support students’ writing.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

Investigations into the JSTOR database, Education Journals, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reports, and EBSCO MegaFILE were utilized searching articles from 1998 – 2018. The keywords for these searches were “teaching writing through cognitive strategies” relating to the first research question, “methods of teaching writing” for the second research question, and “teaching writing to low income schools” for the third research question. The focus of this literature review is on middle school and secondary general education students whose first language is English. While some reviewed sources of this thesis focused on primary school students or English Language learners, they were selected due to their relevance to the topic writing instruction. Certain studies in this field of research were excluded because they were too focused on English Language learners or dealt with topics exclusive to primary education. Additionally, this thesis will explore a selection of books about teaching writing that provide a practical application angle to go along with the body of research reviewed. The search for books was primarily done using the Bethel University library catalogue with the keyword search, “methods of teaching writing.”

The Report Card

Staring at a blank screen with the expectation of creating an amazing story can be a daunting task, so, like any good 9th Grade English teacher will tell you, the first thing is to establish the setting of the story. The setting of overall writing abilities in the US could be likened to airplane travel in that moment when the plane begins to lose altitude and starts its descent back towards the earth. For a long time, the plane has held a steady speed and direction - but now it is shifting. Despite the incredible security of airplane travel in modern times, when the shift of momentum turns on a plane, an involuntarily clench of the stomach bursts forward with a feeling of apprehension. There has been a technological shift in direction with writing, and many teachers are stuck clenching their stomachs with nervousness and uncertainty.

Like any field of education, the field of writing has movement, a direction, and maybe even a destination. Steve Graham (2008), who is one of the standards or "go-to" educational thinkers on teaching writing says that, "writing is a gateway for employment and promotion, especially in salaried positions" (p. 1). This statement reverberates as the one unshakeable truth about writing: it is important for both college and workplace success. While this remains the same, the method of writing has drastically shifted: from lead pencils, to computers, to touch screen devices that predict what you will say as you write. The form of writing has also shifted in check with the technological shift. There is a greater emphasis in our world on succinct messages in the form of texts, emails, or 160 character tweets. The rules for writing and language have also shifted as emojis and abbreviations have increasingly invaded the writing lexicon as standard means of

conveying thoughts and feelings. Along with emoji enabled communication has been a de-emphasis on traditional paragraph organization of writing, as well as well implemented use of grammar/punctuation rules. Still, amidst this change, the plane has a direction and writing remains as the "gateway for employment and promotion" (Graham, 2008, p.1).

Graham, as one of the leading researchers on writing instruction, points out that the under-prioritization of writing in high school curriculum is the main problem. Graham surveyed high school teachers to about the types of writing assignments students work on and found that, "half of the most common assignments were basically writing without composing" (Graham, 2008, p.1). This indicates that students commonly are not tasked with the type of writing that demands organization and a drafting process. Graham also adds that almost half of the teachers surveyed were not properly trained in how to teach writing. These observations setup Graham's seven recommendations for teachers to improve their writing instruction. Graham's recommendations centered article is based on the premise that there is a lack of prioritization of both the teaching of writing to students and the teaching of writing instruction to teachers.

Graham makes recommendations, but the National Center for Education Statistics "Report Card" on writing skills paints the authentic statistical setting for the writing skills story. The study was published in 2011 and it assessed more than 50,000 students' writing samples, split between 8th and 12th graders (National Center for Education Statistics). This extensive study found that only 27% of 8th graders and 27%

of 12th graders are at a "Proficient" writing ability level. The study assesses the students' ability to persuade, to explain, and to convey experience. The assessment rewards students capable of organizing writing into a clear paragraph structure, and to clearly explain their ideas. While the study is based on these more traditional writing skills, it concedes that, "writing in the 21st century is defined by its frequency and its efficiency" (National Center for Education Statistics, p. 1). This reflects a change of approach in this assessment where students recorded their responses on a computer instead of paper, and the writing situations assigned to them were not simply 5-paragraph essays but rather a variety of tasks comparable to both workplace and educational writing tasks.

This National Report Card study demonstrates innovation in the field of writing assessment in how data was processed in regards to which students used computer-based word-processing. The computer-based assessment tracked how students used editing tools, highlighting tools, and 21 other technological writing tools available. (National Center for Education Statistics). This resulted in valuable data regarding how often students revise their writing or use tools like spell check or the thesaurus. This method of assessment is helpful to teachers as they attempt to pinpoint the specific technological tools that can be helpful to students, and get beyond the traditional pencil and paper form of writing.

Many students may jump out of their seats when given their opportunity to explain their opinions about a given subject out loud. However, when a piece of paper or a screen is put in front of them, and they are asked to explain their opinions, they

smash into a figurative wall. Many students have lost the ability to transfer their thoughts into written statements, and are in need of an updated flight crew to guide this “writing instruction” plane to a safe landing. In order to do this, the National Report Card study indicates that teachers need to do a better job of educating students about the various technological tools at their disposal when word processing on a computer. Another problem that could be clearly seen from the computer based assessment was that students often do not go back to edit or revise their writing. The study states that, “students whose teachers more frequently asked them to use the computer to draft and revise their writing scored higher than those whose teachers did so less frequently” (National Center for Education Statistics, p. 17). This finding shows how students who are educated both on the rules of writing, but also the tools of writing, are better set up for success.

In addition to the overall statistic of 27% writing proficiency, the data also reveals some important distinctions: female students write better than male students, higher family income students write better than lower family income students, suburban school students write better than urban and rural school students. These results are fairly predictable to anyone with knowledge of the current state of education in the US. However, less predictably, 44% of students “report writing is a favorite activity” (National Center for Education Statistics, p. 35). Why are only 27% of students proficient at writing, yet 44% of students report that writing is their favorite activity? This paradox demonstrates how students enjoy the ability to express themselves, but

there is a disconnect between enjoying this task and connecting it to the necessary standards of organization and structure that make writing clear, and easily digestible.

While the NAEP's Report Card shows low numbers in its most recent assessment, the data actually shows more of a plateau than a downward tilt when the 2011 data set is compared with the previous two writing assessments from 2007 and 2003. The Figure 2 table (Figure 2) shows slight gains in writing proficiency both at the 8th and 12th grade levels.

Table A.9 Percentage of students and standard errors by writing achievement level, grades 4, 8, and 12: 1998 and 2002

		Below *Basic*	At *Basic*	At *Proficient*	At *Advanced*	At or above *Basic*	At or above *Proficient*
Grade 4							
	1998	16 (0.4) *	61 (0.6) *	22 (0.7) *	1 (0.2) *	84 (0.4) *	23 (0.8) *
	2002	14 (0.4)	58 (0.4)	26 (0.4)	2 (0.1)	86 (0.4)	28 (0.4)
Grade 8							
	1998	16 (0.5)	58 (0.5) *	25 (0.7) *	1 (0.1) *	84 (0.5)	27 (0.7) *
	2002	15 (0.4)	54 (0.5)	29 (0.5)	2 (0.1)	85 (0.4)	31 (0.6)
Grade 12							
	1998	22 (0.7) *	57 (0.7) *	21 (0.7)	1 (0.1) *	78 (0.7) *	22 (0.7)
	2002	26 (0.7)	51 (0.7)	22 (0.7)	2 (0.2)	74 (0.7)	24 (0.8)

* Significantly different from 2002.
NOTE: Standard errors of the estimated percentages appear in parentheses.
Percentages within each writing achievement-level range may not add to 100, or to the exact percentages at or above achievement levels, due to rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 1998 and 2002 Writing Assessments.

Figure 2: 1998 and 2002 NAEP report card data

However, the 2002 data set also revealed a stark opportunity gap where white students performed significantly better than students from minority populations. The

next assessment in 2007 showed gains both for white students, but also for minority groups.

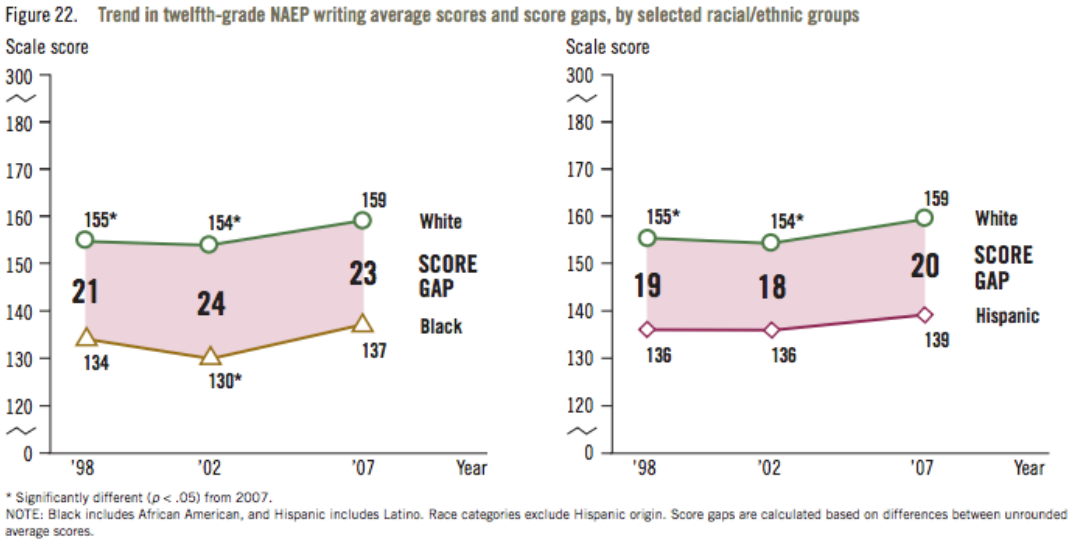

Figure 3: 2007 NAEP report card data

While these results are encouraging, when paired with the most recent data in 2011, they generally show a plateau rather than significant gains. The 2007 data may have been skewed due to being an imperfect trial run of the now more common computer based writing assessments. That being said, the 2011 overall proficiency number of 27% does show a significant increase from 2002's 22%. However, 27% is still an alarmingly low number. Also, the 2011 data again shows that while writing abilities may be staying the same or improving amongst students with higher-income families, the trend is going the opposite direction for students with lower income families. Although the NAEP report card data is somewhat inconclusive about whether or not writing abilities in the US are truly on a downward spiral, it is clear that only about a quarter of US students are graduating high school with a "Proficient" writing level.

In another measure of data, the ACT writing test, the downward trend can more clearly be seen.

Year	# of test takers	English	Math	Reading	Writing	Composite
2006	1,206,455	20.6	20.7	21.4	**7.7**	21.1
2007	1,300,599	20.7	20.8	21.5	**7.6**	21.2
2008	1,421,941	20.6	21	21.4	**7.3**	21.1
2009	1,480,469	20.6	21	21.4	**7.2**	21.1
2010	1,568,835	20.5	21	21.3	**7.1**	21
2011	1,623,112	20.6	21	21.3	**7.1**	21.1
2012	1,666,017	20.5	21.1	21.3	**7.1**	21.1
2013	1,799,243	20.2	20.9	21.1	**7**	20.9
2014	1,845,787	20.3	20.9	21.3	**7.1**	21.0
2015	1,924,436	20.4	20.8	21.4	**6.9**	21.0
2016	2,090,342	20.1	20.6	21.3	**19.3***	20.8
2017	2,030,038	20.3	20.7	21.4	**6.5**	21.0

**2016 writing results are based on ACT Writing from September 2015 to August 2016, when the test was scored on a scale of 1-36*

Figure 4: ACT test score data from 2006-2017

From 7.7 in 2006 to 6.5 in 2017, the writing test scores drop consistently at a rate of about .1 per year. This ACT test data demonstrates a clear and consistent trend

towards worsening writing abilities. While the NAEP assessment establishes the general setting of the state of writing in America, this ACT writing assessment data gives the "Rising Action" of this story, a definite builder of narrative tension as writing scores trend downward consistently while the other four subject areas remain relatively steady. The negative trend in writing scores is especially surprising when compared to the consistency of the scores in the other four sections. There is no question; students' ability to complete an extended essay on a timed test has been declining for ten years or more.

The National Commission on Writing's report entitled *The Neglected "R" the Need for a Writing Revolution* (2003) gave the story a call for climax fifteen years ago saying, "American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom" (p. 3). While it is admitted that good writing education is taking place in select corners of the nation, the paper was unapologetic in its call for revolutionary change. This report helped to spur some movement in the world of writing instruction due to its "S.O.S." climactic signal. The report calls for comprehensive district curriculum changes to place a higher priority on writing instruction time, a re-analysis of assessment equity, and a full revamp of available technological tools.

The basic conclusion of the report was that students "cannot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment" (p. 16) and also defining the "four challenges [that] require particular

attention: time for writing, assessment or measuring results, integrating technology into the teaching and learning of writing, and support for teaching" (p. 20). This defined the focus on better writing, better assessments, better technology, and better teachers, as well as demonstrated the heightened national alarm around decreasing writing skills. The report also shows how the problem is specifically about compositional writing: the practice of organizing and drafting thoughts into an extended written response. While this "call for revolution," came fifteen years ago, the ACT writing results indicate that the revolution has not come to fruition yet.

Smith's article *A Principled Revolution in the Teaching of Writing* (2017) provides an updated analysis on the writing revolution. Smith states that, "writing pedagogy in the English classroom remains outdated, and caustic partisanship among theorists may be to blame" (Smith, 2017, p. 70). Smith points the finger at researchers feeling that researcher's alarm is overly intense and can be a turn-off for well meaning teachers (Smith, 2017). It is difficult to empirically prove the validity of this accusation; however, it does reveal an apparent disconnect between the research on writing instruction and the application by teachers. It also demonstrates how writing, perhaps due to the mentally intimate nature of the exercise for both teachers and students, brings out intense disputes between teachers, researchers, students, etc. Smith attempts to bridge this divide by laying out a six component approach to better writing which essentially boils down to a need to teach the process and strategies of writing rather than a focus on the product of writing. While Smith may be accusatory towards researchers, his

article's six components harmonize well with much of the research reviewed in this thesis that emphasizes teaching the writing process over the writing product.

The outlier in the field of research regarding "teaching the process" is the Baines et al. (1999) article entitled *Losing the Product in the Process*. Baines et al. concede that "the process movement has done wonders to improve the teaching of writing" (p. 67), however they conclude that, "the obsession with process, at times, crowded out the hard, dirty work of learning to write well" (p.71). The "dirty work" references skills like grammar and spelling that are under-emphasized in the process model. While this article points out a flaw in the "process based" approach to writing instruction, the weight of the research reviewed in the following section suggests that this drawback is negligible when weighed against the positive outcomes of writing instruction that focuses on the process, or on "cognitive strategies" for writing.

The "Cognitive Strategies" Approach

The "cognitive strategies" approach to writing instruction is a general term for the method of writing instruction that seeks to teach the fundamentals of planning, self-monitoring, outlining, drafting, revising, and reflecting as its main goal. The research reviewed surveyed various iterations of this method, but the common thread is that students are taught the thinking around writing and assessed on their ability to process, plan, and revise rather than on the quality of their final product.

Primary Schools

Although elementary schools are not the dominant focus of this thesis, there were two different studies conducted in primary schools that lay a fundamental foundation for research into the "cognitive strategies" approach. One such study was Harris, Graham, and Mason's (2006) project that assessed the knowledge and motivation of students in writing using a teaching approach focused on instructing the skills of self-regulation. In this study, 273 2nd and 3rd grade students from 11 different classrooms in Urban Washington D.C. districts were assessed on how well they are able to write a story. The students were divided into three groups, and the results especially examined "the effectiveness of self-regulated strategy development (SRSD), a strategy instructional model designed to promote development" (p. 295). The "self-regulatory strategies" approach focuses on skills like planning, story mapping, self-monitoring, and drafting. The "peer support" element was a separate group that also focused on self-regulating strategies, but created groups of peers to share their learning with each other as they went about the writing tasks.

Harris et al. (2006) found that the students in the Self-Regulated Strategy Development plus peer support group succeeded over the control group by spending more time planning their papers and their papers were longer. However, the results were more conclusive with the 3rd grade group than with the 2nd grade group. Additionally, Harris et al. found that students in the comparison group had longer papers that were described as "qualitatively better." The study advised that more

research be done to understand why these methods were more effective with slightly older students.

While the study was somewhat inconclusive in its findings regarding peer-supported learning, it clearly showed how self-regulatory practices in writing helped students create better-organized stories, and especially increased their knowledge of writing in general. The results of the assessment demonstrated how students in the SRSD-only group could better explain the elements of their stories and also, on a different assessment, show an understanding of what is needed in an argumentative essay (Harris et al., 2006). The SRSD approach puts focus on the techniques of writing, which can amplify students' learning in comparison with an approach that focuses on the content of the writing. Additionally, this study was done in an urban setting with mostly students from low-income families. The finding about teaching self-regulating strategies is especially true in this context as students must first understand how to plan writing, and how to self monitor their needs as they write in order to be capable of composing any kind of extended work.

More recently, Bai conducted a similar study (2015) with 442 fifth grade students in Singapore. This study provides a useful data point to compare how the effectiveness of the cognitive strategies based approach would work in an entirely foreign context with learners whose first language is not English. As part of the study, students were taught nine specific lessons on strategies such as, "text-generating, feedback handling, and revising" (p. 96). While these skills are different than what Harris et al.'s study emphasized, the main idea of putting an emphasis on self-monitoring the techniques of

writing – monitoring, re-reading, revising, and strategizing/planning – is the same. This study similarly found that students increased their knowledge of how to utilize writing strategies and were able to understand a basic writing formula. Bai (2015) suggests that writing instructors ubiquitously adopt an approach of teaching the strategies of writing first with explicit specificity. These two studies on primary school students harmonize in their finding that it is valuable to teach the strategies of writing, rather than focus on the content of writing.

Secondary Schools

The previous two studies show how strategy-based writing instruction methods work for students in 2nd – 5th grade, yet the essential question remains for how these methods affect high school level learners. Olson et al. (2012) conducted a similar assessment to Harris et al.'s focusing on a cognitive strategies based approach with high school students. This study involved 72 different English teachers from the Santa Ana school district in California. The study was focused on English Language Learners, similar to the previously mentioned study that worked with ELLs in Singapore. This particular study was done in response to the problems specifically facing ELLs as, "inadequate educator capacity and the limited use of research-based instructional practices prevent adolescent ELs from learning academic English and meeting content standards in English language arts" (Olson et al., 2012, p. 327). This quotation shows that while the problem of declining writing ability is especially prominent amongst the growing community of ELLs in the US.

The cognitive strategies approach discussed in this study rings similar to the previous studies, except that teachers in this study were part of the Pathway Project which is an alliance with UC Irvine to put English teachers through ah a 46 hour training course specifically aimed at strategies based instruction for ELLs. Olson et al. (2012) explain how students in the study learned the individual steps of both reading and writing, and how each step of the process was explicitly taught. This explicit emphasis on the teaching of reading and writing strategies was narrowed down among other variables and shown that it can open up windows to comprehension for ELLs as well as assist in understanding the practice of writing.

The results of Olson et al.'s study were compiled over two years and were comprehensive in their success. Olson et al. (2012) observed an average percentile improvement of three points on all three post-instruction test grades. This finding validates strategy-based instruction as essential especially for ELLs. It also suggests that more research is necessary to investigate how this approach to teaching writing will play out in other areas of the country as Olson et al. affirm by saying, "a longitudinal study to track student progress through secondary school and into postsecondary education is necessary to document whether the intervention contributes to students' academic success in the long term" (2012, p. 350). This finding demonstrates how more research is needed, especially with English language learners both because there are more unknowns and complications with this population, and because it is a growing population that is an increasingly pressing issue in US education.

In an article that attempts to bridge the gap between this research and practical application, VanDeWeghe (2008) asserts that these methods should be seen as applicable to all students, having a comprehensive value that is not exclusive to ELLs. This shows how these instructional methods have a universal necessity and is not simply effective for ELLs. VanDeWeghe also affirms teaching cognitive strategies by saying that this method can, "demystify thinking processes by making thinking a visible part of daily classroom life" (VanDeWeghe, 2008, p. 96). The word "demystify" is a helpful clarifier elucidating how the teacher clarifies the thinking process that unlocks the door for students to become successful writers.

Kim et al.'s (2011) study also assessed high school students' analytical writing abilities centered on Latino students and had similar research questions to Harris et al.'s study and heavily involved ELLs. Kim et al. (2011) involved "Pathway Project" teachers utilizing some variations to the assessment process involving a more intensive required pretest. In the introduction to the study, Kim et al. highlight how "many teachers of struggling students and ELLs avoid teaching students to write analytical essays because they feel the abilities required are too sophisticated" (2011, p. 4). This quotation underscores how many teachers feel ill equipped to take on the task of teaching writing to ELLs, and also the need for programs like the Pathway Project. Kim et al. (2011) then show how these students can learn the strategies necessary for analytical writing and can therefore build towards writing well-organized analytical essays. Students in the Pathway Project group of the study scored .35 units higher, showing an approximately similar (3 percentage points) finding to Olson et al.'s study. This demonstrates a

consistent result that any type of student, including struggling students or ELLs, can benefit from a strategies-based approach to teaching writing.

In another study entitled *Improving the Persuasive Essay Writing of High School Students With ADHD* (2010), Jacobson et al. further demonstrate this point by assessing analytical and persuasive essay writing with students who have ADHD. While the scope of the study is small, just three students, the results indicate "a marked improvement in the number of essay elements, length, and holistic quality of students' essays" (p. 157). Jacobsen et al. worked specifically on writing strategies with each student, going step by step through the planning and revising process, focusing on the "how" of writing rather than the outcomes. The findings of the study replicate other findings on strategy-based instruction while also showing how this method can be useful with students who have learning disabilities. Previous research involving special education students focused on short narrative writing often more common in primary schools, but this study focused specifically on high school level analytical writing. The lack of research specifically related to analytical writing implies a lack of hope that this level of writing ability can be taught to students with learning disabilities. Jacobsen et al. (2010) confirmed that a strategies-based methodology could be effective in improving writing, even for students with ADHD. Jacobsen et al. also added further confirmation to the finding that strategies-based instruction can be effective with any type of learner.

In another study entitled on strategies based writing instruction, the findings with middle school students were similar to Harris et al.'s research. De La Paz and Graham (2002) found that "students in the experimental treatment condition produced

essays that were longer, contained more mature vocabulary, and were qualitatively better" (p. 687). The students referred to were students specifically taught in cognitive writing strategies as part of a two school, 944 student study conducted in a suburban setting where over 90% of the students were white and were not from low income families. The teachers in this study received a manual with scripted instructions for how to execute the SRSD model mentioned in the Harris et al. study. The instructional emphasis for the experimental group was on using a "plan and write strategy" (De La Paz & Graham, 2002, p. 693). De La Paz and Graham's findings were exactly as anticipated, and were even preserved when students were assessed a final time one month after strategies based writing instruction had been completed (De La Paz & Graham, 2002). Interestingly, both the experimental and the control group increased the amount of pre-essay planning for the post-study assessment, although the experimental group's essays still proved qualitatively better (De La Paz & Graham, 2002). This indicates a potential flaw in the research practice where control group students may also have been influenced by the changed curriculum of the experimental group. All this aside, De La Paz and Graham verified how teaching cognitive strategies for writing is helpful for students at the middle school level, a vital time for developing these skills.

The use of cognitive strategies has also been researched as to its effect on standardized test scores. Langer (1999) worked with high school students to understand the underlying causes for students that "beat the odds" by getting a higher standardized test score than average. Langer was looking for students who went beyond basic

reading and writing to develop a mastery of academic language more suitable for higher-level critical thinking. Langer terms “high literacy” as, “the ability to use language, content, and reasoning in ways that are appropriate for particular situations and disciplines” (1999, p. 1). This definition sets forth what is commonly understood as the underlying goal of language arts classes: to help students establish a fluency in academic language in order to be well situated to grapple with complex ideas and to not be thrown off by standardized test’s academic lexicon.

Langer’s investigation of 960 students spread across 19 Florida schools boiled down to a core of six findings about the students who “beat the odds.” These six findings are what Langer establishes as the model for growth in writing instruction. Although this study is older than other studies looked at in this thesis, this study sets up the foundation for classroom reforms such as “strategy based instruction.” One of the six main findings from the study was that successful “students are overtly taught strategies for thinking as well as doing. In contrast, in more typically performing schools, the focus is on the content or skill, without overtly teaching the overarching strategies” (Langer, 1999, p. 39).

Again, a strong emphasis is placed on explicit instruction that focuses on the thinking strategies necessary to produce good writing, rather than on the content of the writing itself. Langer’s study also stressed a belief in “sociocognitive learning” which is the idea that learning cannot be “boxed in” to study, but rather it happens in a context and a culture that reflects the values of all those involved. Langer specifically looked at how students make connections between their learning and their “real lives.” Langer

(1999) found that the schools that place a higher priority both on connections between students and their communities, but also between teachers and students, had a high rate of success on standardized tests. This was another of core six findings about beating the odds that connectedness of learning is an emphasis of the schools that perform higher. This demands that teachers make connections with students both about the content of what they are learning, but also about the context for their learning which is the culture of the community around them. Langer acknowledges that her core six findings must be embraced as a complete package in order to truly see positive results. However, the study was conducted within schools with 80% or more low-income family students proving how these methods can be useful in any context.

In a more current study entitled *A Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High Schools* (2011), Applebee and Langer give an updated picture of writing instruction at the secondary level. This study was more comprehensive, collecting data from 260 classrooms that did not solely include English teachers. It also involved twenty different schools spread around several states (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Applebee and Langer were not focused on the use of cognitive strategies, but rather a broad analysis of how writing instruction has changed in the past twenty years. Applebee and Langer (2011) reported that teaching writing through the use of cognitive strategies with an emphasis on the process rather than the product had become the common practice in more than 90% of English classrooms. They point out how this is a drastic shift from when most of the instruction around writing occurred after the student had completed their writing assignment. Still, Applebee and Langer lament how

little instructional time is actually placed on writing, and how much class time goes to things like test preparation. In their observation, only 6.3% of class time is devoted to the teaching of cognitive writing strategies (2011, p. 21). Applebee and Langer show how the tide of writing instruction has shifted but suggest that a greater emphasis on teaching cognitive strategies is necessary to achieve significant improvement.

Graham and Harris's article (2000) narrows the scope of cognitive strategies to center on self-regulation and transcription skills. Graham and Harris state that, "high levels of self-regulation are thought to be important to skilled writing because composing is an intentional activity that is quite often self-planned and self-sustained" (p. 3). Self-regulation can be measured by tracking whether students are goal driven, and whether they apply any sort of strategic approach to planning their writing before diving in. Graham and Harris find that self-regulated writers are more skilled writers, but also suggest that more research is necessary. Graham and Harris (2000) conclude by stating that successful writers can transcribe and self-regulate. The addition of transcription is somewhat surprising due to both Graham and Harris's focus on self-regulation in other research studies. However this study makes it clear that the simple ability to transcribe symbols on a page is of paramount importance to become a successful writer.

Graham, as a leading researcher in writing instruction, is a key force producing a body of research, but also defining to what avenue that research should take its next steps. In 2011, Graham and Sandmel published a study entitled *The Process Writing Approach: A Meta-analysis*. Graham and Sandmel analyzed the body of research on

teaching the writing process, comparing 29 different sources. Graham and Sandmel conclusively find that writing pedagogy that emphasizes cognitive strategies consistently results in improvements, they concede that the statistical gain is "relatively modest" (2011, p. 398). The data supports writing instruction that is centered on teaching the process, however Graham and Sandmel were expecting more conclusive numbers. Graham and Sandmel (2011) also conclude that teaching the process of writing does not necessarily help students that are already low-performing writers . Graham and Sandmel mention that this finding contradicts several other studies and suggest that more research is necessary. They also point out the variables, such as inconsistently applied training for various teachers, which could have complicated the data. This meta-analysis makes it clear that continued research in the field of writing instruction is of paramount importance if the conclusive findings are to be achieved.

The Writing Instructor's Toolbox

This sub-section overviews research studies on specific tools for writing instruction. Tools such as modeling, rubrics, and iPad apps are common practice for any kind of teaching but can be particularly applicable for teaching writing. These studies bear out how each of these tools can be specifically applied to writing instruction.

Regan and Berkely's (2012) study focused on modeling in teaching writing stating that, "modeling is particularly important when teaching students to use cognitive learning strategies" (p. 276). This provides a useful case study not just on how an emphasis on teaching cognitive strategies is important, but also a specific tool for how

this approach can be implemented. Regan and Berkely are specific in strategies for modeling providing a “think aloud” example where a teacher models by introducing a question to the classroom and then audibly surmising about potential solutions to the dilemma (2012). This gives students a clear picture of cognitive strategies in practice and increases the awareness of students for how important it is to apply strategies. The various headings in the article give a series of commands, which are most commonly “be specific,” and “be explicit” (2012, p. 279). This repeatedly stresses the importance of specific and well-modeled instruction when laying out a path through the nebulous practice of planning an analytical essay. The research demonstrates that, “When students clearly understand and accurately employ the steps of a cognitive strategy, students are better prepared for guided and independent practice” (2012, p. 280). This highlights how the use of teaching strategies can only be effective as the teacher seeks to explicitly and consistently apply a modeling approach so that students have a specific understanding of how to apply it.

Another important tool when teaching writing is the use of rubrics. Bradford et al. (2015) found that the use of a rubric with the specific outcomes well defined in the rubric caused a universal improvement in students’ writing scores (p. 463). The study took place in a first-grade classroom of twenty students. Bradford et al. point out how “delivering explicit instruction to provide a foundation for new content” (p. 464), is especially important for young learners. Bradford et al. (2015) then provide an explanation as to what is an effective rubric delineating the rubric’s need to explain each item the student for which the student is being assessed and explicate a clear-cut

definition for each level of success. Even in explaining the qualities of an effective rubric, Bradford et al. exhibit that simply the practice of using a rubric and explaining each element to the students is what is most important. The rubric is a tool that provides students with an explicit understanding of what is involved with an excellent piece of writing. Interestingly, Bradford et al. (2015) found that students in the control group not involving a rubric were not as motivated and felt overwhelmed by the writing task. This suggests that rubrics can also be a positive motivator for students. While the scope of this study is small, it clearly finds that the rubric is an effective tool for young learners to begin grasping the tenets of good writing.

The writing instructor can also use writing as a tool to help students improve their reading skills. Graham and Herbert's (2010) report lays out how proper writing instruction also complements reading instruction. Graham and Herbert (2010) single out several strategies for developing students' reading and link this to a compounded effect of improving students' writing. Graham and Herbert (2010) outline the a three pronged tactical approach that starts with reflective writing about the text, then a lesson about the strategies necessary to create this text, and finally an overall increasing of the amount that students write. This approach emphasizes how the writing task is an appropriate literacy challenge for students that will improve their literacy abilities beyond just the task of writing. Writing forces students to reflect and also organize their thoughts, which leads to higher levels of comprehension. Along with an emphasis on cognitive strategies, this article also reiterates the necessity to simply increase the

amount of writing, and of precise writing instruction necessary to achieve improvement in students' writing abilities.

Technological Tools

Writing teachers often bemoan how technology has transformed the world of writing. Teachers are tired of reading papers that are basically an extension of text message speech complete with abbreviations like "lol" or "yolo." While this may be a negative side effect of technological changes, technology also brings unbridled potential for more effective and efficient writing instruction.

The article *The Neglected 'R': Improving Writing Instruction Through iPad Apps* (2016) provides an example of how teachers can use technological tools to improve students' writing. Kang, Sessions, and Womack conducted a study that compared students using traditional paper and pencil teaching methods versus students who were taught how to use iPad apps to work on writing tasks. Kang et al. make mention of the NAEP 2011 writing assessment's shift towards tracking technological elements while writing and the importance of incorporating technology into writing teaching pedagogy. The goal of this study was to research how teachers can use technological tools to assist in improving students' writing, and also to investigate how the use of iPad apps affects student motivation levels (Kang et al., 2016).

The study monitored one class of 30 fifth grade students at a suburban school and focused around the learning target of getting these students to use more sensory details in their writing – laying the foundations of a sophisticated story telling technique. Data was collected from the students in three ways: daily writing journals, regular

recorded interviews with the teacher, and their writing pieces. The study was intensive in its collection of qualitative data, exploring the entire writing process of students and going beyond a simple assessment of their final written products. Kang et al. (2016) found that, "the Track B (iPad app use) students' writing also demonstrated increased use of sensory details, but the iPad apps helped the Track B students most in their sequencing skills" (p.221-222).

This finding illustrates how iPad apps, and technology in general, can be useful to students who are attempting writing tasks. Kang et al. (2016) also found that students who made use of iPad apps better achieved sequencing in their writing tasks, creating stories with more definable beginnings, middles, and ends causing the authors to conclude that a combination of well researched teaching methodology with the utilization of iPad apps would be a powerful duo to improve students' writing skills. The apps enabled students to practice sequencing their writing because they could practice this skill by simply touching the screen and moving bits of text around. This gives students a more efficient way to practice this skill, giving them an advantage over paper/pencil students.

While the task of writing remains the same as ever, technological tools can allow students to become more efficient in how they practice writing, and technology can help teachers provide feedback in more time-efficient ways. While using iPad apps, teachers can see all their students' progress on their screen and provide simple feedback like a "thumbs-up" image, or short comments. This allows students using the iPad app to get more individualized attention to their writing. Even more, it allows for

teachers to see the writing in the present tense and to immediately intervene where learning is necessary. This model for teaching writing is more effective than grading a finished product and forcing the student to reflect on what they wrote, a practice that is much more difficult for students than an in-progress readjustment. Kang et al. (2016) concluded that the use of iPad apps greatly benefited students especially in the ability to create a logical series of events.

Another outcome was that students who used iPad apps had more fun with the learning task and reported that they were more interested in what their peers were doing on their assignments. One student in the study said, “Many of the apps were fun and made me more easy-going. This led to me realizing that other kids had good ideas too” (Kang et al., 2016, p.223). Motivation is an important indicator of success in teaching methods, and for this student, he was motivated to learn both by the app and by other students enjoying the app as well. While this study was conducted with a small sample size, the results are encouraging regarding how technology can be used to amplify writing instruction and guide students to better practices of using the technological tools available to them to create better writing.

In another study on the use of technological tools, Wong and Hew (2010) investigated how the use of blogs can have an impact on the ability of elementary students to write narratives. Wong and Hew state that, “blogging provides learners with a less formal environment outside the classroom where they could use it as a knowledge log” (2010, p. 3). They also point out how using blogs familiarizes students with publishing writing and making it “real life” relevant. Although Wong and Hew

(2010) conclude that blogging made an impact in improving students' writing, they make sure to concede that blogging in itself is not a magical solution to teaching writing. In addition to the use of blogging, Wong and Hew used a scaffolding technique that introduced the concepts of blogging as well as writing narratives to the students in stages. There were 36 participants to the study who were taking English language as a subject at a school in Singapore. The results showed "that pupils' mean scores…improved for all three areas (i.e., content, language, and overall total), after the blogging and scaffolding treatment" (Wong & Hew, 2010, p. 7). Wong and Hew demonstrate how blogging can make the practice of writing more relevant for students and can help them better apply their developing writing skills.

Closing the Achievement Gap with Writing Instruction

The achievement gap is an across the board problem in the US education system with no exception in the field of writing instruction. Snow and Biancarosa (2003) summarize the problem: "Despite decades of reform efforts, certain groups of youth—African-Americans, Latinos, English Language Learners (ELLs), and those from low-income homes—continue to underperform on common indicators of academic achievement" (p. 1). The problem is multi-faceted and systemic, and there are many steps to undertake an effective solution. Snow and Biancarosa's report (2003), which is a sort of survey course on the various topics involved with the achievement gap, asserts that the achievement gap is directly related to sub-par literacy abilities of minority

students. This accentuates how the teaching of literacy, and therefore the teaching of writing, is a core issue necessitating reform.

In a study entitled *Reducing Achievement Gaps in Academic Writing for Latinos and English Learners in Grades 7–12* (2017), Olson, Matuchniak, Chung, Stumpf, and Farkas outline how the Pathway Project for teaching writing can result in significant academic writing improvements with this traditionally challenging population. Olson et al. (2017) attempted to prove that the Pathway Project techniques would be effective for Latino students by observing 95 teachers across 16 different schools in which more than 90% of the students were Latino ELLs. Olson et al. also highlight writing as a "gate keeper for college admission," and explain, "failure to close these achievement gaps in academic writing will have serious social and economic consequences" (2017, p. 1). This sets the tone for the desperate need to provide more effective instruction methods to improve the disparity in academic achievement.

Olson et al. (2017) observed marked improvement from the students in the Pathway groups, their scores consistently surpassing the averages for their population group. The Pathway Project allows the student to focus on the techniques of how to write and breaks down the process into achievable steps. This not only gives students a better chance at learning the step-by-step strategies of writing, but also helps them stay motivated because breaking down the task makes it more achievable. Olson et al. (2017) found how it is effective to implement a pedagogical practice that regularly models to students the strategies used by good writers to create their work. By using a

cognitive strategies approach to teaching writing, the writing instructor can help break down barriers to learning that makes a step towards closing the achievement gap.

Jesson, McNaughton, Rosedale, Zhu, and Cockle's article (2018) gives an up to date analysis of best practices when teaching writing through digital tools. Research groups worked with several schools in urban school districts, training specific strategies based pedagogical methods to teachers, and equipping students with personal technology devices (Jesson et al., 2018). While device ownership and wireless access tends to be a barrier to this population of students (not involved in research studies), for the purposes of this study, it yielded optimistic results. The students produced blogs that allowed for teachers to clearly see a development progression. (Jesson et al., 2018). Blogging, because it involves daily-published writing, also allowed teachers to analyze strengths and weaknesses over time and cross reference students' writings. Blogging proved to be a useful tool for students and teachers to analyze and reflect on the progress of students' writing skills. The use of blogs also resulted in a higher quantity of writing, and multi-modal works that combine audio or video elements with writing.

This type of writing instruction that makes use of blogs and individually enables low-income students to access a community of digital learners had promising potential. Jesson et al. conclude that the use of blogs and other technological tools, "promote complex compositional tasks, discussion and critical thinking" (2018, p. 14). The study was limited in scope and had many limitations due to the complexity of assessing digital writing and keeping a control group consistent in a digital environment. However,

Jesson et al. (2018) add further research that suggests that the use of blogs and technological tools can have powerful salubrious effects for students' writing abilities.

One of the barriers to closing the achievement gap is the lack of research pushing better teaching practices to the forefront. Snow and Biancarosa (2003) explain that, "a dearth of information exists about novel approaches or adaptations of effective approaches designed specifically for use with the groups of underperforming readers" (p. 1). This presents a challenge for answering a main research question of this literature review. The following sources were reviewed due to their relevancy to the subject of the achievement gap but are lacking because they are either not targeted at students in the US or are not specifically about the teaching of writing.

Coker and Erwin's article (2010) provides another experiment with the Self-Regulated Strategy Development for writing instruction in the context of oral debate and comparing it with a Collaborative Reasoning approach. The 38 students involved with the study were all African-American low-income students. Coker and Erwin (2010) were successful in experimenting with both intervention methods, noticing improvements in both experimental groups. Both the SRSD approach and the Collaborative Reasoning approach helped improved student's argument skills, with little difference in effectiveness between the two. Coker and Erwin conclude that, "The most important instructional implication of this work is that these interventions have been successful developing the argumentative writing and discourse of low-income, middle school students in urban schools" (2010, p. 136). Both strategies proved effective, and

the important takeaway from the research is that these strategies can be particularly effective with low-income populations of students.

Another study on low-income students followed a second and third grade classroom in Australia investigating “how a group of teachers negotiated critical literacies and explored notions of social power with elementary children” (Comber, Thomson, Wells, 2001, p. 451). While this study does not apply to low-income students in the US, it does show how confronting the achievement gap conversation courageously, even for primary school students, can be effective in motivating students to engage in critical literacy activities. Comber et al. encourage an approach to writing and literacy instruction that involves students contemplating their own stories, flexing their reflection muscles daily in a personal way. This enables them to begin to practice cognitive strategies for writing that can be a powerful tool for building writing skills. Comber et al. explain that, “reading the children's texts confirmed our faith in their perceptive, analytical re- sources and their ingenuity in representing complex ideas” (2001, p. 453). This optimistic finding was muddled in terms of empirical data, which is not well represented in the study. Comber et al. focus more on the sociological implications of helping students integrate the task of knowing their story with critical literacy tasks, to which they found anecdotally positive results.

Practical Advice: Books on Teaching Writing

The books reviewed for this thesis provide practical tips on writing instruction that harmonize well with data-based studies that research which specific methods are more effective. With some exceptions, these books provide specific bits of wisdom and lesson plans that equip the teacher not only with a general direction for writing instruction, but also a toolbox of techniques to effectively apply better methods of writing instruction. One of these books is Murray's *A Writer Teaches Writing* (2004) in which Murray lays out advice for teaching writing both as a teacher and as a writer.

Murray starts with an alarming indictment about the state of writing instruction in the USA. He states that, "the majority of composition courses in the country are taught by teachers who do not write, do not know how effective writing is made, and do not know how to teach writing" (2004, p.1). This remark harmonizes with the NAEP Report Card findings that show a barrier between student enthusiasm about writing and student proficiency as writers. Murray's cynical view is based in the belief that teachers set about teaching writing without having accomplished the skills necessary to be effective writers themselves.

Murray's book reads somewhat like a manual about the theory of writing in general, going through instructional methods that relate to the practice of writing at its core. Murray identifies the problem with writing instruction as one that is tied to teachers themselves not understanding the practice of writing - the practice of multiple drafts, constant revision, and an insistence on process rather than outcome. Indirectly, Murray encourages more of a strategies based instruction via his approach that is tied

to teaching writing discipline, rather than teaching how to write beautiful content. Murray states that, “The discipline of writing is developed by a productive tension between freedom and limitation. It is the task of the writing teacher to monitor this tug of war.” (2004, p. 149)

This quotation shows how deeply Murray understands both the task of the writer, and the writing teacher. To enable effective writing, both encouragement and critique are necessary, another way of saying that a “Romantic Pragmatist” is the necessary approach of the writing instructor. In addition to this understanding, Murray also lectures on the importance of teaching the process of drafting. Murray (2004) asserts the importance for students to constantly be viewing drafts, both of their teachers and of their fellow students. This implies that the writing instructor must not only model what good writing looks like, but what the process of good writing looks like, therefore exposing imperfect drafts for each student to ponder.

For Murray, the goal of the writing instructor is to enable students to embrace the power of the writer’s pen. Students need to be encouraged to see that they are not simply writing for their teacher, but that they have the potential to write to any reader and appeal to them. Murray (2004) explains how it is essential for the student to contrive of writing as an exercise for appealing to a variety of readers, rather than just the teacher. This means that students need to write in ways that they themselves can be excited about, and that they can see other people being interested in reading. This means that in his view, it is essential for the writing instructor to connect the student

with their writing assignment in a way that transcends the motivation of simply completing the task to receive a grade.

Another book that provides a plethora of wisdom to guide the writing instructor is Colleen Cruz's *The Unstoppable Writing Teacher* (2015) Cruz begins with a fundamental maxim for teaching writing: "So much of teaching is building relationships and making connections with students"(p. 32). This quotation is at the core of Cruz's philosophy – build relationships and foster a relational based flexibility in order to problem solve. Cruz goes into practical detail about how she makes connections with students, explaining how this flexibility often takes her away from her comfort zone (2015, p.34). While teachers often shy away from references to pop culture, Cruz highlights the importance of pop culture literacy by saying, "Very few things draw their eyes, hearts, and minds as quickly as pop cultural references" (2015, p. 122).

This practical tip can help teachers' create writing assignments that get students excited, and not simply about the grade they can potentially achieve. Cruz encourages a simple reflective attitude when it comes to the work necessary in order to determine how to "work smarter" or cut down the workload to the absolute essentials to help students become better writers. This advice lends itself well to the "Romantic Pragmatist" instructor who must constantly consider how to be efficient and useful with feedback to students.

Additionally, Cruz also has a chapter dedicated to the writing instructor's task of encouraging students to be independent and make their writing their own. Cruz responds to the problem of "I can't seem to get my students to stay writing unless I'm

sitting beside them" (p. VII) by explaining how primarily, the teacher must simply start from a place of optimism, assuming the student is capable of the learning task (2015, p. 27). Students often need the teacher simply to believe that they can write, and this belief, when reaffirmed often, can set the foundation for students to believe in themselves and become more independent in their writing. Cruz further goes on to explain how to scaffold writing lessons to keep these kinds of students working on short, achievable writing tasks. She also explains how this scaffold should not be a crutch for students, and asserts that when a scaffold is used this also necessitates a plan for extracting the scaffold (2015, p. 28). This advice helps students increase their writing skills, while also having a plan for them to continue building on their skills without the need of a teacher's constant presence.

In the book *Uncreative Writing* (2011) Goldsmith provides a unique guide for innovative instructional practices that embrace the "information age" where mass quantities of text rest at the fingertips of every student. Goldsmith makes the point that, "Words very well might not only be written to read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated, sometimes by humans, more often by machines, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to reconsider what writing is" (2011, p. 15). The setting for writing has shifted recently, as well as students' writing abilities. The shifting setting does not have to mean that students' abilities will decline, but rather provides an opportunity for students to re-imagine the importance for writing. Students are already tapping into the adaptable and easily shared version of writing, but now need to combine this skill set with some more traditional tools of structure and organization.

The focus of *Uncreative Writing* is Goldsmith's views on teaching creative writing through "uncreative" methods, theorizing that students need fewer lessons on how to be "explorers of prose," and more lessons about technique and process. In the introduction, Goldsmith states, "faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists" (Goldsmith, 2011, p. 1). This frames Goldsmith's approach to writing, and approach that seeks to navigate through the available texts now at his fingertips and learn how to "re-manage" them, rather than become focused on original text creation.

Perhaps Goldsmith's most radical pedagogical method is to have students turn in paper written by someone else as their final paper for the class. The students then present the findings for this paper as if it were their own. This exercise is meant to facilitate a discussion where students explore questions like, "can you defend someone else's work as if it were your own?" and "how does this change the quality of the argument?" While this lesson may be seen to be counter-productive, it boldly inserts them in a conversation about how readily available information has changed the field of writing. Rather than making the task about establishing their own original ideas, their task is about understanding how others' ideas can be used, and how using someone else's ideas affects the understanding of the content. This exercise then works its way into a discussion of what Goldsmith calls *patchwriting*, or "a way of weaving together various shards of other people's words into a tonally cohesive whole" (p. 3.) This is a discussion that is more relevant for students in the technological/information age, as it

guides them into a depth of knowledge regarding how writing has shifted, and how they can use the vast array of texts out there to assist them appropriately in their own writing endeavors.

The truth that is at the core of Goldsmith's (2011) pedagogical methods is "the secret: the suppression of self-expression is impossible" (p. 9). Goldsmith argues that even if you give someone the most "boring" or "uncreative" of writing tasks, their self-expression will find a way to reveal itself. One assignment Goldsmith gives to his students is to re-type five pages of any written work. Rather than focusing on creating writing, students only focus on the process of typing and how words appear on the screen. Goldsmith explains how this exercise transformed students' view of the text on the screen from meaningless text to a living document that could be adapted and maneuvered at their fingertips (2011, p. 203). This plan of instruction gives students a unique window to recalibrate their approach to writing, and to develop a skill set geared toward the process of writing, and not simply the inspiration for writing.

The final book reviewed for this thesis is Emdin's *For White Folks Who Teach In The Hood* (2016). The book centers on the importance of making personal connections with students as the bedrock for teaching success. However, Emdin establishes that this goal will intentionally necessitate a stretch out of the normal comfort zone of teachers when it comes to students in urban settings. Emdin states that, "teaching the neoindigenous requires recognition of the spaces in which they reside, and an understanding of how to see, enter into, and draw from these spaces" (2016, p. 27). The "neoindigenous" term stems from the beginning of the book where Emdin parallels the

late 19th century practice of "teaching the savage out of the Indian" to more modern practices where teachers come into urban schools with the intention of teaching students a specific set of rules and standards that most likely do not fit in with their cultural norms and standards. While this may seem like an exaggeration, Emdin backs up this term with a wealth of classroom observation that suggests that their teachers are overall not reaching students of color in urban classrooms due to a lack of connection/understanding. This is why the teacher in this space must recognize the student's space and culture first in order to be successful.

In one of the chapters, Emdin suggests that the teacher should model their approach after a Pentecostal Preacher – a model for instruction that is familiar to urban students. Emdin concludes that, "the two most powerful elements of a Pentecostal service, as related to pedagogy, are the call-and-response exchanges between preacher and congregation, which results in focus and engagement, and the solemn call to the altar that moves them to be reflective" (2016, p. 51). These two practices are highlighted as methods that can be replicated in the classroom, and will allow students to "buy in" to the lesson because it meets them in their cultural space. Emdin provides a guide for the interventions necessary for teachers to become more connected with the cultural context they enter when teaching in urban schools.

Emdin proposes a teaching method that he terms "Reality Pedagogy" which is "an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf" (2016, p. 27). The word "primary" is essential here, because Emdin believes that this goal needs to be prioritized over more

traditional teaching goals such as proper lesson planning, class organization, or staying consistent on behavior management. Emdin also reinforces the idea of "reality pedagogy" with the teaching that students must be actively involved in the classroom as independent members with valued voices to open up space for the students' "cultural and emotional turf." Emdin states "reality pedagogy focuses on privileging the ways that students make sense of the classroom while acknowledging that the teacher often has very different expectations about the classroom" (2016, p. 30). Emdin encourages teachers to involve students when setting up expectations for the classroom and to yield to them not just as participants, but to privilege them as creators of the classroom culture.

The practice of "reality pedagogy" lends itself well to writing instruction as it enables students to establish their independent voices in the classroom. The teacher must be successful in doing this not only for writing instruction to occur, but also for their to be any hope for growth in writing instruction for students in urban schools. In his closing thoughts, Emdin insists that, "planning for your lesson is valuable, but being willing to let go of that plan is even more so. It is only on the path away from where you started that you can get to where you want to go" (2016, p. 207). This quotation demonstrates the need for teachers to go "off book" in order to have success in an urban context. Especially when teaching writing, an intimate exercise of unraveling thought life onto pages and then critiquing it, students must know they are in a safe culturally inclusive space where they are not required to play by someone else's construction of rules. This book provides an up to date guide for teachers on how to

better create relationships with students in urban settings, and what kinds of uncomfortable shifts in classroom management are necessary for a successful teaching environment in urban schools.

All of the books mentioned in this section establish a need for the writing instructor to guide students to become independent writers, to detach the students' writing from the teacher. This is most important when teaching in an urban context with high percentages of minority and low-income students. The book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (2016) by Christopher Emdin, while not explicitly about the teaching of writing, gives a powerful explanation of how Urban students can be taught to take control over their own learning, becoming independent thinkers and writers.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Summary of Literature

To summarize the many sources reviewed in this thesis, it is necessary to revisit the original research questions and analyze how the various sources show answers to those questions or open doors of further inquiry. The first question boils down to, "what is the state of writing instruction in the USA, especially among high school students?" The 2011 NAEP Writing Report Card shows that around one quarter of students are writing at a level that is deemed proficient, even using a newer computer based assessment that is designed to examine how students use computer word processing tools. While this finding may seem low, the previous NAEP report cards show how writing proficiency has actually ticked up a couple percentage points for 12th graders over the past 12 years. However, while the NAEP report shows stability (at a relatively low level of proficiency), ACT Writing Test scores report a different narrative where writing scores have fallen steadily, and since 2007 there has been "a general decline in scores across the board" (Aldric, 2017).

This fall in writing scores also manifests itself in the attitude of writing instructors who feel the tremendous stress of pushing back against a wall of students with poor writing skills who often have no desire to improve their writing abilities. Applebee and Langer (2011) observed that teachers whose introduction to writing assignments is merely procedural, with no emphasis on writing strategies, lasting less than five minutes (p. 14). Applebee and Langer suggest that lack of instructional time dedicated to writing is at the root of the problem. *The Neglected "R"* (2003) report

suggests the need fur a full scale “writing revolution” (p. 3). Smith’s (2017) response to this report affirms that this “grim assessment of the state of high school writing instruction should have been enough to move…to dramatic change” (p. 70). Still, the field of writing instruction continues the decline as widespread reform is lagging.

One way this problem is compounded is that writing instructors often become complacent and cynical in this environment of lagging student skills. Murray (2004) underscores this theme when he explains how teachers are trained to instruct the highest quality writing; only to end up stuck teaching remedial skills to students that they do not understand. Murray highlights how there is a disconnect between the writing student and writing instructor where the student needs basic support and the writing instructor is not equipped to provide for the more remedial writing needs of students. Teachers highlight how experience in writing education may be holding teachers back rather than improving their methodology due to how the field of writing has transformed quickly. In this context of declining students’ writing skills, teachers have sought to “re-tool” in order to become effective teachers of writing in the now information saturated age.

The thesis then covers various studies that investigate different methodologies for teaching writing attempting to answer the research question of, “what are the ‘best practices’ for teaching writing?” While the sources reviewed in this thesis were not all of one accord on the answer to this question, there were common themes that came up in nearly every source. One of these themes is that writing instruction is more effective when it focuses on the strategies for creating writing such as planning, reflection, time

management, revising, and outlining, rather than the content of the writing created. For younger writers, Bai's study (2015) found that after the strategy-based intervention implemented by his research study, "the sustained positive effects…show that such interventions provide a better alternative pedagogical approach to teaching writing in primary schools" (p. 105). Harris et al.'s study (2006) harmonized with this finding adding, "peer supported" to the strategies-based approach and finding that "as early as second grade, the writing performance…can be improved substantially by teaching them general and genre-specific strategies" (p. 335). This study had similar findings regarding using strategy based instruction, but was inconclusive when it came to "peer-supported" learning at the 2nd grade level. It seems that it is better practice to structure peer supported writing groups at a secondary level where students are more easily taught the norms of interaction and apply an educational structure based in social dynamics.

One of Langer's six findings for how to "beat the odds" on standardized testing with high school students bears this out as she states, "in schools that beat the odds, English learning and high literacy (the content as well as the skills) are treated as a social activity" (p. 41, 1999). This means that creating a structure of social interaction around learning writing is essential for the writing instructor at a secondary level. The fundamentals of "strategy-based instruction" was also found to be successful in the Olson et al. study which found that this instruction practice led to, "clear essay structure; the presence of claim/thesis statement...and some improvement in the conventions of written English" (p. 348, 2012). De La Paz and Graham (2002) similarly

reported that their "writing program had a positive effect on the writing performance of the participating middle school students" (p. 695). This shows how the strategies-based approach is applicable at all age levels. Jacobson et al.'s study on students with ADHD also yielded positive results using a strategies-based method.

Additionally, several studies based in the "Pathway Project" model indicated positive findings around teaching cognitive strategies. Kim et al. (2011) states that "students in the Pathway classrooms scored higher than students in control classrooms at posttest" (p. 28), and Olson et al. (2017) add that, "Pathway students had higher odds than control students of passing the California High School Exit Exam in both years" (p. 1). Based on these findings, the task of a secondary school writing teacher is to focus on writing strategies rather than focus on writing content, and to do this within a structure that allows for students to become independent in their writing task and share their learning with other students in some sort of socialized writing feedback structure.

Besides the findings around strategies-based writing instruction, several sources delved into methodology for how to put this approach into practice. Sessions et al.'s study sought to understand the "influences of iPad apps on student's attitude, behavior, or social relations during writing instruction" (p. 218, 2016). The study reported positive effects in all areas stating, "students were being motivated by the apps to persist at writing, and students' statuses were altered and collaborations became valued" (p. 224). The iPad apps created a way for students to more efficiently practice their sequencing/organization of stories, and also encouraged to collaborate with other iPad users to assist with their endeavors. This study carves out an important new trend in

research that demonstrates how learning apps can be effective in the classroom. Wong and Hew's (2010) research on the use of blogs as tools to "record [students] learning journey" (p. 3) with elementary students and Jesson et al. confirmed this finding with secondary students who used blogs to "author traditional writing products and digital learning objects" (p. 21). These studies show how the use of technological tools can enhance writing instruction. Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing* (2011) also carves out an important angle into research on technological pedagogy, where he steps back and attempts to teach students how to navigate the information age rather than attempt to be pioneers of creating their own original information.

The final research question examined was, "how can writing be improved with students from low-income families or students in minority populations?" This question necessitates a more specific field of research that, as of yet, has not been explored as thoroughly as necessary. Snow and Biancarosa (2003) underscore the, "pressing need to coordinate research" (p. 1), calling for a widespread emergency overhall to examine the common practices that are resulting in the achievement gap. This quotation shows the need to more specifically analyze the learning barriers causing the achievement back for these students. Every source that attempts to discuss this issue concludes that more research is necessary. In addition to a call for more research, Olson et al. (2017) suggest the practice "of sustained ongoing professional development for teachers if they are to effectively teach academic reading and writing to Latinos and Els" (p. 17-18). Olson et al.'s findings suggest that there is a need for more comprehensive training for teachers, especially training in teaching a strategies-based approach to writing.

The books reviewed in this thesis were also helpful in giving practical approaches and a taste of optimism for how to make steps of improvement against the achievement gap. Cruz highlights how diversity in the classroom is an "opportunity to reflect and refine our teaching in ways we might not have done otherwise" (p. 58, 2015). Cruz discusses the need for a positive attitude about the classroom challenges that are faced and makes connecting with students as people the bottom line priority when teaching writing to students in urban settings.

Emdin's book complements this theory as it more specifically elaborates on a "best practice" pedagogical approach for teaching in urban areas to students of color. Emdin stresses that the teacher must get out of their comfort zone and seek to understand the cultural context that the students live in to become an effective teacher. Emdin stresses that, "the neoindigenous in urban areas have developed ways to live within socioeconomically disadvantaged spaces while maintaining their dignity and identity" (p. 13, 2016), and so therefore teachers need to understand how students cultivate their traditions and collaborate with students on setting up a classroom that allows them to "maintain their dignity." It is in this type of classroom setting where students of color in urban settings can find fertile ground to improve their writing abilities.

Limitations of the Research

While the field of research on teaching writing is extensive, this literature review was intentionally limited to more current sources that address writing pedagogy within the technological "information age" atmosphere where students' writing proficiency is slipping consistently. While the study began as an inquiry into writing instruction in general, the project changed as it became apparent that much of the body of research around teaching writing quickly becomes obsolete. This caused a limitation on research sources to be found after 1999 and resulted in the use of the keyword "teaching writing through cognitive strategies" in order to find up to date research studies.

In addition, this literature review was limited due to a lack of up to date research on effective pedagogy in urban settings and with English Language learners. The studies that addressed ELs noted a lack of current research in this area, and a need to further explore research questions regarding ELs. While books like Cruz's *The Unstoppable Writing Teacher* (2015) and Emdins's *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (2016) give valuable practical advice on these topics, they do not provide up to date data on the effects of the practices they prescribe. As more current research becomes available on these topics, this thesis could be updated to more thoroughly address the research question regarding how to teach writing to English Language learners and/or students in an urban context.

Implications for Future Research

For future research on this topic, a separate field of study is necessary to research secondary EL students. While there is some research on primary school ELs, a more intense inquiry into secondary ELs should be opened up to fill in the gaps for how writing can be taught to students at lower levels of English skills. This will be helpful for many teachers as ELs continue to increase in population, and place a high demand on teachers to attempt to integrate into classroom's with a large spectrum of English language abilities.

In addition, there should be more extensive research on Emdin's theory of "reality pedagogy," to investigate how these tactics will affect urban learners. Emdin makes a strong argument about how existing pedagogical practices can be damaging to "neoindegenous" students and encourages a pedagogical approach that better incorporates the culture and identity of urban students. In order to truly understand if this would be successful, and extensive research study is necessary to compare "reality pedagogy" methods with other approaches and analyze the results. This would be particularly useful to attempt specifically with writing skills, because of the importance of allowing students to establish learning independence as writers. The teaching of writing demands an intimacy that is only effective when the teacher has a genuine personal connection with students. Therefore, the need to connect to the students' culture should be seen as paramount, and a research study should be taken on to empirically prove the effects of this practice.

Implications for Professional Application

As a teacher who seeks to be a "Romantic Pragmatist" while writing, the research discussed in this literature review affirms both sides of this paradox. Cruz (2015) makes a similar point by saying writing teachers "are scientists and artists" (p. 2). This emphasizes the balance necessary between relational encourager, and strict critic bent on comprehensive improvement. On the "Pragmatic" side, the research that insists on a "Strategies Based" approach guides the instructor towards teaching the process of writing, rather than evaluating the content of writing. Smith's first component of *A Principled Revolution in the Teaching of Writing* (2017) is that "writers need process, not product" (p. 71). This practice can loosen the hold of the time commitment to grading when it comes to writing, because the teacher's job becomes more about setting up the strategies of planning and self-management, and less about a detail oriented grading of each paper. While this may seem counter intuitive to red-pen grading fundamentalists, the research consistently shows that the approach to teaching the draft is more important than the final product.

Another important finding that this literature bears out is that there is no time to deliberate over the need for up to date writing pedagogical practice. Students' writing skills are overall low, and continue to slip. The 2011 NAEP writing report card shows that less than 30% of students are proficient writers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), and ACT writing scores decrease every year, even as the amount of ACT test takers goes up (Aldric, 2017). College writing instructors lament the need for a complete curriculum shift in their lesson plans in order to accommodate the need for basic level

writing instruction even for Higher Education students, which is brought out by both Goldsmith (2011) and Murray (2004) who teach writing at a college level. This should cause an alarm for writing instructors to be reflective about their teaching approach, and to reconsider the methods they are using to reach students.

Finally, especially for teachers who teach in urban settings, a careful consideration of Emdin's reflections on "neoindegenous" learners is necessary. If teachers are attempting to reach students without connecting to their culture and identity, they will be paralyzed in terms of their ability to persuade growth particularly in the area of teaching writing. Emdin explains how it is the task of the teacher to "unpack their privileges and excavate the institutional, societal, and personal histories they bring with them" (2016, p. 15). While Emdin suggests things that may seem uncomfortable for teachers like the importance of going off the lesson plan, or the need to "show up" in non-school urban community settings like a Pentecostal church, these are practices that reach students within the context of their culture and provide an environment suitable for student learning.

A piece of advice that may seem obvious but was repeated regularly in the books about teaching writing is that teachers must continue to remind themselves that students are capable of great writing and are able to achieve high standards. Goldsmith (2011) explains this with his secret that "the suppression of self-expression is impossible" (p. 9) and Cruz (2015) explains how teachers always must "assume competence" (p. 25). Especially in the area of writing, teachers have a tendency to become complacent when students are unable to make progress towards writing

proficiency. Writing is unique in that it demands a "trial and error" mentality when taught at the secondary level. The lesson must be flexible enough so that each student can find an individualized means to connect to the assignment on his or her terms. Good writing necessitates an independent thinker who writes not simply for the teacher's approval. Teachers therefore must be willing to involve flexibility in their teaching of writing so that students can adapt the assignment to involve something that they have an interest in. Through the teaching of process, and not product, this approach is more feasible for the writing instructor. Smith explains this by saying students need strategies and heuristics, not formulas" (2017, p. 72).

Finally, teachers must be optimistic in order to plow through the potential for failure with writing instruction. There is no "catch all" advice that will put a "band-aid" on the problem of poor writing skills. Instead, there is a need for resilient writing instructors who are willing to make personal connections with students, repeatedly reaffirm their confidence that students are capable of high writing expectations, and a pragmatic flexibility that focuses on teaching writing strategies rather than written content.

Conclusion

This thesis confirmed that the plane of writing instruction has turned its nose at a downward angle, and there is cause for apprehension. However, this plane does not have to crash. The main body of research in this thesis addressed the second research question regarding "best practices" for teaching writing. The "best practice" for teaching

writing is difficult to narrow down, but studies conclude that a “strategies-based” approach is the most effective, and also show how a personal connection with students is fundamental to the success of the writing instructor. When it comes to teaching English Language learners and students in urban secondary schools, there is more research that needs to be done. However, by maintaining an optimistic “Romantic Pragmatist” approach, teachers can successfully provide an environment where students can consistently improve their writing abilities.

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