

Running head: IMPROVEMENT OF WRITING SKILLS

Action Research Project  
Identifying Best Practices for the Improvement of Student Writing Outcomes in the  
Delran Middle School

William Paterson University  
EDLP 608: Qualitative and Quantitative Design

## Chapter I: Introduction

Writing is an essential key to achievement in school, in the workplace, and everyday life. Writing instruction is often an informal process in many middle schools. Identifying the best practices for writing instruction is a difficult task. Delran Middle School does not have a formal writing program all Language Arts teachers follow. This causes confusion among teachers and students with regard to writing processes. The researchers inquired on how to improve students writing skills, confidence in writing, and student learning outcomes. The researchers identified the existing best practices for writing instruction at Delran Middle School.

Researcher A teaches sixth grade integrated Language Arts and Researcher B teaches seventh grade integrated Language Arts. After much collaboration, the researchers have discovered the lack of a formal writing program has left a void in the students' skill levels and their appreciation of writing. After the researchers reviewed the recently revised Delran Public School District's Language Arts Curriculum grades 6-8, they realized that a formal writing program was nonexistent. Many of the school goals for the 2007-2008 school year revolved around the eighth grade Language Arts test scores on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK). After Delran Middle School's teachers' attempted to improve test scores, such as an after school preparation workshop, purchases of preparation materials, and classroom exposure to testing-like situations, it was evident to the researchers that there needs to be change in the way writing is taught.

At Delran Middle School, students received an 82-minute double period of Language Arts instruction for sixth and seventh grade; however, when the students reach eighth grade they were not required to take a reading class which limits their exposure only to a writing period of forty-one minutes. The researchers believed that students must receive a double period of Language Arts daily in order to continue the skills learned in previous grades. The double period allowed the teachers for adequate time to create lessons that fully integrate reading and writing. It also made writing more relevant when it is linked to reading.

Furthermore, the researchers felt that the resources are lacking for Language Arts teachers. Text books were outdated and irrelevant for the needs of the students.

Expectations for writing instruction were not clearly communicated throughout the building by supervisors, administration, and among teachers. The researchers believed that cross-grade teacher collaboration is important for improving students' writing skills. Because teachers were not sharing work and ideas among grade levels, there were gaps in writing instruction for the students. Therefore, the researchers found little or no continuity among grade levels due to the lack of teacher accountability.

Researcher A taught eighth grade Language Arts in September of 2005 at Delran Middle School. The researcher taught writing for forty-one minutes and felt that the restraints from time and resources made it difficult to focus on individual students' needs. Researcher A now teaches sixth grade Language Arts in an 82-minute block and is able to address the needs of individual students; however, the lack of resources still exists. Researcher A would like to define the best practices in the sixth grade for writing instruction and use that data to improve students' abilities, skills, and confidence in writing in grades sixth through eighth. Researcher A believes that the best practices need to extend beyond the sixth grade and to the seventh and eighth grade which would allow the students to build upon the skills taught in sixth grade.

Researcher B began teaching in another district in November of 2002. The researcher began teaching in Delran Middle School in September of 2004. The researcher taught seventh grade Language Arts for the duration of this time and has always taught in an integrated Language Arts format of at least an eighty-two minute block of time. Researcher B feels that Delran Middle School needs to have more cross-grade collaboration to provide students with a framework for writing. A writing program would benefit the teachers as well as students of Delran Middle School because it would be clear what must be taught and what skills are important. Researcher B would like to identify the best practices in seventh grade and understand the best practices in sixth and eighth grades. Researcher B believes that in order to prepare the students for eighth grade, she must work with sixth, seventh and eighth grade teachers to provide the best writing instruction for her classes.

The need to define best practices for Delran Middle School's Language Arts writing instruction stemmed from poor student attitudes towards writing, low test scores, and inadequate teacher communication. The researchers experienced first-hand the

pessimistic views students have towards writing. They found, in their research, ways to motivate and inspire students to embrace writing as an avenue for personal expression. They wanted students to be excited about writing and open to learning new concepts. The researchers believed that writing is a life skill that the students need to develop. The researchers wanted the students to value the importance of writing in their lives now as students and in their future as working adults.

Students' negative perceptions of writing not only affect their classroom performance but also affect test scores. When students do not appreciate the importance of writing in the classroom, they transfer that negativity onto the standardized tests. The pressures from the state test also affect the climate of the classroom and therefore do not allow for teachers to create an enjoyable learning atmosphere. Test scores will not improve if students are not provided with an environment conducive to positive learning. In order to develop confidence in students, teachers must understand how to support a positive and productive setting for learning.

Collaboration is a key factor to student success. The researchers saw how more teacher collaboration among grades and across grades improved student learning. The researchers felt understanding what is taught in other classrooms will help teachers to create lessons of relevance and importance to student development. Collaboration provided teachers with an accurate assessment of their students' skills and what to expect from those students. The researchers saw more time provided for teacher collaboration. Through collaboration, teachers were provided with time to identify best practices for the improvement of student writing outcomes which are best suited for Delran Middle School students. The researchers determined ways to improve attitudes towards writing as well as builds confidence levels which enhanced test scores and overall academics preparing students for the future.

Key terms used in this action research proposal include "writing process" and "writing instruction". Writing instruction is defined as instruction in written composition, style, and grammar. Teachers model and identify a variety of different methods and skills used in writing. The writing process is defined as a method of teaching students how to write. Students are guided through the steps which include, brainstorming, pre-writing, teacher conferencing, revising/editing, and publishing.

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

“Writing is a very demanding task, requiring the orchestration of a variety of cognitive resources. For developing writers, it can be especially demanding, as they have not yet mastered important writing processes, skills, and knowledge involved in planning, drafting, and revising text.” (De La Paz & Graham, 2002, p. 687) It is the Language Arts teachers’ job to make writing a valuable tool for students to “learn about themselves and their world and communicate their insights to others. Writing confers the power to grow personally and to effect change in the world.” (NCTE Guideline, 1985, n.p.) Classrooms must provide an environment for students to value writing and be able to fully obtain the necessary skills for effective writing. (NCTE Guideline, 1985, n.p.)

Through writing, students are encouraged to communicate their personal feelings, beliefs, and ideas. When students write they use higher level thinking skills such as evaluating, analyzing, comparing, contrasting, and creating. (English Language Arts 6-9, 2007, n.p.) Students learn to reflect when they practice the writing process which can transfer to deep self-understanding in other life aspects. Writing allows for free expression and the development of values and opinions. When students are excited about writing topics, they are compelled to express themselves clearly and completely. They believe their ideas and want others to accept their beliefs. Through writing, writers can persuade, recreate, or describe any thoughts, interests, or beliefs they want to share. (NCTE Guideline, 1985, n.p.) “By choosing topics from their own experiences, observations, and interests, students get a sense of ownership of the writing in which they are involved; this sense of ownership promotes commitment and continuing interest.” (English Language Arts 6-9, 2007, n.p.)

Writing is more than putting words on paper:

In the 1990’s a report by the US Labor Department said that most executives cited writing as one of the most neglected skills in the business world and yet one of the most important to productivity. In the same report executives noted the most future jobs will require writing skills, and so in a labor force full of mediocre writers someone who writes well is bound to stand out. (Sun Star, 2006, n.p.)

Writing is an essential key to achieving success in school, in the workplace, and in the larger world. Research shows that writing develops higher-order thinking skills and

helps students learn content across subject areas. "Written expression is difficult to teach because it is the most complex form of communication; however, it is critical because it is the most common mode of communication." (Alber-Morgan, Hessler, & Konrad, 2007, p. 124) Writing is considered as the primary basis upon which your work, your learning, and your intellect can depend throughout someone's entire life. "Writing is a continuous process where students learn to refine and improve their skills throughout life. The teacher's role is to provide the students with a love of writing and the skills to do it as well as possible." (Sun Star, 2006, n.p.) Students must take the time to understand and realize the impact that writing has on their future. Through effective motivational strategies and methods, all students can be taught how to write well.

The 2007 Survey on Teaching Writing, a national public opinion survey conducted for the National Writing Project, reports that the American public believes learning to write is as important as learning to read. (Bennett & Walcoff, 2007, n.p.) Reading and writing has been and sometimes still is taught separately; however, this concept is unnatural to everyday communication and life experiences. Most teachers and curriculums are centered around integrating reading and writing instruction as Language Arts literacy.

Over the last ten years research has shown that reading and writing are more interdependent than we thought. The relationship between reading and writing is a bit like that of the chicken and egg. Which came first is not as important as the fact that without one the other cannot exist. A child's literacy development is dependent on this interconnection between reading and writing. (Brummit-Yale, 2007, p. 1)

When teachers integrate reading and writing instruction, students are given a more meaningful experience to make connections and develop higher-level thinking skills. Reading jumpstarts students' creativity and allows for them to develop interesting and new ideas for their writing. Reading improves basic writing skills such as vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and usage. (Brummitt-Yale, 2007, p. 2) Exposing students to various genres of literature in the classroom opens the door to a wide range of writing styles and ideas they can use to improve their writing. By reading various authors and genres, students learn to emulate different writing techniques. "The influence of writing on

learning to read and improved reading achievement is well documented. When writing-with a focus on creating meaning-is taught reciprocally with reading, all children benefit.” (Katahira, 2008, p. 1)

Americans also believe that writing is essential to improving many life skills. These life skills include; improved communication skills, grammar, and critical thinking skills. From the 2007 Survey on Teaching and Writing, seven in ten Americans say that students should be given daily writing assignments and that writing should be taught in all subjects. (Bennett & Walcoff, 2007, n.p.) The very act of writing forces the student to process information which is a fundamental act of learning.

With state assessments increasing pressure to produce effective student writers, the improvement of writing has emerged as the central focus of education. Added pressures on the students and teachers can result in a negative attitude towards the teaching of writing and the actual writing process.

Writing is disliked and avoided because it is frustrating. It is frustrating because it is unnatural. Speaking is natural and not frustrating; when we speak, we open our mouths and words flow out easily. We do not think about the grammatical correctness of the utterances, nor do we think about mechanics... Most writing, on the contrary, does not flow smoothly. We write a few lines, reread them, scribble out one of the lines and move on. We are constantly checking for correctness.

(Martin, 2008, p.9)

One method to ease student frustration with writing is freewriting. When students freewrite on a topic, they are able to express their thoughts and ideas without the penalties of grammar, usage, and mechanics. It is essential for students to foster their creativity and voice without feeling frustrated about negative grading consequences (Martin, 2008, p.9). Freewriting is a technique teachers can use to build confidence in students writing abilities and allow them to view writing as form of personal expression. “If you can get your students to freewrite, you will have won most of the battle over frustration. Frustration is the main cause of the dislike and avoidance of writing. Perhaps then your students will be more eager to write, and do more of it.” (Martin, 2008, p.9)

Teachers must create an environment where the students are comfortable with writing. The importance in the writing test has forced teachers to adjust the way they teach writing. Teachers should establish an inviting classroom with flexible seating, accessible resources, and attractive surroundings. (Graves, n.d., n.p.) Teachers should also provide opportunities for students to collaborate as writers, thinkers, and learners. They can create lessons based on collaboration in small groups, structure mini-lessons so students can observe, discuss, and practice the targeted skills or strategies.

Writing instruction must include ample in-class and out-of-class opportunities. Teachers should include writing for a variety of purposes as well as audiences. Purposes for writing include developing social partnerships, engaging in debates, supporting personal opinion and beliefs, reflecting on experience, and engaging in future experiences. The more students write the better they will become at it. Writing takes practice. "The more a student writes, the easier it becomes to put thoughts into words and to see the effects it might have on others." (Svinicki, n.d., n.p.) Good writers need more time to write, not less time. It is necessary for students to be exposed to writing everyday with enough time for risk-taking and reflection. They need to have adequate time to own their writing and be able to evaluate their work without interruption. (Atwell, 1987, p. 77)

In addition to giving writing a purpose, teachers must empower students with practical and effective strategies to become strong writers. Teachers can provide the students with mnemonics such as PLAN or WRITE to refer to during state testing. (De la Paz & Graham, 2002, p. 692) When students are under pressure to produce a writing sample for standardized tests, such as the NJ ASK, it is extremely helpful for them to have a way to remember the strategies to be successful. PLAN includes the following strategies: pay attention to the prompt; list the main ideas; add supporting details; and number your ideas. After the students devise their PLAN, they may use the WRITE strategy which includes the following strategies: work from your plan to develop your thesis statement; remember your goals; include transition words for each paragraph; try to use different kinds of sentences; and exciting and interesting words must be used. (De la Paz & Graham, 2002, p. 692)



Students must be taught how to monitor their own work and be able to set goals for good writing. The Self-Regulation Strategy Development (SRSD) model of instruction is a strategy in which students are taught to initiate good writing strategies automatically when they write. (Helsel & Greenberg, 2007, p. 752)

Self-regulatory strategies include setting goals, carefully choosing appropriate strategies when approaching a task, generating self-instructions on how to complete the task, managing time effectively, creating effective environmental settings, monitoring progress, evaluating one's own performance, seeking help from appropriate sources when needed, and providing rewards or imposing consequences based on performance. (Helsel & Greenberg, 2007, p. 752)

The SRSD model has been used to assist students master higher-level cognitive processes of writing while reflecting and using effective strategies. The stages of the SRSD model of instruction include the following: build background knowledge; discuss it; model it; memorize it; support it; and independent performance. (Helsel & Greenberg, 2007, p. 755) If teachers were able to adopt the SRSD model of instruction or the PLAN and WRITE model it would give students the tools needed to perform well on classroom assessments as well as standardized tests.

It is the responsibility of writing teachers to present students with the strategies that develop good writers. Students can practice strategies in the classroom, but if they are not taught to monitor their own work and generate a plan for their writing, they will not succeed. (Monroe & Troia, 2006, p. 21) Students typically do not know how to revise their writing effectively beyond checking for spelling and glaring grammatical errors. Unfortunately, this has little impact on the quality of their writing; it only improves some mechanical errors. Another acronym, SEARCH (set goals, examine the paper to see if it makes sense, ask if you said what you meant, reveal picky errors, copy over neatly, and have a last look for errors) can be used to help students revise their papers and look for changes that make a difference. (Monroe & Troia, 2006, p. 21-22)

Strategies such as PLAN, WRITE, SEARCH, and the SRSD model for instruction are effective ways to provide students with the strategies necessary to become good writers. Even though teachers may instruct students to use these techniques to improve writing, they may not always use them. If students do not enjoy writing, they are less

likely to employ any strategies for writing given to them. "Of great concern to writing teachers and literacy researchers are not only the inability of reluctant writers to write well but also their lack of desire to do so." (Street, 2005, p. 636) Students may not be interested in writing because they can not relate to their assignments. Giving students the freedom to choose their own writing topics can decrease the negative impressions that they have about writing. Teachers can model this by writing about what interests them as well. When students see their teachers excited about writing, they may feed off that enthusiasm. (Street, 2005, p. 636)

Students who are able to choose their topics take ownership in their writing. "In writing about their personal experiences, their interests, and their lives, my students told me about their particular situations and interests, while at the same time making substantial gains as writers." (Street, 2005, p. 638) Writing becomes a form of expression that they can value and appreciate rather than a chore. In addition to giving them freedom, teachers must build trusting relationships with their students. If teachers can open up and share their experiences with the class through writing, the students see them as fellow writers rather than teachers. (Street, 2005, p. 638) Only then will trusting relationships begin to form.

Students must learn to become self-sufficient writers. Teachers can help the students achieve this through effective conferencing. Writing conferences provide the students with an opportunity to evaluate their writing one on one with their teacher. This provides the feedback and guidance needed to improve their writing. Conferences should be scheduled and the students must know what they are expected to share with the teacher. The students and teacher will discuss the writing piece and any other concerns the student has about writing. This strengthens the teacher-student relationship and allows for a risk-free environment for the students express their thoughts, beliefs, frustrations, and goals with writing.

Conferences help facilitate individualized instruction. Not all students are experiencing the same difficulties. Conferences help us to address the individual's needs. We better understand our students and are better able to help them when we discuss their writing with them. We also get a better sense of

student growth when we conduct conferences because students are able to talk of what they see as breakthroughs in writing. (Bishop & Reichert, 2008, p. 2)

The structure of a conference is important. The teacher must meet with the student one on one in a designated place in the classroom. The student is responsible for bringing all of the necessary writings to the conference. Conferences should be about five to twenty minutes in length. There needs to be enough time for students to leave the conference with at least one good idea to improve their writing. Teachers must try to conference as often as possible with students throughout each piece. It is important for the students to know they can meet with the teacher for advice and guidance. (Bishop & Reichert, 2008, p. 3)

During the conference, the student should be doing most of the talking while the teacher guides the conference. "The teacher has to restrain himself or herself from providing the content, taking care not to inhibit the students from finding their own meaning, their own subjects, their own forms and their own language." (Martin, 2008, p. 6). This is the student's opportunity to critically evaluate the writing and reflect on his or her progress. The teacher does not grade during the conference. This is a time for the student to learn from his or her mistakes without penalty. The teacher must praise the student's writing as well as identify areas in need of improvement. (Martin, 2008, p.7)

The dynamics in a writing classroom are extremely important for students to write well. The writing workshop approach is a popular way to create a positive writing atmosphere. "As important as it is for children to learn how to write well, it is equally important for them to care about writing. It is enormously important that we, as teachers, demonstrate and expect a love of writing." (Calkins, 2006, p.10) The workshop environment creates a positive atmosphere for writing where students are engaged in their work. Students feel more comfortable asking for help as they write and revise their work. (Street, 2005, p. 639) Students become more likely to help one another and participate in class discussions. Building a "writing community" (Street, 2005, p. 640), gives students a sense of trust and the opportunity to dig into their personal experiences and feelings. This is when they can truly become effective and creative writers. Writing becomes a social experience and students are not afraid to discuss their ideas with the teacher and each other.

A mini-lesson is an effective strategy teachers use in the writing workshop model. As the teacher demonstrates the writing skill, students immediately implement the strategy. During writing workshop, it is important for students to share their work with each other. Each student works with a partner and builds a relationship with that person. This gives them a steady resource to rely on for ideas, questions, or input. The mid-workshop teaching point keeps the students focused on the mini-lesson while writing. The teacher has the opportunity to reinforce the skill and keep the students on task. (Calkins, 2006, p. 5-6) The importance of conferencing is displayed during the writing workshop model. As previously stated, conferencing gives the students a chance to interact one on one with the teacher and receive specific help for their needs. "Remember the centrality of ownership in students' growth as writers. The piece of writing belongs to the writer." (Atwell, 1987, p. 95) As stated previously, when students own their writing, they will care about their writing. The role of the teacher is to help guide the students' ideas and not change their ideas.

Students are also encouraged to read more in a writing workshop environment. The students have opportunities to examine text as a writer rather than just a reader. They are able to read with a new sense of appreciation for the writing style and transfer those styles to their own writing. (Calkins, 2006, p. 11) The more students read, the better they are at writing. Reading novels broadens vocabulary and sentence structure. They learn to write for different audiences and vary their focuses. Students should choose novels that interest them. The freedom of choice increases their interest level in reading and their overall comprehension of the material. (NCTE Guideline, 2004, n.p.)

Providing strategies and choices, linking novels to their writing, and creating a positive learning environment are effective ways in which teachers can help students become good writers. However, some Language Arts teachers do not feel confident in their writing instruction. Teachers need to be provided with the strategies to teach their students. "For example, teachers' confidence in their ability to help their students succeed exerts a direct influence on their classroom routines and consequently their students' motivation and success." (Troia & Maddox, 2004, p. 19) Collaboration among Language Arts teachers can help improve student writing. Struggling writers need consistent writing instruction throughout their schooling. (Engel & Streich, 2006, p. 661)

Collaboration among teachers results in continuity between grade levels and retention of skills for students. In order to create a collaborative writing program, teachers must look at their student population and determine what they need to become effective, independent, and creative writers. Teachers can decide how to teach writing, what types of writing to teach, how to assess writing, and how much writing instruction students should receive each year. Collaboration is the only way to create a writing program that is tailored to the needs of the teachers and students in a particular school. (Engel & Steich, 2006, p. 662-669) In order to define best practices in writing instruction, teachers must work together and be open about their instruction methods.

Incorporating teacher collaboration into the culture of a school is important. Many current educational reforms are based upon teachers collaborating extensively and meaningfully. However, teacher collaboration is not the norm in most schools. Teachers traditionally plan and teach in isolation. (Inger, 1993, p. 1) Collaboration takes more time and effort from individual teachers who are accustomed to working alone. "Some teachers dislike group planning because they believe it can be unproductive. However, the benefits of working collaboratively are too great to dismiss the practice." (Owen, 2008, p.3)

"In schools where teachers work collaboratively, students can sense the program coherence and consistency of expectations, which may explain the improved behavior and achievement." (Inger, 1993, p. 1) Writing skills improve when students receive consistent instruction between grade levels. This is accomplished through teacher collaboration and common planning time. It is important for Language Arts teachers to interact among and within grade levels during the school day. Regularly scheduled meetings, professional development and follow-up sessions, the availability of shared resources and other materials allow teachers to collaborate more effectively. (Inger, 2008, p. 5) Collaboration with Language Arts teachers leads to consistency with writing instruction and provides students with a common foundation for all aspects of writing. When teachers collaborate, students retain the base knowledge for writing which gives teachers more time to focus on developing higher level writing skills.

Not only is collaboration beneficial for students, it also benefits the teachers and helps them deal with the everyday stresses of accountability. "It is collaborative teaching

that enables us to draw on our individual and group strengths, divide work into manageable chunks, and conquer the obstacles of overloaded curriculum frameworks, high-stakes tests, all while holding ourselves accountable for results.” (Wild, Mayeaux, Edmonds, 2008, p. 1) Teachers benefit from sharing ideas about writing instruction because it allows them to try new methods and provides the students with a solid basis for writing. When every Language Arts teacher in a school provides the students with the same strategies for writing, the students retain those skills throughout their academic career and are able to focus each year on growing and developing into stronger writers.

Instituting more teacher collaboration into a school’s culture can be challenging; however, it is essential for improving the writing skills of students. Less time is spent re-teaching simple writing skills and more time is spent moving students to a higher level of writing instruction. Teachers can devote more time to conferencing and teaching creativity and individual expression rather than the basics of writing. Even though it may be a difficult transition, the benefits to the teaching learning process are invaluable.

Serious collaboration-teachers engaging in the rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning-is rare and where it exists, it is fragile. Yet it can and does occur, and the enthusiasm of teachers about their collaboration is persuasive.

When schools are organized to support it, the advantages of collegial action are varied and substantial. When teachers work as colleagues, it produces greater coherence and integration to the daily work of teaching. (Inger, 1993, p. 6)

Finally, research shows teachers must constantly evaluate their teaching styles and collaborate with each other to decide what is best for their students. Teaching students writing is an ongoing process which is constantly assessed and restructured to adhere to the students’ needs. Language Arts teachers allow students to take ownership of their writing choices. Integrating reading and writing helps students make decisions in their writing by providing them with more experiences. One on one conferencing between teachers and students in a risk-free environment helps develop their individual writing style and avoids frustration. Collaborating and teaching common strategies to students provides the foundation for students to build their writing skills to the next level. Establishing a positive learning environment for students to grow as writers benefits them

in the classroom as well as developing the skills needed to effectively communicate and be successful in their future.

The best teaching, just like the best science and the best medicine, is a moving target. And so the process of pursuing best practice is just that: a process, something fluid and dynamic that we should all try to stay actively involved with as much as we possibly can. (Peha, n.d., n.p.)

### **Chapter III: Focus Statement and Action Research Questions**

In the 2007-2008 school year, the Language Arts classes in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades evaluated instruction of the writing process in Delran Middle School. The researchers assessed the method of writing instruction in each grade level and discovered the best practices which resulted in strengthening students' abilities, skill levels, test scores, and confidence in writing. The researchers believed there must be academic continuity among grade levels by including cross-grade teacher collaboration. The researchers analyzed the students' and teachers' perceptions of writing by collecting samples of student writing. The researchers collected data from student and teacher surveys, journals, student performance, and interviews. The qualitative data examined students' confidence and enjoyment levels. The work samples analyzed students' skill levels. The analysis by the researchers resulted in a recommendation for best practices in writing and the implementation of a writing program which addressed the needs and concerns of middle school teachers and students.

The researchers anticipated some challenges throughout the action research project. During the action research process time constraints were the most challenging factor. Accomplishing the data collection techniques within school hours and coordinating with teachers limited the amount of data. Cooperation from students, and teachers hindered the researchers' timeline for collecting data. Due to various teaching styles, the researchers found it difficult to determine best practices for writing instruction. The researchers felt positive teacher-student relationships could alter students' perceptions about writing in a productive way.

Throughout the action research process, the researchers focused on specific factors. The researchers considered teachers' methods of writing instruction which resulted in strengthening students' abilities, skill level, and confidence in writing. This was determined by identifying the best practices at Delran Middle School. The researchers discovered the students' feelings about writing and how that affected their performance. They also found out how the teachers felt about writing instruction. The researchers determined that teachers at Delran Middle School were using formal writing instruction in their classrooms. Finally, the researchers discovered that most students



have retained skills from the previous grade and are currently retaining skills during this academic school year.

The purpose of this action research project was to identify which writing instruction methods were working to improve student performance which could guide Delran Middle School in achieving its school goals for improving writing. By defining best practices, the researchers aided teachers in providing data which was used in their lesson plans to enhance students' writing skills. The researchers wanted students to view writing as an avenue for personal expression and feel more comfortable with their writing abilities. The researchers collected data which identified areas that needed improvement and proposed possible methods which would advance students' performance and confidence in writing.

Figure 1 displays the areas the researchers focused on to evaluate various aspects of writing instruction at Delran Middle School. The factors have been divided into percentages based on the researchers' areas of focus.

**Figure 1**

**Factors Involved in the Action Research Proposal**

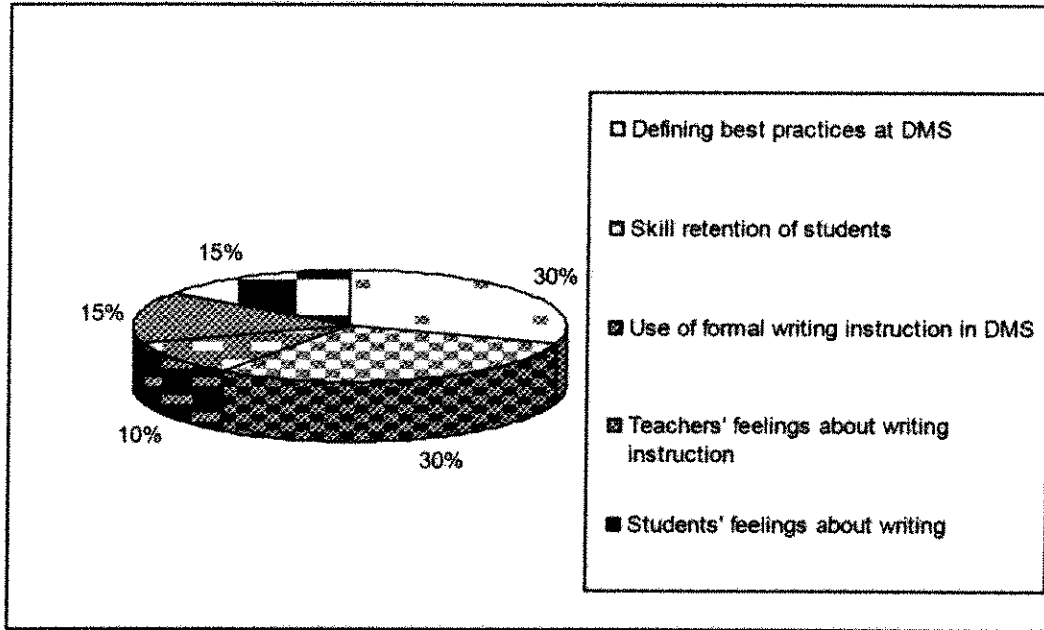
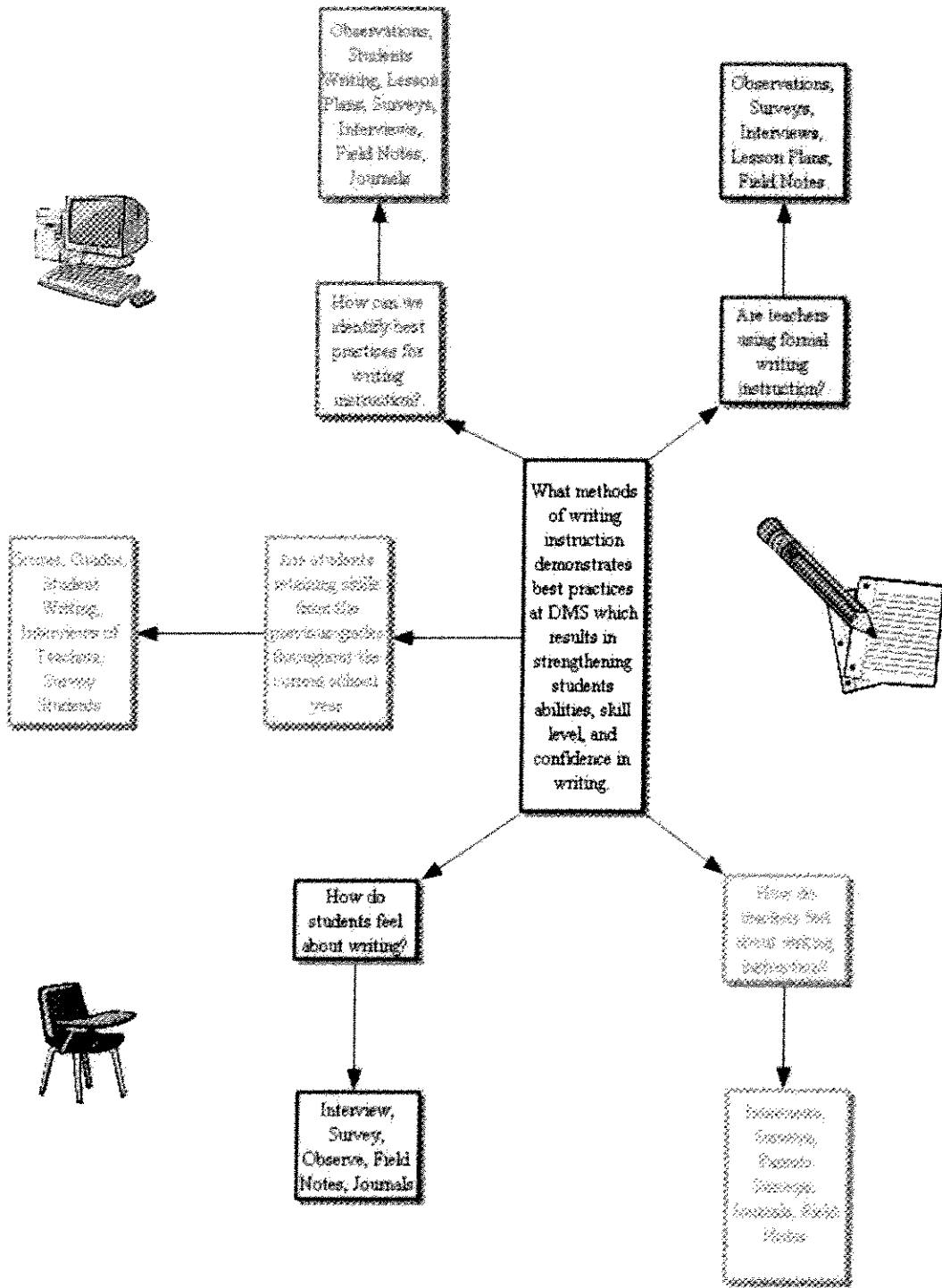


Figure 2, displayed on the following page, illustrates the relationship between the research questions and the sources for data the researchers collected.

**Figure 2**



*Five Big Questions*

#### Chapter IV: Design and Methods

The researchers used various qualitative methods to collect data in this action research proposal. The researchers collected data using the following methods: surveys to students and teachers; reviewed teacher lesson plans; interviewed students and teachers formally and informally; observed writing instruction from teachers in grades 6-8; analyzed student performances with authentic writing samples; and collected field notes throughout the process. The researchers are confident that the methods mentioned provided ample results which were examined and considered during this action research project. They believe their data aided in determining the validity of their focus statement.

The researchers discussed the action research proposal with the principal and the Language Arts Supervisor to determine the need for student improvement in writing. The researchers determined a focus statement for their action research proposal and began to collect data on student performance. They reviewed literature on writing instruction and the Delran Middle School Language Arts curriculum to provide background information. The researchers informally interviewed teachers and obtained permission from the Superintendent to survey students.

The researchers designed surveys to distribute to students in the beginning of January and again in May or June. The researchers examined lesson plans and observed writing instruction. Randomly selected students and teachers kept journals to record feelings about writing and writing instruction. They conducted interviews with students and teachers based on survey results. Examples of student performance on authentic writing samples were examined to help determine additional interview questions. During the process, the researchers looked at the data collection samples and recorded field notes to examine the action research process. Based on the plentitude of data collected, the researchers analyzed and reported their findings. The researchers made recommendations to their principal and Language Arts Supervisor for improved writing instruction techniques and possibly a formal writing program based on the research results.

The action research process included eleven middle school Language Arts teachers. In sixth grade, there were three female Language Arts teachers, two with fewer than fifteen years of experience and one with over thirty years of teaching experience.

There was one male Language Arts teacher in sixth grade with over thirty years of teaching experience. In seventh grade, there were three female Language Arts teachers, two with fewer than fifteen years of experience and one with over thirty years of experience. There was one male Language Arts teacher in seventh grade with less than fifteen years of experience. In eighth grade, there were two female Language Arts teachers one has over fifteen years of experience and the other had less than one year of teaching experience. The male eighth grade Language Arts teacher had over fifteen years of teaching experience. Each teacher selected one heterogeneous class which participated in the action research process.

In order to achieve triangulation, the researchers used a variety of data collection methods to gather information. The following triangulation matrix shows the multiple sources the researchers used as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3

Research Questions	Sources of Data					
	Surveys	Lesson plans	Interviews	Observations	Authentic Writing Samples	Field Notes
What methods of writing instruction demonstrate best practices at DMS which result in strengthen students' abilities, skill level, and confidence in writing?		☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
How do students feel about writing?	☺		☺			
How do teachers feel about writing?	☺		☺			
Are teachers using formal writing instruction?	☺	☺	☺	☺		☺
How can we identify best practices for writing instruction at DMS?		☺	☺	☺	☺	☺
Are students retaining skills from the previous grade and throughout their current school year?	☺		☺			

In Figure 4 the researchers organized the above data collection techniques into experiencing, enquiring, and examining.

**Figure 4**

<b>Data Collection Techniques</b>		
<b>Experiencing</b>	<b>Enquiring</b>	<b>Examining</b>
Classroom Observations	Interviews	Lesson Plans
Field Notes	Surveys	Student Performance

The researchers used the timeline below for this action research proposal:

**September/October 2007**

- Discussion with principal and Language Arts Supervisor regarding action research proposal.

**November 2007**

- Developed focus statement and determined data collection techniques for action research proposal.
- Reviewed Language Arts curriculum and available resources.
- Reviewed literature on writing instruction.

**December 2007**

- Informal teacher interviews informing them of this action research proposal.

**January/ February 2008**

- Request for permission from Superintendent to send surveys to students
- Surveys sent to students and teachers
- Analysis of surveys
- Create formal interview questions based on survey results
- Collect field notes

**March/April 2008**

- Create formal interview questions based on survey results

- Classroom observations
- Interview teachers
- Review lesson plans

May/June 2008

- Examine student performance by collecting writing samples
- Collect field notes
- Analysis of classroom observations
- Analysis of interviews

July/August 2008

- Begin review of data

September/October 2008

- Continue review of data

November 2008

- Final analysis of all data
- Report results

December 2008

- Make recommendations based on findings



### Chapter V: Data Analysis and Reporting of Results

During the 2007-2008 school year, the researchers surveyed nine Language Arts teachers in Delran Middle School about improving the writing skills of the students. The researchers surveyed 220 middle school students about the writing instruction they receive and their overall feelings about writing. In addition to surveys, the researchers observed lessons on various writing strategies by one sixth grade Language Arts teacher, one seventh grade Language Arts teacher, and one eighth grade Language Arts teacher. After collecting the above mentioned data, the researchers interviewed one sixth grade Language Arts teacher, one seventh grade Language Arts teacher, and one eighth grade Language Arts teacher about the factors which most affect the improvement of writing skills in the students of Delran Middle School.

The researchers administered a survey to the Language Arts teachers using a Likert scale of 1-4. The teachers were asked to indicate the extent to which each statement characterized their opinion by placing a number on the line. They chose from the following options: 1-Strongly Disagree; 2- Disagree; 3- Agree; 4- Strongly Agree. The students were given a survey using a Likert scale of 1-3. They were asked to identify how they felt about each statement by placing a number on the line. They chose from the following options: 1- Uncomfortable; 2- Alright; 3- Confident. The researchers observed one sixth grade, one seventh grade, and one eighth grade Language Arts class using a lesson observation checklist with a Likert scale of 1-3. The researchers observed the lesson and the students then placed an appropriate number on the line based on their findings. They chose from the following options: 1-Lacking; 2- Adequate; 3- Above and Beyond.

After analyzing the above data collected, the researchers developed interview questions for the teachers to further identify ways to improve writing instruction. They interviewed one sixth grade, one seventh grade, and one eighth grade Language Arts teacher. They asked each teacher the following questions: Is enough time provided for students to write in the current Language Arts class period?; Do you feel the students adequately understand the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric?; Do you provide the students the opportunity to choose the topics they write about in class?; How often do you conference with individual students about their writing?; What writing skills and

strategies do you feel the students retain from the previous school year's writing instruction?

The review of data is divided into four sections. The first section analyzes the teacher surveys. The second section analyzes the students' surveys by grade level and as a whole. The third section analyzes the lesson observation checklists from the lessons. The fourth section analyzes the teacher interviews. Each section is described below with data results, analysis, and the researchers' findings on improving writing skills.

**Figure 5 Teacher Survey Data Results**

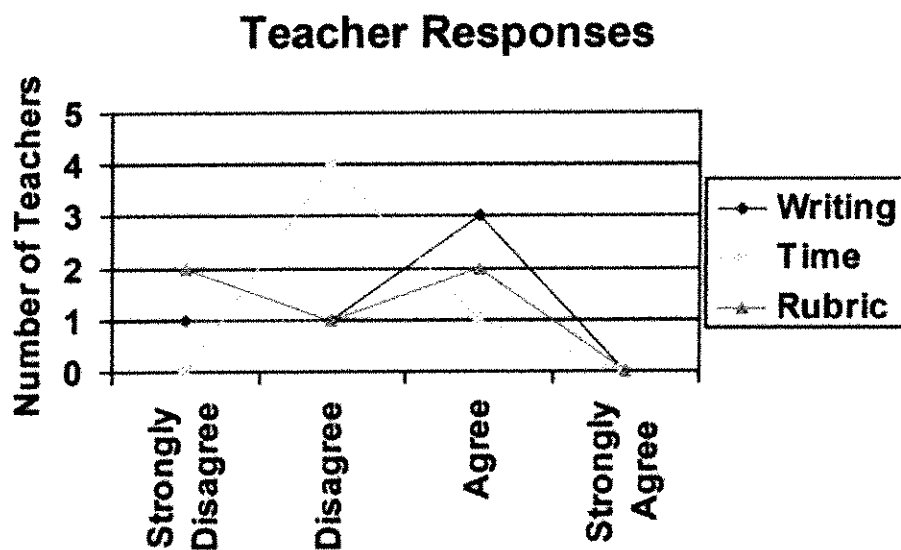


Figure 5 represents three of the questions the researchers believed to be the most significant to identify the improvement of writing skills. This was determined after reviewing the surveys. When asked if teachers collaborate with each other, the average for the teachers surveyed was 2.4 with a standard deviation of 0.90. The average for the teachers surveyed was 2.2 with a standard deviation of 0.45 for if enough time is provided in class for the students to write. The average for the teachers surveyed for the students' understanding of the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric was 2.0 with a standard deviation of 1.0.

Figure 6 Sixth Grade Survey Data Results

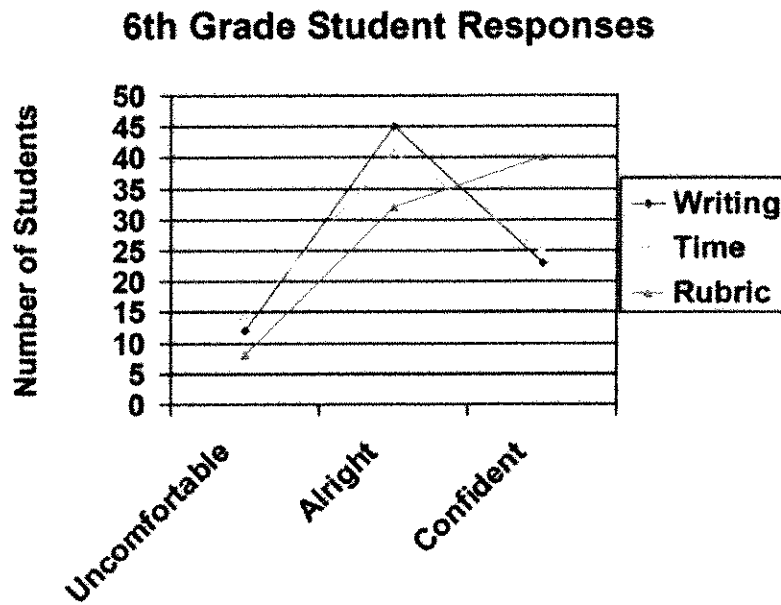


Figure 6 represents three of the questions the sixth grade students were asked that the researchers believed to be the most significant to identify the improvement of writing skills. This was determined after reviewing the sixth grade student surveys. The average for the students overall feeling towards writing was 2.14 with a standard deviation of 1.35. The average for the amount of time the students were provided for writing was 2.14 with a standard deviation of 1.25. The average for the students understanding the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric was 2.4 with a standard deviation 1.90.

Figure 7 Seventh Grade Survey Data Results

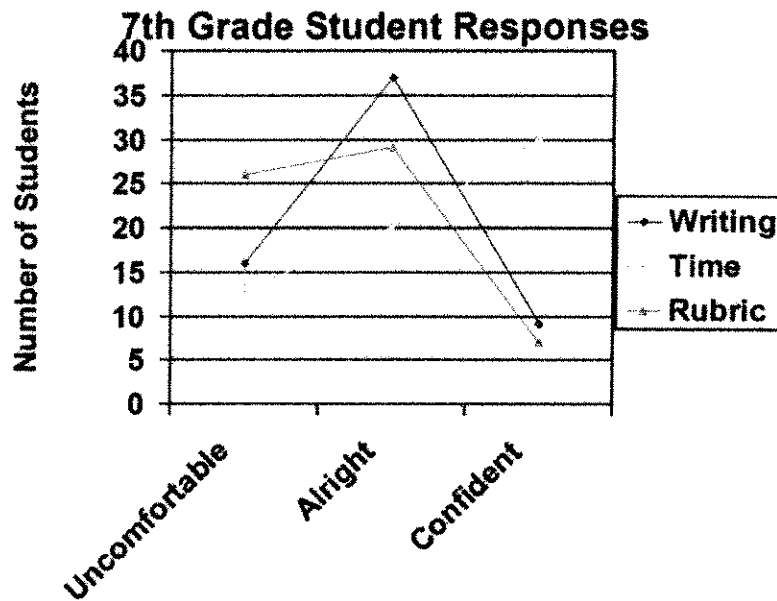


Figure 7 represents three of the questions the seventh grade students were asked that the researchers believed to be the most significant to identify the improvement of writing skills. This was determined after reviewing the seventh grade student surveys. The average for the students overall feeling towards writing was 1.89 with a standard deviation of 1.54. The average for the amount of time the students were provided for writing was 1.98 with a standard deviation of 1.45. The average for the students understanding the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric was 1.69 with a standard deviation 1.00.

Figure 8 Eighth Grade Student Survey Results

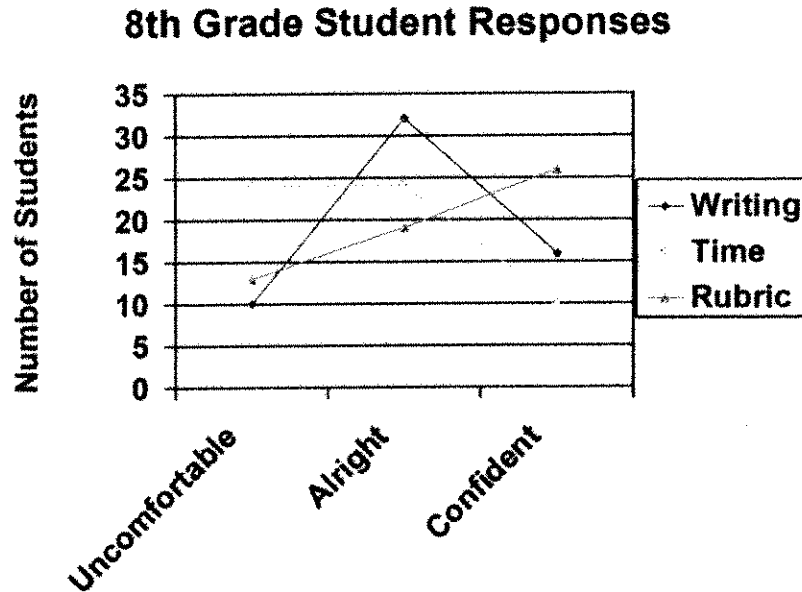


Figure 8 represents three of the questions the eighth grade students were asked that the researchers believed to be the most significant to identify the improvement of writing skills. This was determined after reviewing the eighth grade student surveys. The average for the students overall feeling towards writing was 2.10 with a standard deviation of 1.85. The average for the amount of time the students were provided for writing was 1.93 with a standard deviation of 1.65. The average for the students understanding the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric was 2.22 with a standard deviation 2.19.

#### Lesson Observation Checklist Data Results

The researchers observed one teacher from each grade level during a writing lesson. They recorded the grade level, number of students, topic, and length of the lesson. There were similarities in each lesson. Each teacher provided the students with enough time to write and at least mentioned the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric. In

each class, the students were on task and engaged in the lesson. Most of the students used the skills the teachers taught in the lesson in their own writing, and the teachers helped individual students who were struggling with implementing the skills.

The researchers noticed certain differences in the lessons worth noting. Only one class was permitted to choose their own topics for writing. This class exhibited more enthusiasm for the assignment, and the students seemed more confident when working on the assignment. The researchers observed one teacher reinforcing previously taught skills from other lessons. The teacher referred to the "writing board" in the classroom to remind the students to use various skills and strategies they have learned. Despite the similarities in the lessons, the differences were significant and could be minimized by more teacher opportunities for teacher collaboration.

#### **Teacher Interview Data Results**

The researchers interviewed one teacher from each grade level to collect additional data based on the survey results. When asked if enough time was provided for writing instruction, the sixth and seventh grade teachers each felt they had enough time to effectively teach a writing lesson in an 84 minute Language Arts period. However, the eighth grade teacher felt the 42 minute Language Arts period was not enough time to present an effective writing lesson. The data indicates that the eighth grade teachers are at a great disadvantage due to the single class period of instruction. The sixth and seventh grade teachers have enough time to deliver their lessons and implement the skills. The eighth grade students would greatly benefit from a double period of Language Arts.

When asked if the students understand the New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric, each teacher believed that the students did not completely understand what is expected of them despite instruction. The seventh grade teacher claimed, "The wording is confusing and the students do not take the score of 1-6 seriously because it is different than how they are graded in every other subject." The data reports that the students do not understand the rubric, and the teachers need to discover new ways to help the students understand how they are graded, so they may improve their writing skills.

The teachers' responses varied when asked if they allow the students to choose their topics for writing assignments. The sixth grade teacher stated, "When students are

given the freedom to write about their own topics, they are more interested/ confident in their writing abilities. I feel their final writing piece is better.” The seventh grade teacher did not allow students to choose their own topics. The eighth grade teacher felt that it was appropriate to let the students choose sometimes, but they most often needed to be guided with a given topic. The data shows that the teachers were not in agreement on whether or not students should choose their own topics and why.

The researchers found that each teacher felt they did not conference enough with individual students and would not be able to even if more time was provided. They felt that this issue was the biggest challenge when trying to effectively instruct students to become more skilled writers. One teacher stated, “If my class sizes were smaller or if I had a conference period to meet with students, I could truly impact their writing abilities and help build their confidence by giving them the positive feedback they need to succeed.” The data shows that the teachers believe conferencing with students is important but difficult to accomplish.

The students do not appear to be retaining the skills from the previous year’s instruction according to the teachers’ statements. They each feel that if the teachers had more time to collaborate or if more professional development was offered, they could provide the students with more continuity between grade levels. The data reports that more collaboration is needed among the teachers in order to help the students retain writing skills and strategies from year to year.

Some areas of strength in this research are the varied sources of data such as the surveys, observations, and interviews. The variety of survey questions gave the researchers a clear objective when observing the writing lessons. The researchers were able to develop the interview questions based on the findings of the surveys which allowed them to investigate the most important issues that need to be addressed in order to improve writing skills. The scope of the data clearly reflects the literature reviewed by the researchers; therefore, the researchers discovered a strong connection between the research and the writing instruction at Delran Middle School.

One area of concern is the accuracy of the student responses on the surveys. The researchers anticipated that some of the students would not answer seriously or honestly. The researchers experienced difficulty trying to schedule observations because of teacher

schedules and availability. Receiving the surveys from the teachers in a timely manner proved to be difficult, but the researchers were able to recover all of the surveys within their set deadline.



## Chapter VI: Action Plan

### Theory to Practice

The researchers believe the results from the teacher and student surveys, their extensive research, classroom observations and teacher interviews will help provide concrete evidence to improve the writing skills of students at Delran Middle School. The researchers decided to present their research to the school principal. The researchers suggested that the eighth grade Language Arts teachers should be given a double period to integrate reading and writing. This increase in instruction time would allow teachers to conference with individual students on their writing and focus more on what each student needs to improve his or her writing skills. The double period also would allow for continuity between grade levels since the sixth and seventh grade students currently receive a double period of Language Arts.

The researchers also suggested that the Language Arts teachers should have a common planning period. This common period would allow the teachers to collaborate throughout and between grade levels. This collaboration would lead to a better understanding for students' knowledge from year to year. For example, if the sixth grade Language Arts teachers are teaching their students persuasion, the seventh grade teachers will know what to expect when those students reach seventh grade. This would also continue into eighth grade. Collaboration is essential to providing the students with seamless instruction in writing between the grade levels. If teachers are given a common planning time to collaborate, the students will benefit from new ideas and methods of instruction.

Since conducting their research, the researchers have held several Language Arts meetings after school. During these meetings, writing topics were discussed and new ideas were discovered. These meetings have lead to many more classroom lessons in which the students can decide on their own writing topics. This has allowed for students to become more creative in their writing. The students have developed a sense of ownership in their writing since they have been given more options for what they write in class.

**Recommendations**

With the various data taken, the researchers would like to recommend changes to the eighth grade schedule. Based on the research and data collected, the researchers feel it is necessary for the students to receive a double period of Language Arts in each grade level. It is recommended that another period is added to the eighth grade students' schedule to accommodate this need. The students would benefit from having more Language Arts instruction since reading and writing would be taught integrated and more time would be provided for writing instruction.

The researchers would also like to recommend that Language Arts teachers are provided more time for individual writing instruction. Based on the research and data collected, the researchers feel it is important for teachers to conference with students individually on their writing in order to provide accurate and meaningful feedback. Reducing class sizes would allow for teachers to have more time for conferencing as well as adding the second instructional period to the eighth grade schedule. Not only will conferencing improve writing skills, it will also improve the teacher-student relationship which helps students feel more confident and secure in their writing.

The researchers recommend that the Language Arts teachers have more opportunities to collaborate within and among grade levels. Based on the research and data collected, the researchers believe collaboration is essential to improving writing instruction for students. This can be accomplished with a common planning time built into the current teacher schedule. The researchers recommend monthly collaboration meetings for the teachers to share ideas, strategies, and lessons with each other. Through collaboration, the students writing will improve.

**Action Plan**

The researchers will present their findings to the Language Arts Supervisor and building principal. They will recommend the above changes with the appropriate research and data. The researchers will continue to meet after school with the other Language Arts teachers to collaborate and will present to the supervisor and principal the effectiveness of our meetings on student writing. The researchers will present their results to the Delran Curriculum SMART team and Director of Curriculum. The Delran

SMART Team is responsible for bridging the gaps between subject areas and grade levels. The researchers hope to assist in closing the gaps in Language Arts by recommending their ideas for improvement based on the research. The Director of Curriculum will be presented with recommendations for changes in the eighth grade curriculum to implement an additional class period.

The researchers will present their findings to various professional organizations. They will send their research and recommendations to the National Council for the Teachers of English, the National Writing Project, and the National Middle School Association. They hope to share their research and recommendations with these organizations in order to improve writing skills among students everywhere.

The researchers plan to hold professional development workshops in Delran Middle School for Language Arts teachers to improve student writing skills. They would like to offer specific strategies for the improvement of writing instruction based on the needs of the building and their research. The professional development workshops would include follow-up support through email and the after school meetings already being held.

#### **Limitations of the Study**

During the course of the study, the researchers believe some information was limited. Of the nine Language Arts teachers, only five participated in the study despite the researchers' efforts to obtain the data. Another limitation was the accuracy of the student responses to the survey. The accuracy may have been affected by individual student's understanding of the survey, the honesty to which they responded, the time given to complete the survey, and other external distractions while completing the survey. Overall, the researchers feel confident with the validity of the study.

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**Appendix 1 Teacher Letter and Survey**

February 14, 2008

Dear Colleague,

As a part of our graduate school program, we are conducting a research project to explore the writing instruction at Delran Middle School. We want to find out different strategies that work best in the classroom and help build confidence in students' writing.

Your participation in this research is, of course, voluntary. Your confidentiality and anonymity are assured. Although the survey is coded to allow for follow-up with non-respondents, you will not be individually identified with your questionnaire or responses. Please understand that use of this data will be limited to this research project.

We greatly appreciate your participation in this research. Please return the survey on the back of this page by Tuesday, February 19, 2008.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this study. We genuinely appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Carol Davis

Michele Hassall

Directions: The following are statements about your perception of writing instruction at Delran Middle School. Please indicate the extent to which each statement characterizes your opinion by placing the appropriate number on the line provided.

1- Strongly Disagree 2- Disagree 3- Agree 4- Strongly Agree

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The Language Arts class periods offer adequate time for writing instruction.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Writing instruction resources such as textbooks, novels, and technology are up-to-date and available.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Students demonstrate in their writing that they have adequately learned writing skills in their previous grade levels.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Enough time is provided for professional development for writing instruction through in-services.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Teachers collaborate with other Language Arts teachers in their grade levels.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Enough time is provided for Language Arts teachers to collaborate during professional development days.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ Students exhibit a genuine interest throughout writing lessons.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Students exhibit confidence in the classroom during writing lessons.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Students work well as they write independently in class.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Students apply skills taught in Language Arts class to their writing.



11. \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher-generated rubrics are more effective with the students than using the New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric.
  
12. \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher-student conferences are a part of writing instruction.

**Appendix 2: Student Survey**

## Language Arts Survey

February 26, 2008

Dear Student,

Please complete the following survey about your feelings and concerns about writing. **Please do not put your name on this survey!** Label each statement with your honest opinion and feelings. This survey does not affect your grade in any way. It will only be used to help Ms. Davis and Mrs. Hassall complete a research project. Thank you for your help!

What grade are you in? \_\_\_\_\_

How do you feel about the following statements? Write the number at the end of each statement.

1= Uncomfortable

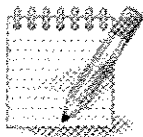
2= Alright

3= Confident

1. Writing paragraphs, essays, journals, responses \_\_\_\_\_
2. Organizing your writing (example format, formula) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Using writing skills modeled in class \_\_\_\_\_
4. The amount of time you write in class each day \_\_\_\_\_
5. Timed writing assignments \_\_\_\_\_
6. Doing creative writing assignments \_\_\_\_\_
7. The New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric \_\_\_\_\_
8. Using writing skills in other subjects (for example-writing essays in Social Studies \_\_\_\_\_
9. Using correct grammar skills (for example- punctuation) \_\_\_\_\_
10. Remembering writing skills you learned last year \_\_\_\_\_
11. Writing persuasive essays \_\_\_\_\_

12. Answering open-ended questions \_\_\_\_\_

13. Responding to topics assigned by your teacher by writing essays or writing  
journals \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix 3: Observation Checklist**

**LESSON OBSERVATION CHECKLIST**

**Grade:**

**Number of Students:**

**Topic of Lesson:**

**Length of Lesson:**

1= Lacking

2= Adequate

3= Above and beyond

1. \_\_\_\_\_ Lesson provided enough time for students to write.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The New Jersey Holistic Scoring Rubric was used in the lesson.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Students were on task when writing independently.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ Students used the writing skills modeled during the lesson in their writing.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Students were engaged during the lesson.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher provided opportunities for individual instruction.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The students exhibited knowledge of writing skills from previous years.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Students were provided the opportunity to choose the topic, style, and method for their writing.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Students exhibited confidence when writing.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher reinforced previously taught writing skills.

