

ABSTRACT

GAINEY, PAUL BARROW. Beyond the Test Scores: A Retrospective Study of One School's Efforts to Promote Teacher Competence and Confidence in Fourth Grade Writing. (Under the direction of Lance D. Fusarelli.)

This study focused on how one elementary school undertook improving writing instruction during the time period from 2001-2006. The study was conducted in a retrospective study approach to determine whether or not the work done to improve teacher competence in writing instruction actually produced improved student test scores on the North Carolina writing assessment for fourth grade. Another part of the study concentrated on the role of the school's administration in supporting the fourth-grade teachers, as well as those at other grade levels in the school, in promoting strong writing instruction and student mastery.

This study used data collected from state writing assessments, instructional calendars, data compiled from student prompts, school district expectations, student demographic data, state testing data, school accreditation reports, the school's writing performance plan, and school improvement plans. Data was also collected through individual and focus group interviews with teachers in the school, and the school principal. Interview and focus group data was analyzed to ascertain common trends, teacher perceptions of the school's efforts to support writing instruction, and teacher expectations for administrative support.

This study revealed some important results. There was improvement in test performance. The efforts made in fourth grade writing by the teachers teaching fourth grade were not met with the same efforts at the grades below fourth grade. Further, there was higher frustration among those teaching writing at the non-tested grades suggesting a need

for more relevant in-service training. A third result showed a lack of instructional leadership by the school's principal.

**Beyond the Test Scores: A Retrospective Study of One School's Efforts to Promote
Teacher Competence and Confidence in Fourth-grade Writing**

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation has been the culmination of untold hours of work, sacrifice, frustration, and exhilaration. No part of this entire process would have been possible without the constant support, encouragement, care, and love demonstrated by my wife, Jennifer Gainey. It was Jennifer who first encouraged me to pursue my doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at North Carolina State University. She stayed awake each week waiting for me to complete the drive from Raleigh to Havelock after long night classes; she offered to read text throughout the project; and she assisted me by providing a constant source of emotional support, especially when the rigors of managing a job as a school administrator while being a graduate student appeared to be more than I thought I could handle. The ironic part of all of this is that she did these things while teaching her own high school English classes and serving as her school's English department chair. I am truly a fortunate man to have Jennifer as a wife, colleague, and friend.

I've always believed that behind every person who does something of importance, there is another unseen person pushing him or her to reach a level of performance that cannot be reached alone. Jennifer has been with me every step of the way through this program and it is for this reason that I dedicate this dissertation to her. She truly deserves this recognition, and without her, no part of this entire process would have been as sweet or rewarding.

BIOGRAPHY

The author of this study, Paul Barrow Gainey, was born on December 31, 1967 in New Bern, North Carolina. The middle child of three sons born to O. K. and Jane Gainey, Paul grew up in Havelock, North Carolina and graduated from Havelock High School in 1986 where his father served as the principal for thirty years and his mother taught American History, World History, and Economics and Sociology.

Growing up in a family of educators, one would think that the pressure to excel as a student would be strong; however, Paul's parents allowed him much latitude in determining who he was and exploring his own talents. His parents did provide many experiences both in and out of school which helped Paul develop as a child and later as an adult. Through his mother's insistence that he take piano lessons as a child, Paul developed an interest in music that he was to continue to develop throughout high school and college as a member of various school music organizations. Paul's father encouraged him throughout school to apply himself to his schoolwork, even though that encouragement was not always met with optimal academic performance as a high school student much to the chagrin of both parents. Paul always said that one of his interests growing up, North Carolina history and geography, was promoted through numerous car trips with his parents and brothers to various locations around the state during the high school football play-offs in the 1970s and 1980s when the Havelock Rams were perennial favorites to advance to the state championship. Aside from that, there were community sports and church activities and Paul was encouraged by both parents to participate in these activities growing up in Havelock.

Paul graduated from East Carolina University with a Bachelor of Arts Degree with double majors in Political Science and English Literature in 1990. Upon graduation, Paul began graduate school and worked as a graduate teaching assistant in the ECU English Department. Paul completed his Master of Arts in English Literature in 1992. Thinking that he wanted to teach English at the college level, Paul taught in several adjunct English positions at ECU and various community colleges in eastern North Carolina concurrently from 1992 through 1994.

In August 1994, Paul accepted a lateral-entry position teaching English Language Arts and Social Studies at Havelock Middle School in Havelock, North Carolina. Paul taught seventh and eighth grade at Havelock Middle for six years and served on several committees in the school eventually chairing the school's curriculum committee. It was during this time that Paul met Jennifer, his wife, who was teaching English at Havelock High School. They were married on December 27, 1997. In 1998 with the encouragement of his principal, Donald Leatherman, Paul returned to East Carolina University to pursue a Master's degree in Educational Leadership which he completed in 2000.

In June, 2000, Paul accepted his first administrative position as assistant principal at William Jesse Gurganus Elementary School in Havelock working for Patrick Williams, the school's principal who had once been one of Paul's elementary school teachers when he was a student. Paul worked hard during the next seven years as assistant principal concentrating on the school's instructional program and learning much about how to assist teachers in understanding curriculum in order to provide relevant instruction to their students. During this time, Gurganus Elementary School achieved a very impressive performance record and

the school's students were recognized several times for their performance on state assessments. It was during his time at Gurganus that Paul, with the encouragement of his wife and others, began his doctoral studies at North Carolina State University. In May, 2007, Paul was reassigned by the school district to his present position, assistant principal, at Havelock Middle School.

Throughout his journey as an educator, Paul has been fortunate to have many positive role models who have demonstrated what it means to be an educational leader. Several of Paul's teachers, college professors, principals, and others have served as role models, but most importantly, the example set by his parents and grandparents, both as educators and as honorable people, has served to push him to continue developing as a school leader who sees education as more than what happens within the walls of the school building between the hours of eight o'clock and three o'clock each day. The completion of his graduate studies is only the beginning of the journey to continue becoming the type of school leader Paul hopes to eventually be.

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The completion of my doctoral studies has been greatly influenced by many talented, knowledgeable individuals in the field of educational leadership. Without them, I know that I could have not completed this undertaking. First, I would like to thank Dr. Lance Fusarelli, my program advisor and dissertation chairperson. Dr. Fusarelli took the time to help me plan my program of study and answered countless questions throughout my time at North Carolina State. He demonstrated his concern repeatedly through e-mails too numerous to mention, conversations, and evaluations of my work. He is the true example of what I think a dissertation chairperson and educational researcher should be. I am indebted to him for his guidance and support.

I would also like to thank Dr. Kenneth Brinson and Dr. Kevin Brady for their willingness to serve on my committee. As a student in classes taught by both of these men, I found their insight into issues pertaining to education enlightening and well-founded. They have proven to be valuable members of my dissertation committee who are not afraid to ask the hard questions and expect in-depth analysis of educational issues. I am grateful for the opportunity to have been associated with them in this endeavor.

Also, I want to thank Dr. Ruie Pritchard for serving on my committee. Dr. Pritchard provided many useful suggestions about how to conduct this study and assisted me greatly in solidifying my study's focus. Her work in the field of writing instruction and teacher in-service training proved to be most helpful and timely in my development as a scholar and school leader.

Dr. Patrick Bizzaro, Director of University Writing Programs at East Carolina University, proved to be a tremendous asset to this undertaking. His knowledge of composition as a way to assist students in creating meaning through text provided insight from the point of view of one who works as a specialist in this field. Further, having worked with Dr. Bizzaro collegially on other projects has helped me learn how to bridge the gap between school administration and curriculum studies. I am extremely grateful for his willingness to give his time and efforts to come from ECU to serve on this committee.

I would like to thank Pamela Flannery who conducted the focus group sessions and follow-up meetings with the teachers who participated in this study. To do this in the middle of completing an administrative internship was no small feat. Also, I would like to thank Lauren Cox who painstakingly transcribed the tapes from the interviews and focus group sessions while completing her own student-teaching internship at N.C. State.

Finally, I would like to thank the teachers, district office administrators, and principals who made this study possible. This study is a reflection of your work each day to help students learn how to learn in classrooms across our state and country.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Background of the Study

Teaching writing is arguably the most difficult task facing elementary school teachers. Often, this instruction is driven by the modes tested on state writing assessments while excluding others (Hillocks, 2002). As a result, writing instruction takes on an almost mechanical, formula quality that may, or may not, be adaptable to students' needs in their learning across all disciplines in the curriculum. It is understandable that teachers and school administrators would fall into an instructional rut based on assessment requirements due to the reliance of school districts and state educational agencies on mandated assessments to determine the educational effectiveness of local schools.

In 1983-84, the state of North Carolina began assessing students' writing ability. The current writing assessment, tied to the state's ABC testing plan, requires each student in grades four, seven, and ten to write an essay from a prompt provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Press Release, June 17, 2005). Writing instruction is often truncated to address only on-demand writing by teachers who do not teach writing as a holistic process. Further, school administrators are often at a loss as to how to help teachers and students master this process while also performing to district and state expectations. This study will focus on how one eastern North Carolina elementary school addressed the need to create a school-wide program based on the process model to promote writing instruction. This was done not only to address the assessment expectations of students in the fourth grade, but also to increase student capacity to apply writing skills as an avenue for increased learning across all areas of

the curriculum and to promote a more relevant writing pedagogy among the teachers in the building tasked with teaching students regardless of grade level.

The rationale for the North Carolina Writing Assessment is based upon the work of Millman and Greene who state:

A clear statement of purpose provides the overall framework for test specification, item development, tryout, and review. A clear statement of test purpose also contributes significantly to appropriate test use in practical contexts. (North Carolina Writing Assessment Policy Manual, 2005, p. 3)

This rationale for the state writing assessment in North Carolina is further coupled with the following statement from the North Carolina Writing Assessment brief (2006) which gives a reason for the state's introduction and use of the writing assessment. It states:

Believing that statewide emphasis on writing instruction was needed and that the measurement of writing enhances instructional efforts, North Carolina began statewide assessment of writing in 1983-84 at the sixth and ninth grades. (p. 1)

While both statements are rather ambiguous in that neither specifies a reason why the state tests writing other than because it is important to the state, it is safe to assume that there is a real need to determine whether or not students at grades four, seven, and ten have a command of functional writing skills which can be transferred into other classroom/learning settings as well as to the workforce and higher education. The remaining sections of this chapter will outline how this study will proceed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how one elementary school addressed its problems with teaching students to create content-rich writing from 2001 to 2006. The study will concentrate on what teachers did in individual classrooms, primarily in the fourth grade, to improve student writing skills as a method of learning as opposed to simply teaching isolated skills measured by state assessment. Currently, the pervasive modes of writing being taught in most states are narrative, expository, and persuasive (Hillocks, 2002). This study will explore the knowledge and ability of the school administrator to provide instructional resources and assistance to teachers in the school as they teach the writing process.

In order to discern the role of the principal as the instructional leader in promoting a pedagogically-sound curriculum that enables students and teachers to reach individual, classroom, and school performance goals, the administrator must be active in setting the instructional agenda for the school (Glatthorn, 1997). Therefore, this research study will also examine the role of the principal/school administrator as the school's instructional leader, and determine the administrator's level of involvement in setting appropriate instructional goals for the students in the school (McEwan, 2003).

The following research question will guide this study: *How do practicing teachers expand their capacity to teach writing to their students and how are best practices supported and promoted by the school's leadership?* Specifically, the study will attempt to determine the expectations of the teacher for teaching writing and what the principal/administrator determines to be important in terms of instructional support. This information will be

gathered through two different sets of interview questions- one for fourth-grade teachers and teachers at other grade levels (see Appendix A). The other interview guide (see Appendix B) will be used to interview the building principal. These interview questions will lend support to the study to be conducted as a retrospective study of the school's approach to teaching writing, especially as it pertains to teachers of fourth-grade students who are expected to perform at an acceptable level on the state fourth-grade writing assessment.

I employed a retrospective study approach similar to that discussed by Davis (2003) with his pre- and post-questionnaires in retrospective studies paying particular attention to the 2001-02 and 2005-06 school years to identify and measure the levels of reflective practice on the part of the study's participants as indicated in their interview responses. This was done to determine how this school improved student performance after the school attempted to address its writing problems, with the assumption that improvement relies upon the ability of practitioners working in the school to look at lesson plans and teaching behaviors to make adjustments to instruction. Further, the writing program in this particular school warrants extensive study to identify what is working for these teachers and students. Finally, I will investigate elements of the school culture that promote sound writing instruction. This study is relevant to not only the school being studied, but also to the larger school district (Sagor, 2000). The intention is to provide a clear picture about how writing is taught in one particular school and what the results of this approach are for the personnel tasked with instruction.

The Research Problem

During 2000-2001, this researcher served as a first-year assistant principal at

an elementary school in eastern North Carolina. This school serves a population of students, most of whom are dependents of active duty military personnel or Federal employees. The population of the town where this school is located is highly-skilled with many of the students' parents holding at least a college degree or a comparable level of training in aviation technology or related technical fields. As a matter of fact, the town was not recognized as an incorporated town in North Carolina until 1959. The school enjoys a high level of parent and community support and many of the students served by the school attend college after graduating from high school. In fact, the local high school has an average of 80% of its students taking the SAT each school year.

The low turnover rate of the staff is due to the fact that many mid-career teachers staffed the school when it was opened in 1991. The current principal is also the principal who first opened the building. There were few retirements in the building until the end of 2005-2006 when the school experienced the largest single-year retirement since the school opened. In that year, one third of the faculty retired or moved from the area. As a result, the school has the largest number of new faculty personnel it has had in the past decade.

When the state writing assessment scores for fourth grade were returned to the school in 2001, 71% of the students in the fourth grade did not test proficient in writing. For a school with a history of high performance on the state reading and math End-of-Grade tests (usually better than ninety percent proficient in both tested areas since 2002), this was disconcerting. Veteran fourth-grade teachers were at a loss as to how to address this problem of low student performance in writing.

What happened to the teachers at this school is typical of the problems many teachers tasked with teaching writing to students in schools across the state face each year. Hillocks (2002) explains that writing assessments similar to North Carolina's in which students must complete a piece of writing are given in 37 states. Two notable exceptions are Kentucky and Washington which use a portfolio approach with more than one writing sample to measure student growth throughout the school year and with no time limit to complete the prompt (Wolf & Wolf, 2002). What Hillocks and Wolf and Wolf show is that interest in writing assessments is pervasive in schools nationwide, and problems associated with giving balance to relevant writing instruction and test preparation can occupy a great deal of planning and preparation time for teachers and administrators in a school year. The National Assessment of Educational Progress provides a single proficiency score for writing for each state tested; however, the students tested do not produce a written product. Instead, the score comes from a multiple-choice assessment. In 2003, North Carolina scored above the national average on this assessment (NCDPI News Release, July 10, 2003).

Schools in this state are assessed on students' writing skills using a state-prescribed rubric as part of the North Carolina ABC plan and that performance composite is included in the school's overall performance score for the school year. In general, teachers are not as knowledgeable of the writing process as they are of the reading and math curriculum they teach (Hillocks, 2002). Often, the staff development processes many schools use to provide in-service training are haphazard at best with limited time and resources devoted to improving writing skills for teachers and instruction for students (Leiberman & Wood, 2003). One consequence is low student performance on state writing assessments. Further, this non-

aligned staff development training does not always provide teachers with transferable skills for their classrooms. This last point brings into question the specific skills students have as writers which can affect their ability to master other areas of the curriculum.

From 2001-2002 through the conclusion of the 2004-2005 school year, the North Carolina Writing Assessment was administered to students across the state, but the results of the assessments were not counted in the performance composites of individual schools (State Board of Education Highlights 2002, July 10). This was done partially because of the inconsistencies with the assessment prompts in the 2001-2002 administration which caused students to write in an almost list-like fashion without focusing their writing on one main idea when addressing the assessment's prompt. Further, the scores on the 2002 writing assessment dropped dramatically across the state. The rationale for this action was to study the assessment to determine what was considered to be proficient writing and to restructure the rubric for evaluating the assessment to an analytic rubric which employs both content and conventions. The writing assessment was reintroduced as part of the school's total composite score for 2005-2006, and in 2006-2007, the assessment will also be included in the growth component of each school's test scores across the state; however, information as to how that will be reported has not been released to the local school sites.

While the drop in performance for 2001 can be attributed to inconsistencies in the state writing assessment, it is the contention of this researcher that, even with the recognized problems associated with the assessment, students were not receiving writing instruction based on sound writing pedagogy. Reacting to the low performance on the writing assessment, several programs were quickly put into place for 2002 and 2003 at the school

studied. Consequently, the students' writing performance did not climb above 27% proficient.

While the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction study of the writing assessment might point to inconsistency within the assessment, for the teachers and the administrators at the school being studied, it pointed to something much deeper about writing instruction. This concern about how to teach writing is the basis for this study. The study's main research question is: How, and to what extent, do practicing classroom teachers expand their capacity to teach writing to students and how are teachers supported and promoted by the school leadership?

The study, which was conducted in a retrospective case research format, examined assessment performance of the students at the school from the 2001 assessment through the 2006 administration of the writing assessment for fourth grade. Special attention was paid to the 2002-2005 administrations to explore the efforts made by the school faculty to utilize writing instruction as a skill to improve student learning as opposed to simply being a skill taught to master a test. Before describing the study in detail, information pertaining to the framework of the study will be presented.

Definition of Terms

For purposes of clarification, the following terms are defined:

Content-Rich Text-This term refers to student writing that is focused with a clear beginning, middle, and end, which has a logical flow of ideas, and which makes use of effective support and elaboration.

Modes of Writing -This term refers to the type of writing students are expected to demonstrate on writing assessments. For students in this study, the mode that is addressed at grade four is the narrative that can be one of two types: personal or imaginative. This means that students will either write about a real personal experience or an imaginative experience in which he or she is the main character (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Assessment Brief, January 23, 2006, p. 1).

Capacity-This term refers to the ability of the teacher in the school setting to improve personal skills and knowledge of the writing process. This also includes the pedagogical action these teachers and administrators take to improve writing instruction.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because of the importance writing has in the training of individuals to promote academic success in schools. Changes in legislation and educational policy are making the basic skills movement in educational assessment a high-stakes game that teachers and administrators must play every year (The College Board, 2003). Finally, the role of educational assessment as a political tool and the use of writing as one of those assessed areas make this a study of importance not only to elementary school administrators but also to school-based administrators and teachers at other levels.

The second major aspect of this study that makes it significant is that teachers and administrators can get an in-depth picture of how writing instruction is addressed by one particular school faculty. This study fills a hole in the research literature about how schools and school administrators deal with writing instruction to prepare students to be effective learners. For the teachers at this school, the 2001 writing assessment results proved to be a

rude awakening. This event was the catalyst for making instructional change efforts over a period of time. Consistent writing instruction is a key strategy used to develop higher-order thinking skills in students. Writing is much more than a valuable tool for students to construct and assign meaning to subject matter presented in other areas of the curriculum, it is also a life skill.

Finally, this study's exploration of a pedagogical gap present in what teachers feel prepared to teach effectively makes this a study of great importance in the current educational climate of North Carolina and the rest of the nation. It is the hope that this study will provide some clarification about how to address writing instruction school-wide in an elementary school setting and assist educators in making positive instructional change as it pertains to writing instruction.

Overview of Approach and Organization of the Retrospective Study

This study was conducted at one school site and relied upon focus group interviews of teachers in the school building along with a retrospective analysis of school-generated data from 2001 to the present. These data consisted of scores on state writing assessments, notes from teacher planning sessions, instructional schedules and lesson plans, grading rubrics (both state and individual classroom rubrics), goal team notebooks from the school's accreditation plan for core curriculum areas, and student performance on individual prompts.

Chapter Two of this study examines the literature pertaining to writing instruction and assessments. Literature as it relates to the role of the local school administrator as instructional leader will also be explored. Finally, state curriculum expectations will be examined.

Chapter Three outlines the methods to be used in collecting data and the rationale for using them. This chapter also includes a personal study narrative of the problem that led to choosing the school as the subject of the study. Finally, in Chapter Three the researcher's biases are disclosed in a subjectivity statement. The study will include results of the study and implications from the research in Chapters Four and Five.

Summary

This first chapter has provided an introduction to the problem teachers and administrators face addressing instructional needs in the writing process in the elementary school in the study. This study's retrospective approach will allow for exploration of the steps taken at this particular school to improve student performance on the North Carolina Writing Assessment. The organization of the study was presented.

The next chapter will review research pertaining to writing pedagogy and instruction. Research examining the role of the school administrator as instructional leader will also be presented as well as literature relating to North Carolina's writing assessment for fourth grade.

Chapter Two Literature Review

Introduction

In order to understand the process that teachers of writing go through to instruct students in writing, one must begin to evaluate the enormous amount of amount of literature on writing and writing pedagogy. Because this study was centered on one school's efforts to improve writing instruction, much of the literature dealt with pedagogical concerns. The rationale for the inclusion of this literature related to writing pedagogy is because writing is an instructional area of the curriculum and a certain level of understanding on the part of the reader needs to be ensured prior to moving into the study.

A second area to be examined in this study is the literature pertaining to the principal's/administrator's role as the instructional leader in the local school setting. This area of research has increased considerably in recent years. The reason for this increase in research regarding the principal as instructional leader is, in the researcher's opinion, primarily due to the increased emphasis placed on schools to improve performance on local and state assessments. School leaders are expected to know how to address instructional needs in the school setting because of state performance expectations and No Child Left Behind requirements. Aside from that, it is vital that the school administrator take a more active role in assisting teachers and staff in meeting instructional expectations as opposed to maintaining a traditional role as a school building manager. In the school being studied, all stakeholders, from the school's front office to the classroom, realized a need to have a working knowledge of writing instruction in order to help students create sound expressive

text through their writing by understanding that writing is first a personal experience before becoming a shared text.

A third area of the literature explores the rationale for state-mandated writing assessments and what they seek to show concerning student mastery of writing. This area is important to the study because there is real concern regarding what the creators and evaluators of the assessments consider well-developed, content-rich writing. It is this gap that the individuals in this study have tried to bridge with sound writing pedagogy that promotes higher-order thought and expression before adhering to a state-mandated scoring rubric.

The Literature of Writing Pedagogy

Writing, as students will need to understand the skill in the future, is a recursive community practice involving interactions among the writer, his or her peers, the text, and the teacher. Lieberman and Wood (2003) explore the role of the teacher in this process as a facilitator in the classroom. This departure from the traditional top-down instructional approach is one that many teachers have struggled to implement in their classrooms largely due to the inadequacy of the in-service training provided to teachers. The National Writing Project is the largest, and longest-lasting, in-service project for teachers in the United States, and it has provided a great deal of assistance in the area of writing instruction through its philosophy of teachers teaching teachers. The only drawback to this program is that its sites are often housed on college campuses and attending workshops can sometimes be difficult for teachers who must travel varying distances to attend workshops and summer institutes.

For the most part, in-service training offered at the school level is haphazard at best and usually consists of a basic how-to approach using particular stock writing programs purchased by school districts. Lock (2005) echoes this in her narrative of classroom experience in teaching writing through the writer's workshop. The format of this approach to curriculum allows for a great deal of student flexibility in the creation and sharing of text which can be disconcerting to teachers who feel themselves personally responsible for student performance, especially if they are used to controlling instruction through the traditional methods of lecture, drill, worksheets, review, and test.

In order to understand writing, it is important for the reader to understand that writing involves at least five recursive steps: prewriting in which the student begins to explore thoughts about what he or she is writing; creating the first draft; employing revising techniques, including peer sharing, to improve content in the text; editing the text for conventions; and publishing, or sharing, the final text (Unger & Fleischman, 2004). Another aspect of this is that the writer should have time to reflect on his or her process while writing. In order to help students master these steps in their writing, it is important to allow them to have time to complete the process and explore their own composing processes without interference from the teacher.

Thomas (2004) demonstrates that often a complete writing process is not carried out in writing assessments due to the nature of prompt-driven assessments that have time limits for students to complete them. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) point to further problems teachers experience with writing indicating that textbooks have tried to make writing

instruction a linear approach to be mastered in the same manner one would employ with a math problem. They write:

Textbooks often translate the process into a prescriptive, linear formula for producing a paper, which is not truly representative of the stop-and-start, recursive process used by professional writers, who are also writing for authentic audiences and not classroom teachers. (p. 277)

Pritchard and Honeycutt go on to point out that writing is not only about creating a text, but also about internalizing strategies to applicable to a variety of academic tasks.

Teachers often create classroom environments that suppress student thought and expression because they require students to copy what has been modeled for them. Nancie Atwell (1998) describes how these static models must sometimes be let go in order for the student to grow as both reader and writer. This is echoed by Bizzaro (1993) in his discussion of classroom activities drawn from a variety of personal sources to stimulate the thought process of students in the writing classroom. He writes: “. . . another clear benefit of the activities approach is that it engages students in the process of generating the initial impulses for writing from personal feelings and idiosyncratic responses.”(p. 19) Huntley-Johnson, Merritt, and Huffman (1997) further support this. They write: “If our goal is for student work to be significant, meaningful, and useful, we may need to envision alternative assignments and be mindful about structuring a pedagogy that invites authentic learning” (p. 172). Many teachers have difficulty admitting to students that they are not comfortable with the act of writing or that they do not know exactly how to handle certain issues pertaining to

writing. But for the accomplished teacher of writing, the act itself is as much a recursive and reflective journey of personal discovery as it is an instructional practice.

Calkins (1986) describes how teachers sometimes stifle the interest students have in writing. She writes:

After detouring around the authentic, human reasons for writing, we bury the student's urge to write all the more with boxes, kits, and manuals full of synthetic writing stimulants. At best, they produce artificial and short-lived sputters for writing, which then fade away, leaving passivity. Worst of all, we accept this passivity as the inevitable context of our teaching...The teacher will, quite rightly, not want to hear about ways to encourage a child beyond an early draft...When students resist writing, teachers resist teaching writing. (p. 4)

To many teachers, the inability to allow students to explore through their writing often makes writing instruction a painful experience for both themselves and their students. As a result, students are not able to learn how writing can positively impact their learning throughout their schooling. Writing instruction, as Smith (2006) indicates, encompasses six key components in order for teachers and students to experience success in the classroom. These are: making time for writing during the school day; writing in the content areas other than the English Language Arts; selecting topics and creating writing assignments; responding to student writing; actively teaching writing through a variety of manageable lessons; and working in collegial groups to build capacity and skills.

Dewey (1938) promotes the aspect of experience in student learning by pointing out that...it is part of the educator's responsibility to see two things: First, that the

problem grows out of the conditions being experienced in the present, and that it is within the range and capacity of students; and secondly, that it is such that it arouses in the learner an active quest for information and production of new ideas. (p. 79)

Ganske, Monroe, and Strickland (2003) indicate that teachers must provide a sense of safety for students' thoughts and ideas in order for students to feel as if they can write on their own and create text without reprisal. The fourth-grade teachers in this school study had to develop their own sense of safety over a period of years in order to foster this sense of safety among their students.

To understand the need for a comprehensive writing program that teaches students to create content-rich text that is focused and organized, one need only look at the English Language Arts Curriculum for grades 3-5 published by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2004). Written communication is taught to students, according to the Standard Course of Study for English Language Arts, as a process tool for learning and communication. The function of writing according to the North Carolina language arts curricula is:

- instructional (to get what we want)
- regulatory (to control others and the world around us)
- interactional (to establish and maintain relationships with others)
- personal (to develop and maintain one's own unique identity)
- informative (to represent the world to others and to impart what one knows)
- heuristic (to speculate and predict what will happen)

- aesthetic (to express imagination, to entertain, and to use language for its own sake). (p. 3)

While these are the intentions of writing instruction and mastery of the skill as prescribed by the state of North Carolina, too often, writing is taught for the purpose of passing assessments and not for helping students create learning tools which enable them to master a variety of curriculum areas.

Teachers learning how to master the instructional aspects of writing must employ consistent self-reflection as a way to examine the development of skills. Totten (2003) points out that an effective writing teacher continually questions his or her instructional practice and how their practices affect students. Fleischer (2004) advocates that writing teachers challenge accepted norms to shaping curriculum so that it is more flexible and accessible to students. This self-reflection of the writing teacher fits with Hatch's (2002) concept of school site research as being "undertaken for the sake of investigating practice, usually in concert with those working on the front lines, and improving that practice based on what is discovered" (p. 31). Self-reflection also leads the teacher of writing to construct, and enable students to construct, a meaning of their texts as writers and critics for the purpose of assigning meaning to their texts (Fish, 1980).

One important aspect of preparing a group of students to take the North Carolina Writing Assessment for fourth grade involves the alignment of a school's writing curriculum. Bizzaro and Gainey (2006) suggest that elementary school writing instruction should scaffold on the work of the previous year. The creation of school-wide writing programs should be

undertaken by the teachers in collaboration with other teachers and grade levels in the school. This insures that skills are taught and reinforced over a period of time as opposed to being taught all at once during the year when students are being assessed by the state.

The Role of School Administrators in Curriculum Issues

To understand how writing was approached by the school in my study, it is important to understand the roles of school administrators in development and deployment of curricular change. Elaine McEwan (2003) addresses this issue, indicating that instructional leaders are knowledgeable of learning theory, effective instructional practice, and written curriculum. Leaders, according to McEwan, also must be able to communicate important curriculum issues and needs of the school to stakeholders. This connection to the curriculum as a change agent in the school setting is discussed by Fullan and Steigelbauer (1991) who point to the evolution of the role of the principal from that of a middle manager to one of being an agent of instructional change capable of making informed decisions about the curriculum and how to best deliver instruction to the students. Further, school administrators must be skilled in creating a school culture designed to promote positive instructional change within the school setting. Too often, this can be overlooked due to the day-to-day operation of the school building, but the most effective school leaders have a passion for teaching and learning that keeps the teacher and student at the forefront of the change taking place in the building. This passion, coupled with high expectations and monitoring of instruction, promotes increased student performance.

The concepts in the previous paragraph form what is referred to by Andrews, Basom, and Basom (1991) as vision. They write:

In schools where student achievement is high, the building principal possesses a vision of what a school can become. The principal has a way of getting people to accept that vision as their own, rather than just paying lip service to a catchy slogan or phrase. (p. 97)

Strong instructional leadership is an essential element of high student performance and the job of the principal/school administrator therefore becomes one which is dependent upon being able to put personnel and resources in the position to benefit students most effectively.

Sergiovanni (1992) takes this a step further when he discusses the role of the administrator as one of a 'covenant builder'. Sergiovanni writes of the administrator in the school:

When purpose, social contract, and local school autonomy become the basis of schooling, two important things happen. The school is transformed from an organization to a covenantal community and the basis of authority changes, from an emphasis on bureaucratic authority to a moral authority. To put it another way, the school changes from a secular organization to a sacred organization, from a mere instrument designed to achieve certain ends to a virtuous enterprise. (p. 102)

To the school administrator who wants to promote positive growth and change in the curriculum in a school, it is important for all stakeholders to observe the example of doing what is right for students for no other reason than it is the right thing to do regardless of consequences. Fullan (2003) adds to this with his discussion of the school leader/principal being a continuous learner. He writes, "If principals do not go out of their way to learn more (inside and outside of the school), regardless of what the system is doing they can not

become a pressure point for change” (p. 20). Pritchard and Marshall (2002) also support this in their discussion of the need to involve school administrators in training and professional development to improve district goals. Just as important as teacher training, is training for school leaders so that they can continue to acquire skills and hone them to meet the needs of the students and teachers they serve. Further, the need for funding to promote these practices is critical to whole system improvement. In the case of dealing with the dilemma of writing performance in schools across North Carolina, it is clear that performance improvement will not take place in schools if the local school principal is not actively involved the processes to effect change and improvement.

In exploring performance improvement, Pritchard, Morrow, and Marshall (2005) discuss the importance of a school or school district’s culture on student performance. A school’s culture involves how those connected to the school feel about the school environment including expectations about performance effectiveness and student achievement which have developed over time. Another aspect of this is whether or not the personnel and students feel like they are stakeholders in the school’s mission and vision. The principal and administration in the school are responsible for setting the tone for the school in regards to expectations and the feeling of belonging held by students and teachers. This also translates to instructional leadership in that school faculties now view the principal as more of a learning facilitator than a manager of the operational processes in the school building.

As for the district where this school is located, there has been some attempt to lay the foundation for a district-wide writing plan. These efforts are in the early stages and writing performance is inconsistent across the district. District training for teachers primarily deals

with state expectations and rubric workshops, but the pedagogy goes largely unaddressed. At the conclusion of 2005-2006, district performance on the state writing assessments for grades 4, 7, and 10 was below the state average (44% proficient to the state's 50.1% proficient) making this a district issue of great importance, especially since the district's mission statement states that the school district will be the highest-performing school district in North Carolina.

Pritchard and Marshall (2002) discuss the need for focused long-term study and practice in order to achieve school and district goals in writing through using National Writing Project practices. They write:

In our study, those districts with a more elongated view of how innovation and change occur generally evidenced more impact from NWP staff development. They expected change to be slow and the move toward improvement constant.

(p. 32)

This building of capacity over time is the exception to the rule most schools and school districts follow. Too often, districts hire a consultant who delivers one training session with little or no follow up to what has been delivered. This is echoed in The National Commission on Writing Report (2006) which calls for teacher-led professional development which emphasizes classroom teachers writing and connecting to the students in their classrooms. Further, the study states that teachers should have control of more of the funding related to writing training as well as the responsibility for developing writing training in the school and district settings.

The school principal/administrator has numerous tasks to promote effective curriculum leadership. As in the case of the school in this study, effective curriculum leadership must be centered on creating and developing a sound curriculum; utilizing the available resources at the local classroom, school, district, and state levels to promote effective change; and playing a role that promotes overall effectiveness of the school (Glatthorn, 1997). Glatthorn points out that effective curriculum leadership promotes a learning-centered environment for both the student and the teacher. This includes: appropriate scheduling of instructional time, promoting relevant professional growth opportunities for faculty and staff, being responsive to the needs of the school population, and allowing the school to be learning-centered.

The literature of instructional leadership indicates that the school principal has to become an agent of change in the school setting to promote school instructional goals. Parker (2004) indicates that this is a difficult situation given the duties of the local school principal's job. He writes "In light of competing demands, principals often spend their time and energies on what is expedient or pressing, rather than on what they consider to be meaningful instructional activity" (p. iv). This leads administrators in schools to rely upon the expertise of those in the building to assist in meeting expectations as opposed to handling situations on their own. Hence, increasing teacher capacity (competence) is crucial to the success of all school improvement initiatives.

The concept of transformational leadership in the principalship is based largely upon the style of leadership employed by the local school principal. Woodson (2005) points out

that often, the principal's leadership style, which for the purposes of this study means approach to leadership, is not examined. She writes:

However, very few studies focus exclusively on the principal's leadership style (transformational) and the level of satisfaction among stakeholders (teachers, school support staff, and parents) regarding the delivery of a quality education in selected elementary schools. (p. 10)

How a principal leads a school has great impact on the performance of the school, but arguably, style of leadership is not an area of preparation for many school administrators when being trained for the position.

Brookover, Beamer, Efthim, Hathaway, Lezotte, Miller, Passalacqua, and Tornatzky (1982) examine the role of the principal as the instructional leader of the school. They write:

Although the principal may have many other functions in operating a school organization, the leadership role in establishing an effective instructional program is foremost....ideally the principal, must provide leadership to establish clearly identified and specific learning objectives at each grade level and for each course. Unless all members of the organization understand what is to be achieved at each grade level and for each course, they are likely to go in many different directions. (p. 82)

To the classroom teacher, the school's principal must be actively concerned for the instruction and learning taking place in the classrooms within the building and demonstrate instructional leadership in all aspects of the school's instructional programs. Further, as

Stake (1995) indicates, school administrators must be intuitive to the needs of their respective schools. He writes:

To say that a style is intuitive is not to say it is faulty. The style of many outstanding political and business leaders, athletes, and scientists is largely intuitive. Intuitive management can be good or bad, just as rational management can be good or bad. Bureaucratic management is often ineffective because it is too rational, fixed upon rules and justifications, too little on personal understanding and common sense. (p. 7)

As in the case of the writing program being studied, the role of the administration in the school must be one of high visibility and concern for student and teacher development. Administrative support has to be practiced, both formally and informally, through regular conversations with teachers and staff development designed to provide training and resources to support effective instruction. Support is provided through strict adherence to a standards-based curriculum which seeks to promote student learning and teacher professional development. Mark O'Shea (2005) uses the example of Mrs. Lewis, principal of Mariposa Elementary School, to demonstrate the importance of the school administrator in promoting change at the local school. In this case study, Mrs. Lewis provided release time for teachers to plan and study in collegial groups. She also provided teachers with the opportunity to share in the school-wide instructional planning for the school year. Further, Mrs. Lewis took time to have one-on-one conversations with teachers to ascertain their needs and concerns for the school and their students. As O'Shea points out, the school administrator must be aware of the needs of his or her faculty and have knowledge, or at least know where to find that knowledge, to address the needs of teachers to promote a learning-centered environment.

To say that school administrators should keep abreast of curriculum concerns is an understatement. McKay (2001) stresses the need to keep aware of curriculum issues through study of current curriculum development and instructional practice. Another aspect of curriculum awareness by the principal is locating experts who can provide information on best practices to transform student learning and skills mastery. Promoting learning while encouraging teacher leadership at all areas of the curriculum becomes a task which all administrators should perform readily (Dufour, 2004). Marshall, Pritchard, and Gunderson (2001) give characteristics of the instructionally-visionary principal in the school setting. These are: having a clear consistent purpose of improving student learning; forming groups to study practices and keep abreast of educational issues; allowing time for teacher collegiality and collaborative study; providing relevant in-service opportunities which address instructional issues; providing regular follow-up to professional development; and integrating these issues into his or her job as the school's educational leader.

Lezotte (1992) discusses the changes that have come about in schools and points to the need to determine what is important in the area of curriculum studies. While Lezotte is advocating for a national curriculum, the questions asked are pertinent to the role of the instructional leader in the school setting. These questions indicate that schools and school leaders need to clarify what students need to know, how to tell that the students have mastered those lessons, and who makes that decision. The school principal needs to take the prescribed curriculum and make these determinations based on district, state and national objectives and then tailor them to the school environment and clientele.

Richard Sagor (1992) explores the role of effective principals in the school setting in a study of three school leaders who share the distinction of having exemplary schools. He states that these leaders share three common traits: “A clear unified focus, a common cultural perspective (meaning that all personnel in the school hold the same view of their jobs in the school), and a constant push for improvement”(p. 13). These are referred to by Sagor as the “three building blocks of transformational leadership” (p. 13).

Principals/administrators who are effective tend to employ these traits on a regular basis and their expectations are known to everyone in the school setting.

In further exploring the role of the administrator in issues pertaining to student learning, one need only look at the first standard for licensure under the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISSLLC):

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. (CCSSO, 1996)

Joseph F. Johnson and Cynthia L. Uline (2005) write, “Today’s leaders must foster a sense of collective restlessness: a restlessness about educating all students to high levels of achievement. Leaders must believe that every student can succeed” (pp. 46-47). This restlessness is the basis of what Christine Michael and Nicolas Young (2006) mean when they discuss the idea using a “deliberate ‘assets-based’ approach to student learning to promote student efficacy and resiliency....By focusing on the competencies that the individual brings to his or her ‘job’ be it leading or learning” (p. 4).

In order to promote high performance at all levels of the school organization, the principal/school administrator has to develop a school environment which engenders trust among all stakeholders in the school setting. Susan Church (2005) explores the nature of school relationships between the principal of a school and his or her staff. She cites the work of Bryk and Schneider and their study of the nature of trust between the principal and the teachers in schools. Church writes:

The researchers describe how the principal of one of the highest-achieving schools interacted extensively with staff, emphasizing the moral responsibility of the school to advance the education and welfare of the students in their care. (p. 12)

Church further states that when teachers feel [a sense of] support, they will be willing to take chances, make changes, assume leadership roles in the school setting, and be willing to work together to solve common problems, thus building individual and collective capacity. Also, trust encourages teachers in schools to embark on continuous learning and improvement of their own classroom practices in order to improve the overall school goals and vision.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) echo this when they discuss the importance of the school administrator's choosing the right things to work on to improve school programs and performance. To them the issue of school leadership and its connection to program improvement relies not on motivation and interest, but instead on the ability to focus on that which can be improved to benefit the entire school setting.

While there is a great deal of research about the school administrator as instructional leader, there is not a tried-and-true plan as to how school administrators become instructional

leaders. The research shows a large number of cases in which school administrators promote change in their schools; however, there is no set blueprint to follow. It is my opinion that this is the case because each school and school district presents a different set of obstacles and opportunities to be dealt with by each school's principal. This leaves the researcher to determine that instructional leadership is not a how-to process, but instead a where-to-look process for support.

The Rationale of State Writing Assessments

The efforts on the part of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to assess students' writing skills began in 1983. Presently, students at grades four, seven, and ten are assessed to determine their ability to write a focused, well-developed composition that utilizes elaboration and conventions effectively (NCDPI Press Release, June 17, 2005). The intention of this assessment is to demonstrate that if students can satisfactorily write to this assessment, then they possess the skills necessary to be effective writers and learners. Further, this assessment is to ensure that "ample time and resources are allotted for its (writing) development in the classroom" (NCDPI Assessment Brief, 2006, p. 1).

The rubric used to assess students in North Carolina employs the five criteria of focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction places emphasis on teaching writing as a process (North Carolina Writing Assessment at Grades 4, 7, and 10 Trainer Manual, 2005). Two readers average content and conventions (mechanics, usage, and sentence formation) and then the essays are ranked on a four-point scale (NCDPI, 2006). The current rubric, referred to as the analytic rubric, was initially used in the 2002 administration of the state writing assessment

(North Carolina Testing Program Report, 2004). It replaced a holistic rubric which was used from the beginning of the assessment until 2002. This rubric scored students on a four-point scale in each of four areas. These were: “main idea, supportive details, organization, and coherence” (North Carolina Testing Program Report, 1998, p. 9). The State Board of Education moved to drop the writing assessment scores from the ABCs accountability model and revamp the assessment process for writing in 2002 following a sharp decline in assessment scores that year (SBE Highlights, 2002). The intention in this move to a new rubric was to provide students with a more accurate picture of how they perform on the assessment.

The North Carolina assessment program is based upon the work of Jason Millman and Jennifer Greene (1989). Millman and Greene discuss the relevance of assessments to the curriculum being taught. They write:

...tests are used to help make decisions about examinee performance with reference to an identified curricular domain. *Curricular Domain* is defined here as the skills and knowledge identified or developed as a result of deliberate instruction or identifiable curricular content. Within this definition, a curricular domain can range widely, from the target of a single unit of instruction...to a broad component of a curriculum. (pp. 336-337)

While the North Carolina Writing Assessment may very well be testing student writing, it also purports to test students' ability to think and apply knowledge from other areas to this particular task in order to make meaning of that knowledge in that they must compose a piece of writing that logically addresses a prescribed prompt.

While this might be the intention, the reality is just the opposite. Students are given a timed writing test designed to show how well they write with “precision, coherence, and an engaging style” (National Commission Writing in America’s Colleges and Schools, 2003, p. 16). While 84% of the students in fourth grade in the United States have basic writing skills according to NAEP, only 23% of the fourth-grade students in the country write at or above proficiency. What this demonstrates to the researcher is that there is confusion about whether writing assessments are testing the ability of the student to produce a content-rich text that is the product of higher-order thinking or if writing assessments are only to check for a basic proficiency level (Hillocks, 2003).

George Hillocks (2003) explores the rationale of writing assessments, pointing out that “schools interested in promoting higher-order thinking demand a great deal of writing from students” (p. 6). The increase in the level and amount of writing is done regardless of whether or not there is a set writing program in place in the school. Writing assessments, like other assessments, are put into place to insure that the state curriculum is being taught and students are mastering that curriculum. While this is commonplace in 37 states in the country, there is some concern about what those assessments measure. The idea that assessments alone will improve performance leaves unanswered questions about the ability of the student to adequately perform, given that the support for teachers is, for the most part, lacking.

Literature Pertaining to Qualitative Research

Due to the nature of this study, it is important to explore the literature pertaining to qualitative research in the school setting for purposes of improving programs within the

school. Richard Sagor (2000) writes that the use of research in the school setting is a process which can be “a powerful force supporting the transformation from defeatism to an ‘I think I can’ work environment” (p. viii). Sagor also addresses the fact that school site research to promote program improvement in the school setting can be relevant to all parties participating in the process. Further, Sagor indicates three standards for which research is undertaken in the school setting and the need for high standards when conducting research on a school site. These are:

1. Your [the researcher’s] obligation to your students
2. The need for personal and collective efficacy
3. The need to add to the professional knowledge base (p. 109).

Sagor’s three standards, if managed correctly in the research process, can 1) produce information pertaining to the authenticity of what is happening in the classrooms, 2) allow the stakeholders (teachers, students, and school administrators) to identify best practices which improve and enhance student learning; and 3) deploy those practices to promote change.

Douglas S. Fleming (2000) indicates that in school settings, the principal (administrator) has to be the organizing and managing force in promoting and conducting research at the school site. This is done through providing support and acting to keep student learning as the primary goal of the research agenda. Coupled with opportunities to share data and increased professional development, this process becomes not only one of expanding the knowledge base but also a process of continual school improvement. In short, the

administration in a school needs to be an integral part of the data gathering and interpreting process.

Matthew David (2002) indicates that reflective site research is a process which leads to advocacy due to the role played by the researcher in the research process. Research conducted at the school site is designed to identify the goals of the organization being studied and improve the processes to reach those goals. David writes: “The researchers do not simply engage, they engage to facilitate the goals of the researched” (p. 14). This statement is a clear indication that the researcher must be actively involved in the research process in order to allow the organization to improve. For the school administrator as the school’s curriculum leader, intimate involvement in research activities in his or her own school setting is paramount to producing continuous improvement of programs which lead to improved student learning and teacher efficacy.

In their study of curriculum leadership, James Henderson and Richard Hawthorne (2000) discuss school site research in the area of reflective teaching. Henderson and Hawthorne use research as a form of professional problem solving for individual issues in classrooms or school settings. A building administrator sees instructional problem solving as a large part of the school improvement process. As in the case of this study, it is important that the researcher (the school administrator) play an active part in the process of gathering data and observing what is taking place in the school setting as it pertains to writing instruction.

Summary

In order for writing to be taught effectively in schools, it is important that stakeholders in schools work to promote a confluence of ideas. If done correctly, these ideas allow students to explore their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas while learning to master a skill that will enable them to think in the abstract on a higher plane as they progress through their schooling and into adulthood. Writing is a journey that has to take place continuously.

The same practice that is being taught to students must be followed by the teacher. The teacher who also writes understands what has to take place in a way that allows him or her to be a facilitator of learning for students, encouraging them to take risks and grow as learners. As in the case of the school in the study, relevant training and opportunity for development are vital to helping teachers learn how to make opportunities happen for the students. Further, an in-depth knowledge of writing pedagogy enables the teacher to help students learn practices which can lead to positive performance throughout the curriculum, as opposed simply to learning a form of writing to pass a test.

The administrator's role is to provide active support. It is imperative that the administrator provide relevant staff development and resources to those in the classroom. Aside from that, the administrator must move from being the manager of a school site to an instructional leader who is aware of developments in curriculum and has knowledge of the location of resources and how to use them to improve student learning, teacher competence, and total school success.

Finally, writing assessments, as they are designed, need to be viewed as writing situations that, while imperfect, provide a source of student performance data. To say that

because students perform well on timed writing assessments they are good writers is to overlook the five steps of writing—none of which are taught to be enacted on a time schedule. Taken as one source of data instead of the lone determiner of student ability, writing assessments can be effective; however, these assessments cannot overshadow real writing pedagogy and practice.

Chapter Three will describe the methodology which was used in conducting this study as well as a narrative of the case of the school site being studied. The researcher's subjectivity will also be disclosed in order to provide an understanding of the lens through which this study will be viewed.

Chapter Three Methodology

Introduction

This chapter will present the methodology used to conduct this study. The study attempted to answer the primary research question: How do practicing classroom teachers expand their capacity to teach writing to students and how are they supported and promoted by the school leadership? This study focused primarily on the fourth-grade teachers in the school site being studied because of their role in preparing students for the North Carolina Writing Assessment for fourth-grade, and on the school's administration in providing support for instructional change and improvement.

The questions asked to both the teachers and the site principal formed the two primary sections of this study. Artifacts (school data, state assessment data, instructional schedules, school instructional action plans, and state rubrics associated with the state curriculum guides) collected from the school site were used to make connections to the interviews and triangulate the data collected for the purpose of drawing conclusions. The questions asked of the teachers in this study are included in the teacher interview guide (see Appendix A). Questions asked of the school's principal are included in the administrator interview guide (see Appendix B). Finally, the researcher will also include his personal reflections from the time period being studied in order to frame his own experiences within this school improvement activity.

Nature of the Study and Choice of Methodology

This study of teaching writing lends itself to qualitative research for the following reasons: it involves the perceptions of the teachers and the school principal in the study and

their personal observations from teaching writing; the study is conducted at one particular school site; and the data gathered from site artifacts are based on the use of a rubric adapted from the state analytic rubric and are subject to perception of the compilers of that data. The intention of this study is to tell a story about how this particular school site addressed writing instruction and regularly reflected upon the instructional process in an effort to improve student performance and writing skills. Therefore, due to the nature of this educational research project I feel that working from within the research setting as a participant provided the best information about this school program and provide relevance to the study.

I conducted a retrospective study to examine the writing program at a particular school site. Creswell (1998) refers to Stake's (1995) case study of Harper School in which reform initiatives are identified and explored. In this study, Stake spent ten weeks in Harper School which serves a low-income, high crime area of Chicago to determine how the school district's School Improvement Plan was being implemented. Stake interviewed administrators, members of the local school council, students, and teachers assessing their needs and deployment of the plan. This immersion in the school site provided insight into what those directly impacted by the school improvement plan felt about the plan and the district and school efforts to meet the expectations of that plan. I employed Richard Sagor's (2000) seven research strategies to tell the story of how instructional issues in the school being studied were being addressed in regard to improving writing instruction. These seven strategies are: finding a focus; clarifying theories; identifying research questions; data collection; data analysis; reporting results; and action planning.

Because this study deals with instructional issues pertaining to writing instruction at the school site, the use of a retrospective research study had two purposes. One was to bring to light the efforts made by the school's faculty and administration to address writing instruction needs. The other was to provide a road map of sorts for practitioners in the field to follow in promoting school change.

Site Selection

I chose to use the school in this study for four reasons. 1) I was an active participant in the school's efforts to improve writing performance during the period studied; 2) the school serves a middle-class student population; 3) there are adequate financial resources to support school improvement initiatives; and 4) the location of the school was convenient to me as the researcher. These reasons allowed me to get a clearer picture of how this school addressed writing needs and concerns.

This study was based on my experience with the teachers in this school and one incident in particular which necessitated a change in how writing was taught in the fourth grade. The teachers who taught fourth grade from 2001-2006 constitute a purposeful sample which, in my view, can tell a story about the nature of writing and writing instruction. In 2001, the fourth-grade students in this school had a failure rate of 71% on the North Carolina Writing Assessment. The reason why this is unusual is because the school has a large population of students whose parents are highly-educated and have access to resources in the home to assist them in their learning. Further, the state assessment composites indicate that students in the school regularly score better than 90% proficient on state assessments in reading and math. Finally, this performance on the 2001 assessment was the lowest

performance point in writing that the school had ever experienced. It is from 2001 that this study will begin. If one were to base the likelihood of high student performance on the resources available to the students and teachers present in the school, it would appear that this school should have performed much better on this assessment. Also, this school, and its increased emphasis on writing and writing instruction, could serve as a model for other schools and their administrators who are experiencing the same instructional difficulties with writing instruction.

Another reason for this school's selection as a research site is because it serves a thoroughly middle-class clientele. When this school was named as a school-wide Title I School under the reauthorization of the ESEA (No Child Left Behind) in 2002, there were barely enough students identified as economically disadvantaged to qualify. Also, only two sub-groups are present in the school: white students, and students receiving free and reduced-priced lunch (only 84 out of 223 students in the school in grades 3-5 were eligible as indicated by 2005-06 AYP subgroup data from state assessments). Other identified student groups are in the school; however, they do not constitute the 40 students required to make a sub-group under NCLB requirements. The reason why this is important is that, in regards to the amount of federal funding under ESEA (the school receives roughly \$126,000.00 per year-most of which is used to fund the Title I teacher's position and provide instructional support in the way of paid tutors), there is ample funding to provide for supplemental resources to support instruction as opposed to having to use those funds to provide regular instruction as is the case with other schools in the region. Further, line items in the school Title I Budget can be adjusted through amendments to the budget to provide varying amounts

of funding per year for staff development. This is supplemented by local staff development funds which have ranged from \$1800.00 in 2001 to \$2700.00 in 2006. While the school is allowed to use these funds for training and resources in the local building, local funds can be used at the district's discretion to fund training for district initiatives.

Aside from that, the school and the larger school district budgets are supplemented by Federal funds provided under Public Law 874 because of the large student population of military dependents and dependents of Federal employees who live on the local military base and in civilian housing in town. The advantages that this student population has over its counterparts in the region would suggest that performance on state testing would not be an issue. This indicates that even students with advantages, both economic and educational, can have difficulty mastering writing as it is tested by the North Carolina Writing Assessment.

A final reason for the selection of this school site for this study is because the researcher served as an administrator who observed firsthand the efforts the teachers in the fourth grade, and other grade levels, have made to improve writing instruction. The researcher also participated in the school-change strategies that were part of the improved performance the school has experienced during the 2003-2004, 2004-2005, and 2005-2006 school years when the students in the fourth grade improved their writing assessment scores to 53%, 62.5%, and 55.1% proficient respectively, performing above the state average in writing each of those years. Aside from that, the researcher had personal knowledge gained as an English teacher. Along with the teachers in fourth grade, he participated in evaluating student writing and tracking the school's performance data as part of the school's accreditation renewal cycle as dictated by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools

and the local district's performance improvement process. Further, the researcher also conducted staff development workshops in the building and taught student writing workshop groups as a part of the instructional team.

Interviews and Selection of Interviewees

For this study, the researcher invited the six former fourth grade teachers to a focus group meeting to tell the story of how this particular school site orchestrated a change in how writing is taught to fourth-grade students. Using the interview guide for teachers found in Appendix A, an outside group facilitator conducted the discussion using the former fourth-grade teachers. This facilitator also conducted the member checks with this group. The one former fourth-grade teacher who was unable to attend the focus group session and the member-check meeting for the fourth-grade teachers was interviewed by the researcher via telephone. The researcher also did this teacher's follow-up meeting via telephone. Another focus group of teachers in grades two, three, and five was conducted by the same outside facilitator to ascertain how student writing ability and teacher instruction have changed since 2001. The outside facilitator conducted the member checks with this group as well. The teacher interview guide was adjusted to accommodate teachers who have not taught fourth grade in the school. The instructional evaluation rubric created by Pritchard, O'Berry, and Butler (2002) for the National Writing Project was used to evaluate writing instruction delivery for all teacher participants. The researcher used the interview guide for school administrators found in Appendix B to interview the school's principal. This provided an instructional picture of how instruction was delivered from those teachers who worked in the fourth grade during this time as well as those teachers who had been present in the school in

grades two, three, and five since 2001. This methodology provided a replicable description of the plan of action taken in the school to improve student writing.

Critics of the researcher's choice of research site and use of qualitative research at this school might question the researcher's motives in exploring an issue at a site where he worked for six years. In response to this, the researcher, as an insider in the school setting gained access to what teachers in the building think about curricular change and its application to the school because I am immersed in the process. Aside from that, the researcher made efforts to note any bias in order to render a clear, rich picture of the study that allowed for more thorough reflection and drawing of conclusions. Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, and Oakes (1995) point out that in doing qualitative research, especially as it pertains to case studies, constructive methodologists

. . . suggest that cases are what you make them, and what you make of them depends on the theoretical perspective and framework that grows out of your unit analysis...cases are socially constructed and co-constructed between the researcher and respondent...cases are not really defined or bounded until data collection-and even-analysis is finished. (p. 340)

In order to address the issue of interviewing subordinates in the school the researcher conducted member checks using the same outside facilitator on all interviews to insure that the data collected are not only relevant, but also presented in the truest form possible to authenticate his findings.

Of the groups of teachers asked to participate in the study, the researcher was not currently responsible for evaluating any of them. Because of this, question number four [see

Appendix A] in the teacher interview guide was used to determine individual teacher competence. Participating teachers were asked to write a short description explaining how they prepare and teach a writing lesson. These descriptions were evaluated using the instructional evaluation rubric created by Pritchard, O'Berry, and Butler (2002).

It must be noted that since 2001, several changes have occurred in the instructional staff in the fourth grade at this school. Three of the teachers who were at the school in 2001 have retired but live in the area. Two of the teachers who have taught fourth grade in the school have moved from the area-- one due to her spouse's deployment as a Marine pilot and the other due to a spouse's job relocation to another state. Both still have regular contact with the researcher and other personnel in the school, and share instructional techniques and information as well as news about faculty happenings and school events. One of the teachers has moved to another grade level and another former fourth-grade teacher has moved to another school in the district.

An outside facilitator conducted a focus group with the three retirees, the teacher who moved to another grade level, and the teacher teaching in another school in the district. The researcher corresponded via telephone with one in the area at the time the study is conducted. The other teacher who had moved chose not to participate in the study. The researcher conducted the telephone interview with the participating teacher and taped it. The researcher also examined print copies of the mailed documents from this teacher. All focus group and individual interviews done with the former fourth-grade teachers were recorded and transcribed by a transcription service.

Interviews with the 2 teachers currently working in the building at grades two, three, and five were conducted during times when school was not in session in the school conference room. These were conducted using the focus group approach with an outside facilitator. Interviewees felt comfortable and relaxed without the stress of hurrying to meet students or perform tasks associated with the typical school day. These interviews were recorded and transcribed by a professional service.

The researcher conducted an interview with the principal of the building and included own observations of the school improvement process through his own involvement. The researcher wrote a personal reflection of what he observed as part of the building's administrative team during the time period being studied. The principal's interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim and took place in the school building in the same manner as those of the teachers involved. Follow-up meetings were held by the outside facilitator after the return of the transcripts to insure that information gathered in the focus groups and interviews was accurate and to allow for additional information to be contributed by the interviewees.

All 8 participants were asked to sign a consent form in accordance with Institutional Review Board guidelines to allow the researcher to use the information gained from the interviews and follow-up meetings. All participants were assigned a pseudonym in the study to assure their anonymity. The school site being studied was also assigned a pseudonym to further protect the anonymity of the participants, students, and school district. All of the persons initially identified except one cooperated with the study. The researcher examined the transcripts of the interviews to locate common themes and incidents regarding the writing

instruction for fourth-grade students and created generalizations from the members interviewed in the study. Common themes located in the interviews and follow-up meetings were explored in relation to the data on writing that was compiled in the school for various other uses.

This approach to doing site research is similar to the qualitative case study used by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) in the Pinewood School District in her study *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. Ladson-Billings uses interviews and school district documents to conduct her study examining student performance and teacher efficacy and connectedness to the community in a predominantly African-American school district. Ladson-Billings points to her own use of qualitative research in the study by indicating her subjectivity in the research. She writes:

I could have written this book in the dominant scholarly tradition-statement of the problem, review of the literature, methodology, data collection, analysis, and implications for further research...But that tradition rejects my necessary subjectivity.

Thus I chose to integrate my “scholarly” tools with my knowledge of my culture and my personal experiences. (p. ix)

This study was on a much smaller scale, but the researcher used the same methods of interviewing and examination of artifacts to draw conclusions. He analyzed documentation and student writing in a manner similar to what George W. Hillocks, Jr. did in his book *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning* (2002). Hillocks’s study of how teachers teach writing and what happens in the writing classroom and how that is planned under-gird the current study. He writes:

If states really want student writing to improve, they need to insure that teachers have adequate time to teach writing well. Effective teaching means planning for instruction and responding to student writing. (p. 205)

This study attempted to see how teachers in this school setting teach writing and how their results are measured in conjunction with the state writing assessment.

Documents

Documents from the school included North Carolina State Writing Assessment data compiled by the school district. Also examined were grade-level instructional schedules created in the school for fourth grade, and sets of prompts used by the teachers at the school site to assess student writing progress through the fourth-grade year leading up to the state writing assessment. In conjunction with this, the researcher analyzed student performance on these prompts to ascertain whether or not student performance improved based on the rubric created at the school to evaluate fourth-grade student writing. Student identity was protected through the use of student identification numbers that were already in use in the school building. Finally, the researcher used information provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for teachers and administrators. This information included news releases, state scoring rubrics to be compared to the school-created rubric, and instructional materials that have been released from the state educational agency for public use.

The sequence of data collection began with an overview of the documents written for instructional purposes by the state and the local school district. The researcher examined the prompts used with fourth-grade classes at the school and the student responses to certain

prompts from the collection using the rubric created by the teachers in the school. This rubric is a child-friendly adaptation of the state rubric which scores students on the five criteria the state uses to test writing proficiency. These criteria are: focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions. The writing pieces were chosen from prompts given early in the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years and those given near the writing assessment during both years. These writing samples were scored by the researcher along with the fourth-grade team in the school during both years. Finally, the researcher conducted interviews with the study participants beginning with the teachers in the study and finishing with the school's principal. All of the data gathered from the documents and interviews were analyzed and triangulated with the interviews to put the study into a narrative format.

Validity and Reliability of the Research

While this study is interpretive in nature, the issue of validity of findings is an area of concern. Huberman and Miles (2002) discuss interpretive validity in qualitative research indicating that

Interpretive accounts are grounded in the language of the people studied and rely as much as possible on their own words and concepts. The issue, again, is not the appropriateness of these concepts for the account, but their accuracy as applied to the perspective of the individuals included in the account. (p. 49)

While there is no way to achieve complete objectivity in this study, the researcher's complete immersion in the site and personal insight along with the documents provided from the local school, the school district, and the state of North Carolina were substantial enough to

corroborate the information gained from interviewing the participants in the study.

Qualitative research is subjective in nature, but that subjectivity provides thick description which can explain issues in school settings.

In discussing validity, Honeycutt (2002) points out that several aspects of validity which must be addressed in qualitative research. These are: construct validity which requires that interview questions be used to address what is actually being studied; internal validity which, in this study, would indicate how addressing instructional needs in the school affected student writing assessment performance; and external validity which would indicate what could be adapted from this school's emphasis on writing instruction to other school settings.

Honeycutt also refers to democratic validity which takes into account the views and opinions of the study participants. In this study, the participating teachers were aware of the stakes involved for the school regarding state writing expectations and their opinions about how writing is taught are important to exploring how this school addresses writing instruction. This also connects with the idea of process validity in which the study's credibility is checked by the participants in member checks of collected focus group data as well as by the researcher's examination of notes taken during the focus group sessions. Finally, the issue of outcome validity provides the researcher with the opportunity to pursue further research on the study's subject by providing additional questions and insights to be addressed and explored.

Spooner (2002) points to validity as key to authentic qualitative research. He writes, "As qualitative researchers, we should generally be seeking to understand social phenomena,

and to re-present it in as transparent and credible a fashion as possible.” (p.13) In this study, the researcher presented the story of how this particular school addressed student writing performance in a manner that gives as clear a picture as possible of the processes undertaken by the participating teachers to improve student performance. For this reason, triangulation of data and member checks were used extensively.

Limitations of the Study

While the data collection for this study will be conducted in a short time period (less than an academic year), it can in no way answer all of the questions that researchers have about teaching writing. Also, this study is limited because it takes into account the instructional efforts of only one school site as opposed to exploring all of the schools in an entire school district or larger entity. Another limitation that must be noted is that those involved in the study might be hesitant to provide information based on the researcher’s role as an administrator in the building and his relationship with the school’s current principal. For this purpose, the researcher used the questionnaires (see Appendices A & B) and allowed the participants flexibility as pointed out in John Creswell’s (1998) model for conducting interviews with a set of open-ended questions. He also conducted follow-up member checks, providing the participants with copies of the interview transcripts in order to insure the most accurate data possible from the participants’ perspective.

Further, the researcher’s personal biases could limit the study because he was an active participant in the process this school underwent to improve writing instruction and, ultimately, writing assessment scores. Finally, performance on writing assessments and

writing ability might not be compatible in that the assessment may not be a true indicator of student writing skill. Aside from that, is the reality that only a part of the total story can be told due to the limitations of the qualitative research conducted from the perspective of this researcher.

Subjectivity Statement

As one of the administrators present in the school being studied during the time of this change in writing instruction, and as an active part of the school change process, I feel that I should disclose information about myself to provide a clearer picture of the research. I was raised in the town where the school is located and attended school in that school district from first grade through high-school graduation. My parents were educators in the same town, and my father served as the local high school principal from 1970 until his retirement in 2000. My mother was a history teacher at the same high school. The school and the church where my family regularly attended were at the center of most of my activities growing up. My brothers and I were raised in a moderate Southern Baptist home environment. My brothers and I were taught to respect public education as an institution and moderately liberal social and political leanings were present in my home. I have a high regard for ethics and always try to ensure that those I come into contact with are treated fairly.

I attended college and graduate school at a regional state university where I earned an undergraduate degree with double majors in Political Science and English and a Master's Degree in English Literature. I taught English Composition and Literature briefly at the same university and several community colleges in the region during and shortly after

graduate school. In 1994, I took a job teaching English Language Arts and Social Studies at the local middle school in my hometown. It was there that I became familiar with the North Carolina Writing Assessment for eighth grade, and later seventh grade after it was moved to that grade level, as a teacher preparing students to take it each year. I learned from a personal standpoint how frustrating that assessment can be to a teacher who is trying to prepare students to pass the assessment. I returned to graduate school a second time at the same university and was awarded a Master's Degree in School Administration.

In 2000, I became an administrator in the elementary school where the study was conducted in. As a matter of fact, I worked for a principal who taught me as an elementary student and some of my former teachers from elementary school were on the school's faculty when I began working there. As an administrator, I have sought ways to work in the area of instructional leadership because of my belief that a school administrator must be an instructional leader first before being a site manager. My feelings on instructional leadership are that a school administrator must be actively involved in the curriculum in order to provide support and resources to the instructional staff and students of the school, and that curriculum has to be at the center of the operations of every school.

While I feel strongly that the curriculum improvements in writing at this school are worthwhile and are producing results as far as state writing assessments are concerned, I realize that my view of the school's writing improvement process has some biases. This study will allow me as a participant observer to analyze this school's writing program and locate shortcomings in instruction as well as provide suggestions for change and improvement. This is what qualifies this study as a qualitative research project as well as a

case study. I realize that this study has the potential for bias given the nature of qualitative research; however, I feel that this bias can be limited through my research methodology.

Summary

This chapter outlines the method in which research was conducted for this study. The primary parts of the research were interviews of seven teachers (both current and former teachers in the school) and the school's principal. Also, documents created in the school and provided by the state of North Carolina to the local school district, and student writing were examined. The purpose of this study is to ascertain and explore the efforts made in the school to create a change in writing instruction and student performance in the school. The next chapter in this study will focus on the results from this collection of data at the school site.

Chapter Four Data Analysis

Narrative of School Data From 2001-2002

In studying how this school (assigned the pseudonym Croatan Forest School) addressed writing instruction during the time period in this study, I began by analyzing the data generated by the school. The school data from the state of North Carolina and the local school district indicated that in 2001 student performance in fourth-grade writing was at 29% proficient. This drop in performance was drastic, and the school failed to make sufficient growth to meet its yearly performance goals. As a matter of fact, the school's performance in writing was the lowest in the entire school district.

Reading and math scores indicate that this school might have met its goals with a higher level of performance in writing. Reading proficiency performance for grades 3-5 was at 86.9% proficient, 86.1% proficient, and 94.8% proficient respectively. Math performance for grades 3-5 was at 89.4% proficient, 100% proficient, and 100% proficient respectively. Given the other data from testing in reading and math, the school would have reached its annual performance goals if students had performed at around 50% proficient on the writing assessment.

The 2000-2001 school improvement plan indicates that there was some discussion about writing performance, but the direction for writing instruction was determined by the district office. The school, along with the other elementary schools in the school district, began using a program called *Write from the Beginning* for grades kindergarten through five. This program, created and marketed by Innovative Learning Group, operated on the idea that each student would write to four prompts over the course of the year administered on a quarterly

basis. The goal of this program was to monitor student progress; however, there was no evidence of a curriculum plan aside from a bank of writing lessons provided in the program package. This program called on teachers to score prompts on a 20 point scale. The scoring rubric looked for evidence of transition words and descriptive language; however, the student work was not scored as strongly on content. As a result, students were writing what was expected, but they were not concentrating on the creation of content-rich text.

The school held a number of parent workshops to make parents aware of the expectations placed on their children with this assessment. These meetings were not well-attended, so many of the parents were unaware of the requirements for student performance placed on the school by the district and the state. As a consequence, writing instruction remained unchanged in many classrooms in the school building. There was a letter sent by the, then, Associate Superintendent to the teachers in the schools around the district after district writing scores did not improve in 2001, indicating that there was a lack of instructional training from the company which designed the program. The letter indicated that the company would address instruction and provide curriculum support during the upcoming year.

2001-2002 brought with it a new rubric which the state chose to use in evaluating student writing. This rubric, referred to as the analytic rubric, replaced the holistic rubric used by the state up to that point and attempted to merge content and conventions into a single score based upon a twenty-point scale. Assuming that *Write from the Beginning* was the answer to improved writing scores, the school district began the year encouraging schools to continue using it. The school improvement plan stated that efforts were made to pair

schools with other schools in the district to score student writing on the prompts; however, there is no evidence that this happened, and the program was scrapped by the school district.

As for Croatan Forest School, the school improvement plan indicated some concern about the low performance on the previous year's assessment. The plan stated that the school's writing performance was up and down every year, and indicated that there would be some tutoring for students needing additional help with writing prior to the 2002 writing assessment. The action plan also stated that efforts would be made to integrate writing across all areas of the curriculum, but implementation was haphazard at best. The action plan stated that all students would score at level 2.5 or higher on the state writing assessment. This last statement did not take into account that the students would be scored on a different rubric than what had been previously used by the state to score writing and that the rubric would score students on a scale of one to four without half scores.

It was at this time that the school's principal and fourth-grade teachers visited a school in another district which had improved writing to better than 90% proficient after starting at the same level as Croatan Forest. This school had incorporated a writing conferencing/workshop program known as "Story Surgery" that they had created for their students into its fourth-grade instruction. Plans were made to incorporate this program at the school.

The fourth-grade teachers, along with a group of parent volunteers, teacher assistants, and non-core teaching staff, put this plan in motion in December 2001. As the assistant principal, I assumed the duty of training these volunteers to conference with students and planned each weekly focus session before these volunteers worked with their assigned

students. The plan called for students to write to a weekly “Principal’s Prompt”. The prompts were scored by a school-based team, and then the students met with their conferencing partners once a week to improve their drafts. Each week from January to the March writing assessment, the group focused on one of the five criteria (focus, organization, support and elaboration, style, and conventions) in the state rubric to work on with their students with the idea that each focus area would scaffold on the previous weeks’ focus areas. The school also brought in a former state scorer to discuss how papers were scored, but there was no discussion about *how* to move students to a passing score. Also, the group of scorers was too large and did not score together as a group. The teachers learned later that there was too much disparity in the interpretation of the rubric, therefore the scores were inconsistent.

Data from this activity indicate that there was no record of which prompt topics were given out weekly. The fourth-grade teachers and I got together to plan a prompt every week. Also, students were identified by name and this led to inconsistent scoring due to the subjectivity brought by the scorers to the individual student papers. Further, the five criteria of the rubric being used each had an assigned number value which made tracking the data very difficult and inapplicable to determining which skills needed to be addressed in the classroom and which individual students needed specific assistance. Finally, the program did not achieve the results expected because the staff and volunteers did not get into full-swing until the start of the second semester of the school year, thus limiting the amount of time to work with students. Aside from that, there was a great deal of confusion as to what was a sound piece of writing.

When the data was returned to Croatan Forest School in 2002, the students had performed lower than the previous year's 29% proficient (the school had 27% proficient on the assessment in 2002) but they had moved up due to other schools dropping in performance. This was a shock to the fourth-grade teachers because there had been a great deal of activity associated with writing. As far as the other areas assessed were concerned, the school had performed well. Grades 3-5 had reading scores at greater than 95% proficient, 91.8% proficient, and greater than 95% proficient, respectively. Math scores for grades 3-5 were 86.6% proficient, greater than 95% proficient, and greater than 95% proficient, respectively. What should have been the conclusion to a good year looked bleak until the state realized that there was a problem with the assessment because the prompt led students to write in a listing fashion without focusing on the topic. The entire state's scores had dropped drastically. As a result, the writing assessment scores were thrown out and Croatan Forest School was rated as a School of Excellence by the state.

Policy Changes Affecting Croatan Forest School

In 2002 with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act, referred to as the No Child Left Behind legislation, Croatan Forest School was identified as a school-wide Title I school. This identification provided an increase in funding for instructional programs in the school in addition to the funds to pay the Title I teacher's salary. For 2002-2003, the school received \$84,360 in federal Title I funds--a substantial increase over what the school received as a Title I Targeted Assistance School focusing only on reading. The years from 2002-2006 saw Croatan Forest School receive \$91,485 in 2003-2004; \$120,900 in 2004-2005; and \$101,994 in 2005-2006. Why this is important to this

school is that in 2002, when the school was identified as a school-wide Title I school, there were barely the 40% of students present in the school identified as economically disadvantaged with 40% being the minimum number for the school to qualify for federal funds.

Because being labeled as a school-wide Title I program is determined by the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch, there is some question about the legitimacy of those numbers. This is due to the fact that some students who would qualify as economically-disadvantaged fail to turn in the paperwork to receive free and reduced lunch. In fact, of the tested students at Croatan Forest School in 2002, only 67 out of 180 (37.22%) in grades three through five were labeled as economically disadvantaged--a number lower than many schools in the same region. During the time period covered by this study, the school never had a percentage of economically disadvantaged students reach higher than 43%. Upon receiving this designation, the school had to write an extensive Title I plan and a Title I Parent Involvement Plan identifying areas to be addressed instructionally. Fourth-grade writing was identified as an area of concern and emphasis in the school, and that area is still present in the school's current school improvement plan.

It was also in October 2002 that the school went through its accreditation review with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The accreditation team's report indicated a need to expand current practices to adequately address the school's writing deficiencies. As a result, the school adopted a goal team plan for school renewal concurrent with the district's increased emphasis on the Baldrige Continuous Improvement model known as

PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act). A writing goal team was established and each grade was tasked with creating a grade-level writing program for the students in that particular grade level.

Those grade-level plans, while listed in the school improvement plan, were inconsistently followed. There were, however, some attempts to promote writing across the grade levels with prompts assigned to each of the grade levels on the same day as the fourth grade's state writing assessment. In spite of all of this activity, there was little real direction in promoting consistent writing instruction across all of the grade levels.

Key Data from 2002-2003 and a Change in Direction

At the conclusion of the 2002-2003 school year, the state of North Carolina again decided not to count the fourth-grade writing assessment as part of the school's performance composite in the End-of-Grade test data. Croatan Forest School once again retained its School of Excellence status, but the writing assessment scores, while not counted, did not improve. Reading scores for grades three through five were 88.9%, 77.6%, and greater than 95% proficient, respectively. Math scores for grades three through five were 90.7%, 94%, and greater than 95% proficient, respectively. For the second year, the school scored at 27% proficient in fourth-grade writing. While the school was enjoying a great deal of success in reading and math, the efforts that had been made to improve writing instruction were not meeting with success. The saving grace was that while the assessment was being scored it was not being counted against the school.

In order to make sense of the writing data from 2002-2003 and figure out how to correct this problem, I was asked by my principal to disaggregate the data from the writing assessment. As I began to take apart the data, I noticed some glaring numbers which pointed

to a deeper problem: our core teachers in grades kindergarten through five, tasked with teaching writing, did not have a strong enough background in writing pedagogy to effect a positive change. There were 60 students who took the writing assessment that year and only 17 students passed the assessment. Of the 43 students who did not pass the assessment, 33 of them passed the reading assessment for the year along with the 17 student who passed the assessment. This debunked the commonly-held myth that good readers would be good writers which was explored by Honeycutt (2002) in his dissertation on the same subject.

Another part of the data which told a story pointed to using our transient student population, due to their parents' careers as active-duty military and civil service personnel, as an excuse for low writing performance. Of the 60 students who took the assessment that year, 19 were students at Croatan Forest School from kindergarten until they took the assessment in the fourth grade. Of these nineteen students, only two (10.5% of the students tested) passed the assessment. This data proved two things to the teachers and administrators in the school. The first was that staying in the same school from kindergarten through the fourth-grade writing assessment would not insure that a student had received effective writing instruction every year up to the writing assessment needed to pass it. The second issue this data pointed to was that there was not a consistent view of what good writing was, as measured by the state, and teachers had no clear plan of action as to how to address the writing problem to promote improvement in the school--not only on the assessment, but also in providing additional avenues to promote student learning.

Working Toward a School-wide Solution

Realizing that there was an inconsistent approach to writing at all grade levels leading up to the fourth grade, I polled the teachers to gather information about what they knew about writing and found that many of the teachers felt uncomfortable teaching writing. This, coupled with the fact that many of our teachers at Croatan Forest had not been active writers since they took first-year composition courses in college, pointed to a serious pedagogical problem which was concurrent with the claim made by Hillocks (2002) that many teachers were ineffective because they were not writers themselves. Aside from that, the faculty was a veteran faculty which had been at mid-career when the school opened, and it had been a good while since their freshman composition experiences in college. We made plans to approach this problem from a direction different than that which is traditionally used to correct poor test scores. As was previously mentioned, we identified writing as an area of work in our school-wide Title I plan and used some of those funds to address this need at our school.

As a graduate student earning a Master's Degree in English, I first became acquainted with The National Writing Project in 1990. This project, started in the 1970s in the San Francisco Bay area, seeks to promote strong writing instruction through the practices of teachers working as writers, teaching lessons to their colleagues, reading current literature about writing, and having dialogue about the process of writing. We contacted a former writing project director at a regional university and made plans to hold a writing workshop, based on the National Writing Project model, with this person as the facilitator.

A great deal of trepidation plagued the teachers in the school that this might not prove to be a worthwhile endeavor. Since this was to be held in the summer, we could not require any of teachers to attend; however, all of our core curriculum teachers, except three, attended the week-long session. Several teachers who also attended held support roles in the school such as our exceptional children's (special education) teacher, our ESEA Title I teacher, media specialist, and physical education teacher who, along with the administration, attended. All in all, there were 25 regular attendees in this workshop. The district office sent a representative on the first day of the workshop, but that person did not return for the rest of the week. Of the group, only one teacher did not complete the workshop. We also provided the participants with a generous amount of license renewal credit as well as materials, books, and meals during the sessions. The goal of this workshop was to get a dialogue started which we hoped would help us address the problem.

As the week progressed, teachers became more comfortable with writing and began to express thoughts and fears they were having about teaching relevant writing. The culminating point of this workshop was the creation of a school-wide writing plan to address instructional issues, as well as competencies to be mastered, at each grade level leading up to the fourth grade when students were expected to take the writing assessment. What is more, the teachers in the fourth grade assumed the role of helping to drive the program at the school level with the ultimate goal as producing competent writers at all grade levels. The workshop concluded with a feeling among the teachers who attended that now there was a plan of action into which all of the pieces we had used to improve scores would fit to progress in a direction which would maximize our efforts. The key to this was that we had

focused on writing and then applied the state expectations to that knowledge, as opposed to concentrating on the state expectations alone. An added benefit was that we learned that the state would not be counting the writing assessment scores as part of the school's performance composite until the 2005-2006 school year, thus giving us a two-year window to address writing in a methodical manner.

We did not stop there. We had a follow-up session in November to see how we were progressing and invited our facilitator back to Croatan Forest School to observe some of the changes in instruction. We also made arrangements for the North Carolina Teacher Academy to send a facilitator to our school to do a one-day spring workshop using Ralph Fletcher's *Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing in Grades K-8* to reinforce our work. Once again, we followed the format of our summer workshop and provided materials, books, and renewal credit for our staff.

Narrative of the Data from 2004-2006

As 2003-2004 began, the fourth-grade teachers and I took the rubric we created based on the state rubric and restructured it to be more understandable for students. We replaced the number values with a simple plus/ check/ minus rating for each of the five criteria and then added an overall score of a plus/ check/ or minus to determine whether or not the piece of student writing was capable of receiving a passing score. We also included a comments section to point out specific parts students needed to work on when we conferenced with them. This allowed for greater ease in scoring the papers and was more accurate than the way we had tried to score in the past. We also used the previous year's state assessment

prompt to do a diagnostic assessment for fourth grade to determine what students were capable of doing prior to beginning instruction.

Another change to the instructional picture was that I assisted the fourth-grade teachers in conducting writing conferences with their students starting in September, as opposed to waiting until January to begin conferencing with the students. We still maintained that program; however, we began to give students prompts and score them during the fall. The difference was that each prompt was designed to address a particular criterion of the state rubric. We also did a series of mini-lessons on each of the five criteria which I facilitated in each classroom.

The goal here was to introduce each part of the rubric to the students to be reinforced by the classroom teachers before asking students to write to a prompt. During the fall, we wrote five prompts to determine whether students had grasped the basic idea of how to address these issues in their writing. The fourth-grade teachers and I scored responses to prompts as a group and identified students by their lunch numbers to maintain objectivity. This was a change from using a large group of personnel to evaluate student writing and allowed for a more consistent view of what constituted a solid piece of student writing. Further, teachers engaged in a regular dialogue about writing throughout the school year. As result, the students were ready for the writing conferencing when the fourth grade began its Principal's Prompt/Story Surgery activities in January. We maintained data on student performance in response to each prompt for each teacher's class, but we were only reporting proficiency based on our rubric without making any observations on areas of instruction. Also, we were creating prompts each week and we did not keep a written record of which

prompts were being used. We did, however, maintain a file folder for the prompts so that they might be used again with future classes.

Further work in other grade levels included hiring one of our retired fourth-grade teachers to work part-time in teaching writers' workshops to students in grades two and three to support those teachers' regular writing instruction. This teacher followed the fourth-grade instructional plan along with the school-wide plan's expectations to help prepare students for what they were expected to be able to do when they reached fourth grade. This position was maintained through the 2004-2005 and 2005-2006 school years.

When the assessment scores were returned to the school at the end of 2003-2004, Croatan Forest School had improved the fourth-grade writing performance to 53% proficient-almost doubling its performance from the previous year. Data also showed that there were 19 students in the grade who had been in the school since kindergarten and eight (14.5% of the total group) had passed the assessment. While this number did not indicate a substantial improvement with these students, that group was improving. Twenty nine of the 55 students in the grade level who took the assessment passed it.

While this was welcome news which validated the school's efforts to some extent, there was still work to be done. End-of-Grade performance data for reading and math indicated that greater than 95% of the students in all grade levels had scored proficient in both reading and math and all subgroups (there are only two identified by NCLB legislation, white students and students receiving free and reduced lunch; however, other groups represented in the school do not constitute the 40 students needed to comprise a subgroup) in the school met growth expectations. Croatan Forest was recognized as an Honor School of

Excellence by the state, still largely because writing was not included in the performance composite.

When 2004-2005 began, two of the three teachers teaching fourth grade were new to the school writing program. Knowing this, the remaining fourth grade teacher and I began to document student progress more specifically. We duplicated the program that we had used for 2003-2004; however, when we charted progress for each class and student in the grade, we began to list how the class performed as well as suggestions for individual class focus when teaching writing lessons based upon how the students had performed on that particular prompt. We also began to list the prompt and the number of students in the individual class and grade level who had written acceptable narratives. Another part of the changes for this year was that we set up a concrete instructional timeline to cover when certain skills should be taught. This gave us a better idea of how well the grade level was doing with each prompt administered to the grade level. It is important to note that throughout this process I was actively involved teaching mini-lessons and conducting classroom-level writing workshops.

When the scores were returned to the school in May 2005, our students had performed at 62.5% proficient. The students who had been with us since beginning kindergarten scored 62%--roughly the school average. One issue which came to the forefront in the testing was that males were not performing as well as the females in the grade level. Also, it must be noted that this was also the case with reading and math. The reading scores for grades 3-5 were greater than 95%, 93.7%, and 94.8% proficient, respectively. The math scores for grades 3-5 indicated that greater than 95% of the students tested performed proficiently at all grade levels. For the second year, Croatan Forest School was recognized

as an Honor School of Excellence for scoring higher than 90% proficient on the assessments with all subgroups meeting expected proficiency. This was the final year that writing would not be included in the composite score for the school.

As 2005-2006 began, another change came to the fourth-grade teaching staff with the addition of a first-year teacher. Knowing that this was the first year in four years that the assessment would count as a part of the school's composite score, we maintained the writing program as it had been developed through the 2004-2005 school year. We surveyed our conferencing partners who worked with our students to determine how they felt about the program, and we also surveyed the students following the assessment to determine how they felt about the writing instruction they received. When the scores were returned, the school scored 55.1% proficient on the state writing assessment. This was the second year that Croatan Forest students had scored above the state average in writing. The 2005 state average had been 49% proficient and in 2006 it was 50.1% proficient.

At the conclusion of the school year I disaggregated the data and discovered that of the students who had been with us since kindergarten, 66.6%--an average higher than the school average--had passed the assessment. This was an indicator that students were beginning to reach the fourth grade with a certain level of skill which could be directed toward the writing they would have to do that year. One glaring issue which was evident was that our females had scored at 78.5% proficient while our males scored only 7.25% proficient. Fletcher (2006) points to this gender gap in writing performance and explains that often males do not do as well on these writing assessments due to lack of choice of writing topics and out of fear that they will not do well academically and socially. This provided an

area for further work. Reading scores for the school indicated that grades three through five had scored 91.9%, 91.5%, and greater than 95% proficient, respectively. The school's performance in math dipped due to the state's change in what was considered a proficient score in math. Scores for this assessment for grades three through five were 73.3%, 71.8%, and 78.8% proficient, respectively. In spite of the lower math scores and with the addition of the writing scores, Croatan Forest School was recognized as a School of Distinction for having a composite of 80-90% proficient on the state assessments with all identified subgroups demonstrating proficiency.

Although overall scores indicate that there was a significant change in how writing instruction was delivered, many of the schools in the district had not concentrated on writing. This was largely because writing was not included in the composite scores for the 2001-02 through the 2004-05 school years. To the teachers at Croatan Forest, this four-year break from the assessment provided a time period to work out instructional problems and set up a workable plan to teach writing not only for the assessment, but also to be used as a tool across the other areas of the curriculum.

Prompt Data from 2004-2005 and 2005-2006

Although the fourth-grade teachers at Croatan Forest had been giving students writing prompts under testing conditions, it was not until the 2004-2005 school year that the school realized that instruction needed to be predicated upon what students could do as opposed to simply diving in and beginning instruction. The teachers decided to use the state prompt from 2003-2004 as a diagnostic tool and asked the students to write a narrative. This diagnostic prompt was administered during the third week of the school year. The prompt

was, “Think about a time when you tried something new. Write a story about trying something for the very first time” (NCDPI, 2004). Using the rubric designed in the school, the teachers and I evaluated all of the student responses and determined that 12.5% (seven students) of the 56 fourth graders could write an acceptable narrative at this point of the school year. This data gave the teachers a place to start with instruction for the school year.

As each prompt was administered following specific instruction for each of the five assessed criteria, it was evident that instruction and work would have to be year-long to have a lasting effect. We administered four more prompts during the fall. The data for each of the prompts had students performing at 41.8%, 37.5%, 34%, and 41.1% proficient. Data appeared to be fairly consistent; however, students were improving in each of the five criteria as the first semester of the school year progressed although they were not yet showing the numbers we wanted to see.

During the spring semester, the students began with very inconsistent scores on their weekly prompts. These prompts, administered during the first two weeks in January 2005 showed that the students performed at 47.45% and 26.6% proficient respectively. This was more than likely, because of the gap in time caused by the winter holidays when we did not require students to write any narratives to prompts. The next four prompts administered showed more consistent performance.

The final four prompts showed that our students scored 60%, fifty percent, 62.7%, and 54.3% proficient respectively. This fluctuating performance is indicative of how our students wrote based on the prompt and whether it was an imaginative or personal narrative prompt. It might be noted that this group had better success with personal narratives than

with imaginative prompts largely due to their ability to maintain focus throughout the exercise. Bearing in mind that we were evaluating students based upon our adaptation of the state scoring rubric, we were anticipating an assessment performance in the fiftieth percentile when the state assessment scores were returned. We were pleasantly surprised to find that our students had scored 62.5% proficient.

Feeling that we had a legitimate plan of instruction for dealing with this assessment, we duplicated our program in 2005-2006. We began with a diagnostic prompt exercise using the prompt from the 2004-2005 state assessment. The prompt was, “You are walking outside one day and notice a tree with a door in the side of it. Write a story about finding a tree with a door in the side of it” (NCDPI, 2005). Of the 70 students who wrote this prompt, 19 (27.14%) wrote acceptable narratives.

The following five prompts for the fall of 2005 showed an initial dip and then a climb before a drop in late November and December. Data from these prompts are as follows: 15.71%, 34.78%, 52.24%, 48.53%, and 36.76% proficient. Our compiled data listed the specific prompts along with class details regarding how students performed in each class, and as a grade level. Early in the school year, it was clear that students had trouble creating text with a clear beginning, middle, and ending. As the students moved toward the middle of the fall, support and elaboration appeared to be the issue and instruction was directed toward addressing that need. The late fall tapering of scores showed that students were having trouble once again with focusing their narratives. This could be attributed to a number of issues; however, based on the data and the days we administered the prompts, the disjointed schedule during late November and December due to holidays was responsible for the

decline in performance. Students were also occupied by a number of activities both in and out of school during this time.

Data from January 2006 until the state assessment in March showed some fluctuation; however, by the time the students wrote in response to the third prompt, there was consistent performance. Responses to the first prompt administered on January 10 showed our students performing at 59.15% proficient. Students who had difficulty with this prompt typically did not end their narratives with an appropriate closing. Responses to the next prompt administered on January 24 showed a drop to 36.71% proficient and instructional support had to be redirected on teaching students to focus their narratives due to the almost list-like nature of the writing.

The length of time between the first and second prompt in January was due to the semester ending and students having time off before the new semester began. Aside from that, the school was administering quarterly assessments so there was not an optimal time to ask students to write to a prompt during those fourteen days. Further, we always used Tuesday mornings to administer the prompts to students because we wanted them to get used to writing at that point in the week because the state assessment is always administered on the first Tuesday in March.

By the time the students in the school wrote to the January 31 prompt, they had rebounded and the student performance was at 62.85% proficient. Still, some students had difficulty in that they tended to leave gaps in the text of their narratives. Responses to the prompts administered on February 7 and 14 showed that students were still working to provide support and elaboration in their narratives and the results from that prompt were

58.1% and 47.06% proficient, respectively. The responses to the final two prompts administered on February 21 and February 28 showed that students had worked through these problems and the results were 75.36% and 82.09% proficient, respectively. Students who did not perform to the expected level demonstrated that basic editing mistakes were the cause of their not meeting their goals for these prompts.

The school plan for fourth grade for 2005-06 indicates that there is a more comprehensive plan in place to address classroom instructional needs. The operating idea behind all of the data collection was simple: we wanted to have a reasonably strong idea about how our students would perform on the day of the assessment. While the student proficiency for the state assessment was only at 55.1% proficient, the students in our school still scored above the 50.1% proficient which was the state average. To have managed to move from 27% proficient in 2003 to surpassing the state average in both 2005 and 2006, the teachers in the grade level felt that their work had produced some very positive results. Also, it must be mentioned that the school rubric, while honed considerably, was still subjective in that it was an adaptation of the state rubric designed to allow us to collect data to chart student progress.

Interviews with the Fourth Grade Teachers

In my attempt to paint a clear picture of what took place at Croatan Forest School to change writing instruction after the school's dismal performance on the 2001 fourth-grade writing assessment, I held focus group interviews with the fourth-grade teachers in February 2007 in the school's conference room one afternoon after school. I thought it was important to get input from the teachers who had taught in the grade level during the time being

studied. There were six teachers whom I asked to participate and five agreed to be part of the study. My purpose in doing this was threefold. I wanted to get the perspective of those who had to contend with the state writing assessment during that time to see if there were any common issues they all shared when it came to teaching writing to students. Aside from that, I wanted to explore the level of skill these teachers possessed. Finally, I wanted to get their perceptions on what they saw as the building administration's role in promoting instruction and student learning.

A focus group interview consisting of teachers who had taught fourth-grade writing during the time from 2001-2006 was held. Because of my role as an administrator in the school building, this group was facilitated by a neutral facilitator brought in for the meeting and the follow-up member-check session. The teachers were brought together and the discussion held was based on the questions from the interview guide for teachers created for this study (see Appendix A). The four participating teachers--Marvin, Hailey, Trish, and Katie--bring varying experience levels as teachers to the study. Hailey and Trish have retired; however, Trish returned to work on a part time basis to teach for the district in the Academically and Intellectually Gifted program. Katie is in her second year of teaching but now teaches in a middle school after having been hired at Croatan Forest on a one-year contract after a sudden boost in fourth-grade enrollment in 2005. Katie left the school because she was initially certified to teach middle grades and to remain at Croatan Forest would have meant returning to school to obtain an elementary school teaching certificate. Marvin is the only teacher of the group who still teaches in a regular classroom at Croatan Forest; however, he has now moved to the fifth grade after teaching a fourth-fifth grade

combination class for one year. The group of fourth-grade teachers has one member, Camryn, who now teaches in another state. I interviewed Camryn via telephone recording her responses. Camryn now teaches in another grade level after having taught a combination third and fourth-grade class for one year.

Because each of these teachers has a story to tell about how they dealt with teaching writing to fourth graders at Croatan Forest School, I decided to take their responses and write about each of them individually as opposed to trying to integrate responses into continuous text which might not treat them as individuals. I feel that each individual story gives a clear picture about how this school addressed writing instruction. I also feel that the teachers' individual stories paint a realistic picture of what teachers are expected to do in preparing students for the state writing assessments. Further, the feelings of these teachers about the assessments are exposed in a way which allows for others to understand what it is like to have to prepare students for this assessment.

Marvin's Reflections

Marvin, the group's only male teacher, is in his fourteenth year of teaching. He came to Croatan Forest fresh out of college, and, with the exception of three years spent as an itinerant AIG teacher working for various schools in the school district, he has worked there. Marvin returned to the regular classroom in 2004 as a teacher in a fourth grade-fifth grade combination class. Currently, Marvin teaches fifth grade.

When asked about his experiences as a writer, Marvin refers back to his days as a student saying, "I remember enjoying writing, and I remember enjoying it most when teachers allowed me to write across many different genres, many different contexts. I didn't

like it when we stayed in one type of writing for too long.” Marvin points to his stubbornness about writing when he says that he did not like being told what to write about or how to write it. Marvin’s frustration about the formulaic part of writing is something he often sees in his students. He says, “...the reason they are frustrated is because they have in their head the way they want to say it, and then sometimes you get to the point where you just don’t have any time left to deal with it and you want to say, ‘here’s how you should say it.’ And that’s not what they want. They want to say it how they want to say it.”

When asked about the impact of state assessments on his teaching, Marvin is matter of fact about his feelings concerning this assessment. He says, “When I first started teaching, I went into it (writing) more. I wanted them to write like I enjoy writing. I wanted to write on all different genres...you know do some poetry, do some newspaper writing, do some different kinds of writing. But the test became more and more the forefront--we pretty much had to stick to the narrative. The more I did it (teaching the test format), I really pushed against it, but in the end I succumbed like everyone else kind of did to really finding a formula for the writing.” Marvin went on to discuss the formula by saying, “You know, you have this and this and let’s fit it into these little boxes and that sort of thing. It did affect what I did. The sad thing is the kids did better when I did it that way. I did the formulas, and I made them write narratives all the time and we graded them constantly....It did make the writing better, I think, as far as scoring better...I don’t think it made them love the writing more, or maybe carry on.” It is clear from Marvin’s statements that he is like many teachers who are torn between the need to post good test scores and the need to teach writing in a pure form so that students will actively use it as a way of exploring thoughts through creating text.

Marvin's perspective on what writing assessments show about students' writing ability is a realistic one. He also has some strong opinions about how these tests are constructed. "The one topic (to write on) has always bothered me. That's crazy to tell someone they have to write on one topic, and I just gave it to you, and you gotta do it. That to me has always bothered me that they (the state) didn't give them some choices. It's time constrained. You don't get to edit your work. What author writes a book on the first try and says, 'This is my best work'? No one. I guess that's the way all tests are in some ways, you know, it tells you on that particular day how they did....I don't think that's a very accurate picture." When asked if he thought that he was more effective as a writing teacher after having taught fourth grade and preparing the students for this type of assessment, Marvin stated, "I'm better at analyzing writing. It used to be I would read something and say 'that's good' or 'that's not good.' But it was hard for me to say exactly where it broke off. I'm much better at identifying where it doesn't quite work- better than I used to be."

When asked about writing training that he received, Marvin is quick to point out that he was not in the building during the time when the faculty received school-wide training due to his job as an AIG teacher, but he felt that he received more training while scoring papers as a group with his grade-level colleagues. "I really enjoyed the times that we would come in and we'd have all the writing sitting in front of us. And we'd be sitting there reading it and be like 'Oh, look at this one,' and then hand it to the other person. And they'd say 'Oh yeah, that's great. Look at that part right there.' And we wouldn't worry about which child was which because we didn't know who they were." This last reference was to the way the school coded writing prompts to allow for objectivity when the teachers scored papers in the fourth

grade. Also, the fourth-grade teachers at Croatan Forest and I meet during release time each week to evaluate student writing prompts. Marvin also indicated in his responses that he relied more on dialogue with his colleagues to learn about how to teach writing better and referred to Ralph Fletcher's *Craft Lessons: Teaching writing K-8*, a book that all of the fourth-grade teachers used as a part of their individual and group writing instruction.

When asked about how he perceives his principal's role in writing instruction in the school, Marvin was very clear. He referred to the school's writing plan and stated about the principal, "One of the things, he needs to be the one who enforces [insures] that every grade level will teach writing because that's something we can do--go around to every grade level and make sure it happens. He also needs to provide resources that are required to make writing possible. Whether it's volunteers, or time or anything that we need that's going to make it successful, he needs to be there to provide that for us." Marvin's statements refer to materials and time; however, there is little reference to the school principal working in the instructional realm. This could be because of his teaching fourth grade after the school had already created its school-wide plan and implemented it, or because traditionally, the school administrator was more of a manager as opposed to being actively involved in instructional issues aside from providing resources.

Trish's Reflections

Trish retired in 2003 after 32 years in the classroom. She taught fourth grade for ten years and was an AIG teacher for fifteen years prior to that. The other years were spent teaching third grade in other schools in the district. Trish was present during the time when the school began to search for ways to improve writing assessment scores, but retired before

the school began to make real progress in improving writing scores. Three years ago, Trish returned to work in the school district as a part-time itinerant AIG teacher. Since her retirement, Trish has volunteered to help with fourth-grade writing in the school as a conferencing partner for a group of fourth graders and assisting with writing workshop activities.

When asked about her experiences as a writer, Trish tells a story about how she felt about writing as a student and how that affected her as a teacher. She says, “I enjoyed it to start with until I hit sixth grade, and I particularly liked poetry. I really liked to write poetry, all the different kinds. And then I had a sixth grade teacher, and I had written my first book. I had chapters. It was a mystery. I was so excited and I showed it to my teacher and she said ‘we don’t have time for this....You have better things to do....I tore it up and said ‘I will never write again.’” This story is indicative of many others explaining why students have difficulty with writing in the school setting.

Trish goes on to point out that one high school teacher finally turned around her negative feelings toward writing, making her realize that she could write competently. This led Trish to look at how the act of writing is sometimes difficult for students and her role in teaching them. She says, “With children, I have enjoyed helping them write, and helping them get their thoughts on paper. It’s really hard to do that sometimes, but I enjoy it.”

Trish is quick to point out that, in preparing students to perform on these assessments, enjoyment is often reduced, or even removed, from the instructional process for the teacher as well as the students. She reflects on the school’s dismal performance in 2001 by saying, “I can remember that first year when they (the assessment scores) came back to the fourth

grade and we were working on our writing. I thought I knew what I was doing. I remember getting the scores back and going ‘What am I doing wrong? What’s wrong with me?’ I guess it made me really figure out more, or made me pay attention more to how I was teaching writing and what I was doing...it really puts so much stress on me as a teacher to try and make sure I’ve covered everything, or taught them the writing. I mean, I felt like it was so subjective, and it was unfair of the state to put us through this. But the impact on my teaching, I guess it was, it made me become a teacher of writing.”

One of the things that Trish and her grade-level colleagues did to try and make writing more interesting was done in conjunction with Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* when the students used the book to talk about the frontier period in social studies. The students read the book paying close attention to the language and how the author used verb-based descriptions so that they could make connections with how language is used by writers. This activity culminated with a frontier day in which the students actually participated in a school day designed to duplicate what children in frontier America would experience on a typical school day, complete with frontier dress, food, and student lessons and activities. This was followed up by writing activities which allowed students to continue to explore the period from a narrative approach which was concurrent with the state assessment writing guidelines. This became a highlight of the school year for these students because they had observed the fourth graders in previous years doing the various activities associated with the lesson and were eager to participate in it when they became fourth graders themselves.

When asked about the writing assessment and what it told her about her students' writing abilities, Trish says, "It (the piece of writing produced in the assessment) might be their best writing, but it might not be their best writing." Children who were solid writers sometimes would not be able to perform on that particular day. "It's one day, and today may not be your day."

Trish says that this approach to teaching writing has made her more aware of effective writing instruction. She says, "I think it's just made me so much more aware of writing. You know, even today, with my AIG students, we were talking about doing a presentation, and I was telling them the steps in doing a presentation. And I related it to writing a paper. And how they had to address, at the very beginning, just like the beginning of a writing (assignment), and you had to identify your topic and what you're going to be talking about, you know, and then you have your middle, which is your meat of your project, and then your ending. And so I was telling them and showing them. So, it's really made a big difference I think in everything I do." This applicability of a standard process to other areas of the curriculum is one of the benefits of the program being used in the school.

When she was asked about in-service training, Trish says, "We have been to a lot of ineffective training. We were involved with *Write from the Beginning* but it was actually wrong from the beginning and they said 'Throw it away!' We knew at the time, but we played the game, and we continued to do what was right for the children. Our best training came from self-discovery. And getting out and looking at what other people are doing, individually, and then as a collective group. And we collaborated more, shared ideas. Most of the training came from what we discovered on our own. The year I retired, that summer

they [the school] had a workshop and I know that all the teachers that participated shared lesson plans. And I was fortunate enough, after the next year, I stayed home. I came back to help the second and third grade teachers with writing. And I was given those lesson plans that were shared at the workshop. And I took those and I was thrilled to see and the writing ideas and things. And even though I wasn't there for the dialogue, and doing the plans here, that helped me tremendously to see what first grade was doing and what second grade was doing. But that was really not my dialogue (with the teachers) but it was the way I found out what they were doing."

After several years as a fourth grade teacher at Croatan Forest, Trish was used to feeling alone when it came to dealing with fourth-grade writing. When asked about what her expectations of the school principal when it comes to instructional support, Trish says, "We have to have support. It took years for this school, I guess it took somebody else coming in and doing a workshop for us to realize that it was a school effort. You can't come to fourth grade not knowing how to write at least a story. It took years for us to realize that writing had to come from building each grade level, each grade level had to build so that when they came to fourth grade they at least knew how to write a story, with a beginning, a middle, and end, and some details, and those kinds of things, because we don't have time to do it all in the short period of time. Our scores have improved the last few years once we got the teachers on board. And I think it had to come from the administration. They're the ones who tell us. We can't. I can't just go down and tell first grade, 'you've gotta change.' I mean, it has to be supported by the administration, by the principal. I don't know about other schools because I don't go to that many, but for this particular school to get the principal involved

with conferencing that we do so that children know how important it is to get them to realize, to help with reading papers, and scoring them. It means, even though we see them every day, we become like their mothers you know, and they don't care what we say. It means a whole lot more when the assistant principal has read their papers and knows that they've done a great job or when Mr. Smith has read their paper and knows they've done a great job. They just look up to those two guys. And to have them on board with us, I think makes a tremendous difference." Trish's comments about administrative involvement echo what McEwan (2003) refers to as servant leadership. By the instructional involvement of the school's administration in the school's fourth-grade writing program, it is evident that there is a real desire to promote student excellence and teacher success through modeling lessons, conferencing with students, and scoring student writing.

Hailey's Reflections

Hailey retired at the end of 2005-2006 after 26 years of teaching. Twenty-three of those years were spent teaching fourth grade. It is also important to note that Hailey was one of the original teachers who opened the school in 1991. Hailey was one of the original fourth grade teachers present who actively worked on the school's writing plan as the school's writing goal team chairperson from 2001 until her retirement. Hailey spent her entire career teaching in the school district and has seen many plans and programs come and go over the course of her career. She still volunteers as a conferencing partner with the fourth grade at Croatan Forest School.

When asked about her experiences as a writer, Hailey says, "Well, when I went to school there was no creative writing. When I got to high school the only writing we did was

research papers. When I was in college there was no creative writing when I graduated. So, I began to learn writing when I taught fourth grade. At first it was frustrating for me as it was for the students. But the more help I got, and the more I worked at it, the easier it got. I finally decided that I wouldn't be able to teach it until I could do it myself. So, I started writing. And pretty soon I enjoyed it, and I loved teaching it. It wasn't nearly as frustrating." In recent years, Hailey has had some of her work published in various religious and senior citizens publications and has even self-published a book.

When Hailey was asked to reflect on the impact of the state writing assessment on her as a teacher, she says, "It definitely caused me to spend more time on the writing than I did before the test. Sometimes I had to sacrifice other subjects because it takes time. I think I learned how to incorporate writing into other areas. I tried to prepare the children, but at the same time, tried to do activities that I thought would create an enjoyment for writing. And over the years, the children were coming better prepared which made them more comfortable and more confident. So I did begin to see more enjoyment year after year." Hailey began to use writing in the science and social studies curriculum, but was not as successful in using writing in teaching math.

Hailey is realistic about what she feels the writing assessments show her about her students' writing ability. She says, "It is only a snapshot of one day. And they're only given one prompt. There is no choice. And there is a time constraint. And those things on the surface appear unfair to a nine-year old. However, realizing the cost involved in the writing tests I understand what they (the state) are trying to do. I'm not sure a nine-year old does, or their parents. We never knew when the day came what they would do. And, over the years

we learned to predict and probably two-thirds of the time we were correct in predicting what each child would do.”

When asked about whether or not she was a more effective writing teacher, Hailey responded, “I think the fact that we as a grade level sat down and scored papers weekly, and as we got better at scoring and felt more comfortable with that, you could see the mistakes and learn to direct lessons to that end. I wasn’t wasting a lot of time. I could zero in on something and know exactly. I could sit down with a child, read their paper, and know immediately what needs to be done.”

Hailey also points out the level of staff development training given in the school when she reflects on where the school began to change its focus in writing to a more school-wide approach. She is quick to explain that there was little training provided prior to 2001. She says, “I was just sitting here thinking before that took place there was a collaboration of the fourth grade teachers with our assistant principal, who is an English major. And that’s how our school-wide program was developed--was a collaboration of those people with him. And then a professor from ECU came in a facilitated a school-wide collaborative effort (the school’s summer writing workshop in 2003) in which each one (participating teacher) wrote a lesson on writing, they were shared for the group. They were printed. People were given copies so that every grade knew what the people above them and below them were doing. They had an idea of how they fit into the whole, total picture. And that’s when our school really started moving with the writing, as a whole. It was more of a camaraderie, and a common interest. It was not just a fourth grade problem any longer. We shared lots of ideas. We worked well together even though we weren’t cookie cutters of one another, we shared.”

Due to her active role in the school improvement process, Hailey has some strong feelings about the role of the school administration in this process. Of the school principal she says, “First of all, (he needs to be an) encourager. He needs to be willing as an administrator to allow things to happen so that the whole process of writing instruction, conferencing can take place. Since we need one day for writing, we need another day to have release time for scoring. We need another day with a block of time in which we can have a group of people come in and conference with those people (this refers to the school’s writing conferencing/story surgery program). And the total school schedule needs to allow for those things to happen. He needs to support that program, and encourage the rest of the staff to support that program. The whole school, headed by the principal, needs to support whatever schedule needs to be in place for that writing project to be carried out.” To Hailey, a school principal needs to be actively involved from beginning to end in this process.

Katie’s Reflections

Katie came to Croatan Forest School in October 2005. She was hired as a first-year teacher after the school year began due to an over-enrollment of fourth-grade students. Katie taught on a one-year contract due to her having a middle grades English Language Arts license until the end of the school year when she moved to the middle school where she currently teaches.

Katie’s experiences as a writer stem largely from a car accident she was in as a high school student. She says, “Well for me, writing has always come fairly easy. I’m one who likes to sit down at one time and just write. Usually when I sit down and write it all kind of seems to flow. When I was in high school I was involved in a car accident and that’s when I

really got into poetry because I felt like it enabled me to express my feelings. When I got into college, I really hated writing because I hated them telling me I had to have, you know, seven pages, and I could get it all in, in four pages. I don't like a lot of fluff. I like to get down to the point. So, you know, writing is something that I do enjoy. The one thing that I don't like about writing is conventions because I've always sucked at it...you know still to this day I don't know where a comma is supposed to go. When I teach the kids it helps me relate to them because I even tell them today it's something that I still struggle with."

When discussing the impact that the state writing assessments have on her as a teacher, Katie says, "Well for me, I felt like it stressed me out. Last year, coming in as a new teacher it was very stressful." Katie found assistance from Hailey who taught across the hallway to get adjusted to teaching for the assessment. When talking about the impact on her students, Katie points out, "for the kids, you just have to teach them every single step and you know I can see the frustration coming from them. It was a little disheartening to see the kids so frustrated because they felt like if they don't do well on the test then everybody is going to be mad at them or they couldn't do this or they couldn't do that. Even today with my eighth graders I can see more of them mention (about writing) 'I took the writing test last year'. They focus on writing for a year and then it's like nothing else for a couple of years, then focus again." To combat this and make writing a continuously evolving skill, Katie has incorporated it into all parts of the curriculum in her eighth-grade English Language Arts classes.

Katie concurred with her former grade-level colleagues about the writing assessment being only one indicator of skill on one particular day, but points out that the assessment

doesn't allow for students to work through an entire process on a piece of writing like they would on a regular classroom assignment. She says, "When we were preparing for the writing test last year the kids got several chances to edit their work and you could see how they got better. But each time they were given a fresh topic they always started out at the bottom and had to work their way up."

Katie says that her year as a fourth grade teacher was helpful in making her a better teacher of writing. She says, "I think I've become more effective. After teaching last year, I see all the steps whereas before, for me to sit down and write, it's nothing. But for other people who struggle it's good to actually be able to sit down and show them the steps and show them the whole process. So even now, teaching eighth graders I still have to go back sometimes and teach them, you know, each little step because they weren't properly taught how to write. I can see an improvement in them now so I think it's taught me to think a lot more and to be more precise with exactly how I was teaching writing."

Katie was new to the school and to teaching during her year at Croatan Forest. This limited the amount of in-service training that she received; however, she did have some observations on the subject of in-service training. She says, "I think my biggest help last year, coming in as a new teacher was having an experienced teacher and then an assistant principal who was very well-trained. And you know, he came and gave me a lot of his focus because I was, you know, I didn't know what I was doing. And I remember the first day he came in to score papers I was just kind of sitting here and I took longer than everybody else because I didn't know what I was looking for...the more I did it, the more comfortable I became...a lot of things that I learned last year I've been able to carry into this year was from

sitting down and actually talking to them (the veteran teachers in the grade level). And them giving me the time and you know, actually teaching me the things that I actually needed to know, instead of what you actually learn in college.” This collegial interaction comprised much of what Katie received in training in the school setting.

When asked about administrative support, Katie refers to the visibility of the school administrators. She says, “Well, I know last year the kids really loved it when the assistant principal would come in and actually teach the lesson. Like, he would come in and teach the different parts of writing. And then our job would be to follow up on that. And the kids really enjoyed that because they looked forward to it. You know, when he was late the kids would say ‘Is he coming? Is he coming?’ I feel like they (the administration) need to be a visible part of the process so that way the kids get a sense of, you know, we’re doing something good.”

My Interview with Camryn

Camryn was the fifth teacher from the fourth grade who I included in the study and since she now lives and teaches in another state, she was unable to participate in the group meetings. I interviewed Camryn via telephone and recorded the interview to get her thoughts on how the staff at Croatan Forest School approached teaching writing. It is important to note that Camryn taught fourth grade for only one year as a part of a third grade-fourth grade combination class. Prior to that, Camryn had taught second and third grade before leaving teaching for a number of years to start a family.

Camryn is very open with her experiences as a writer. She says, “I always enjoyed writing. When taking a test or in task situations I always preferred essay questions because I

knew I could write my way out of about anything. The key for me when doing an essay was just never to write anything wrong. And I normally could talk my way out of about anything.”

When asked about the impact of the state assessment on her teaching, Camryn is quick to point out that she wanted to do well. “When I taught fourth graders I took the test very seriously. And so, if that’s going to be my students’ measure on if they are a high-achieving student or not I’m going to make sure that they’re ready for whatever measure it is—whether it be a writing test or an EOG or whatever. Previously, when I had not taught fourth grade I knew that the writing test was something that the fourth grade teachers did. I wholeheartedly believed that it wasn’t just a measure of the fourth grade teachers’ ability to teach because if the kids had never received proper instruction in previous grades, that’s a long way for a fourth grade teacher to catch up on. I always believed that, but it took me being in that fourth grade teacher’s shoes to really see it, to have the full impact of it.”

Camryn has a very realistic view of the writing assessment and its connection to instruction. She is quick to add that while she is cognizant of the impact of assessments these assessments are not all that she teaches. She says, “I won’t say that I teach to the test, but I’m going to make sure that my kids are fully prepared to take a test. And my philosophy is as long as the test is an accurate picture of what kids need to know, it’s okay to teach to a test.” Camryn follows up on this with a reflection on how writing has been integrated into her classes. “For me to be efficient as a writer, writing should be integrated throughout all of your teaching. It’s not just a set writing time that ‘Okay, it’s now writing time kids so put away your science books and now we’re going to teach writing.’ To me the best and most

effective writing comes when you've integrated it with children into other subject areas.”

Camryn goes on to describe an activity her classes did at Croatan Forest when they chose an author and wrote to that person to ask questions about their books. Camryn followed this up by saying, “if you can connect the writing process to a real world situation your kids are going to do better.”

When asked if the state writing assessment was an accurate indicator of student skill, Camryn responds, “I wish they gave more feedback. I don't think a one-day shot of writing, a one-day test of writing necessarily is the correct measure. I think on-going portfolios are much more valid. I wish they (the state) gave more details in to what students were doing well and weren't doing well. That's how we drove our instruction. We would give them prompts and then together with the students would critique what was good, what was strong, did they have a clear focus, were they speaking with expression? I wish that the test would give that type of feedback. But what it did is made me as a teacher really look for it.”

Camryn is now teaching first grade, but when asked if her experiences teaching fourth grade have made her a more effective writing teacher she responded by saying, “After that whole experience, now everything I think about comes from being a writing teacher. Now, I find myself teaching my first graders similar things I was saying to my fourth graders about using a vivid voice and strong verbs, and the author's technique. So after teaching fourth grade and going through the training we did it's become a complete part of my teaching style.”

Camryn's memories of the school's staff summer writing workshop in 2003 stick out in her mind as one of the better in-service training activities she has participated in as a

teacher. She also points to the work done by the school's administration in the training the fourth-grade teachers to teach writing. She says, "One of the greatest experiences for me is when we were part of it. It wasn't just a lecture. We were encouraged to write as well. And as teachers we were all encouraged to come up with our own lesson plans and share them so that we could learn from each other. And then having you come in with our kids and model what a good lesson looked like, and model a great writing experience was powerful for me to see. And watching other teachers do the same thing. Writing didn't seem so scary anymore. It seemed like a natural teaching opportunity."

When asked about how much training that she receives in writing each year, Camryn says that she only receives writing training for about one to two hours each school year. She points out that other training has taken on a new appearance for her. She says, "But because it's hard for me now to see writing as a separate entity, I mean, like when I'm getting staff development in using graphic organizers, or collaborative groups, my brain is incorporating it into how it can be used for writing. But as far as separate writing staff development goes, I think I've received very little. With the exception of being there at the school that year." Of some of the activities she has participated in, Camryn indicates that she needs to view it as being purposeful to what she is doing.

When talking with colleagues about writing, Camryn says, "I just try and tell them what I've learned out of the whole thing (the writing activities at Croatan Forest). Writing isn't taught separately, it should be incorporated throughout, that it's a daily collaborative thing." Camryn explains how her current grade level team in her new school views writing. She says, "I'm lucky to be on a team of six other teachers with me that actually feel the same

thing, and writing is a daily activity that happens in all of our classrooms. We provide feedback and give others ideas on how we can connect writing into our daily subject areas. When I was teaching fourth grade, I collaborated with Hailey and the other teachers. They were the ones who helped me get through. They were supportive through the whole experience. The third grade teachers I also had to work with were not as supportive.”

When asked about what she feels the administration’s role is in creating and supporting writing teachers, Camryn says, “I think you set a wonderful example in the whole writing process because you got your hands dirty in it. You were in our classrooms helping us. You were modeling for us. I think that a good curriculum leader knows the process inside and out and knows the assessment piece of it--what the assessment tools look like. He or she should be able to think outside of the box a little bit and be able to figure out what’s not going right and take the first step to figure out what we are going to do about it.”

Reflections on the Fourth Grade Teachers’ Interview Responses

Of the five teachers who taught fourth grade during the period from 2001-2006, Hailey was the only teacher to be in a fourth-grade classroom for the entire time. The others spent only one to three years in the fourth grade. Hailey was the key teacher during this time and often did much of the classroom-connected work to assimilate new personnel into the plan that the fourth grade used to prepare students for the writing assessment. Also, it is evident that of the five teachers, two, Hailey and Camryn, were present during the school’s summer workshop when the school-wide plan was created. The other three teachers, while not there, were made aware of the plan and were trained through interaction with the other teachers in the grade level. All mentioned the dialogue they shared with their colleagues and

the collaborative work they did when scoring student papers and conferencing.

As the administrator who worked most closely with this group over the past six years, I would have to point out that the training aspect of the grade level's work became less formal in that the teachers took over this part of the process. Through their sharing and discussing issues as they pertained to writing instruction, the teachers in this grade level took ownership of their improvement as writing teachers and worked to raise the level of competence within the grade level in order to deal effectively with teaching writing to prepare the students for the state assessments. This could possibly be due to the impact of the assessments on the school's performance composite and because they feel a need to maintain a team attitude about how they want to perform and they work to insure that all of the teachers in the grade level are competent.

All of the teachers in the interviews indicated that administrative support is important to their success in the writing classroom, and four of the teachers pointed to the administration taking an active role in helping them teach writing whether it is through teaching lessons or conferencing with students. Marvin, the only male to be interviewed, pointed to a support role which primarily dealt with providing resources making sure that the grades below the fourth grade were teaching the aspects of writing as the school plan indicated. This feeling, perhaps, stems from the idea that the school administrator is a manager as opposed to an instructional leader.

Evaluation of the Fourth Grade Teachers' Skills as Teachers of Writing

After exploring the interview responses of the fourth-grade teachers in this study, I began to examine their skill as writing teachers. Because the local school district uses a

performance rubric based on the Baldrige Continuous Improvement model which does not include teacher observations used with the traditional teacher observation instruments, I opted for an alternative instrument to assess the ability of the teachers to teach effective writing. Using the rubric created by Pritchard, O’Berry, and Butler (2002), I evaluated the skills each teacher displayed in the written statements about how they taught writing to their students. These statements also served as the teacher responses to question number four in the Interview Guide for Teachers in the Study (See Appendix A). The rubric is a holistic rubric which assigns a rating of zero to three to the individual teacher responses.

The criteria are:

0 = way off base; failure to respond at all; may mention practices, but not writing processes per se; cannot really decipher the practices that the teacher uses.

1 = weak responses, showing little understanding of the writing process; may mention only one stage of the process or merely list stages.

2 = satisfactory understanding; at least three stages or processes mentioned; some stages described.

3 = strong understanding, including all stages of the writing process. (p. 24)

I began by examining Marvin’s written response. Marvin indicates that he does a great deal of modeling what good writing is to his students. He gives students examples of good text and then discusses with them how to plan or brainstorm a narrative story. He then helps students plan their own narratives. These plans are then developed, or drafted, into stories by the students after they have discussed beginnings, middles, and endings. Marvin’s written responses indicate that he has a fairly good idea of what happens as students work through a

writing experience; however, there is no mention of the revision part of the process although it could be implied. Also, there is an implication of sharing, or publication, but that is never stipulated. Marvin rated a 2 on the scale indicating that he has a satisfactory understanding of how the stages of writing are to be carried out by students but does not mention all of the steps of the process.

Trish's written response begins with a statement of using the composing process after the introduction of a particular skill. Trish also indicates that she models for her students the components that they are working on. Trish points to the practice, or drafting stage, in which the students write their drafts. Trish specifically mentions conferencing with students when she provides feedback to assist them in the revision process. Trish also makes it obvious that the process must end with the sharing, or publication, of the students' work. Based upon these parts of her statement, it is evident that Trish has a strong understanding of how writing should be taught and understood by the classroom teacher, so her rating is a 3.

Hailey's statement about her teaching writing is specifically centered around getting students to write solid beginnings to narratives. She uses children's books to spark students' interest in how good stories begin. She indicates that her students keep portfolios and that they choose drafts in the portfolio to practice improving their beginnings and then revising them. This implies that students have worked through the brainstorming and initial drafting phase before moving on to the revision of their introductions. When the students have completed this part of the activity, they share their beginnings with their classmates. Hailey's lesson works through the entire process; however, all parts are not specifically stated. Hailey's statement was rated a 3 according to the rubric.

Katie indicates that she works through all of the writing stages when teaching a writing lesson to her students. She begins her statement by discussing with her students about what makes a good piece of writing. She discusses brainstorming and leads her students through this part of the process before they attempt it on their own. She then takes students through drafting their narratives before they begin to draft on their own. She then points out that her students peer edit each other's work and then move to the revision process. Katie's statement indicates that she follows the steps for composing text; but she does not clearly indicate the sharing or publishing aspect of writing. She rated a 2 based on the rubric.

Camryn points out that she begins with modeling for her students. She implies that she works through the brainstorming and drafting parts of the process, but never specifically states it. She also points out the conferencing aspect of the revision process when she sits down with her students to give feedback on their writing. It is obvious that she is aware of the process and its various stages; however, there is more implied from her statement than clearly stated. Based upon her statement, Camryn rates a 2 on the rubric indicating that she is competent of the stages in writing.

The five fourth-grade teachers demonstrate, based on their written responses, an awareness of the steps that a piece of text must go through from the conceptualizing of a narrative to the final draft. While there are steps not mentioned in some of their responses, it can be implied that they do follow the composition process with their students for the most part. The one issue that comes through in these statements is that all of them are geared in some part to assisting students in creating text as it is required of the students in preparing for

the state writing assessments. That in no way implies that this process cannot be adapted to other modes of writing that students may have to do in other disciplines. It merely points to a prevalent culture in this school setting that, like many others, is geared toward dealing with assessments as opposed to creating content-rich text for the purpose of providing ways to apply knowledge for understanding. This is not to say that this is not happening; it merely is a necessary evil that schools have to deal with in an educational climate driven by student performance on assessments.

Interviews with Teachers in Second- and Third grade

In order to get a clearer picture of how writing is being taught in other grade-level areas of the school building, I conducted another focus group interview with one of the second grade teachers and one of the third grade teachers. This focus group was run in the same manner as the focus group with the fourth grade teachers and was conducted with the help of the same outside facilitator. These teachers were chosen because I had not served as their administrative evaluator during my time as an administrator in the school. The facilitator also conducted the follow-up member check sessions. It must be mentioned that the reason for using only one teacher in each of these two grade levels is due largely to the fact that out of the participants in the study, both currently-employed and former employees, these were the only two teachers in the building aside from Marvin who were still working at the school and for whom I have not had to do performance observations/evaluations during the time at the school covered by the study.

The two teachers who participated, Katrina, a second grade teacher, and Debra, a third grade teacher, bring a different perspective to the study because they are tasked with

teaching writing; however, they are not in a grade level that is assessed. Because of this, they hold a very different view of how the school goes about working with teachers to insure that writing instruction is sound and relevant. Their responses serve to provide a clearer picture of writing instruction and the role of the administration in the school.

Katrina's Responses

Katrina is a teacher in her mid-fifties. She began her career as a teacher assistant before returning to college to earn a degree in elementary education in Minnesota when her husband, a retired Marine, was transferred there for recruiting duty. She has worked as a teacher for twenty years teaching second and third grade with the exception of one semester spent teaching fourth grade in Minnesota when she was student teaching; however, there was no writing assessment with which to contend.

When asked about her experiences as a writer, Katrina indicates that she has enjoyed writing. She says, "I like writing. I enjoy writing. I've been told I'm a good story teller so I enjoy writing stories, writing reports, and just enjoy it period. As a student, I did not dread writing assignments. But you know, I was a student some time ago. I'm fifty-five. So when I was in school, you didn't do much writing. You did a whole lot more like answering questions, or worksheets, that type of thing. You didn't do nearly the variety of writing that my students have to do now. But throughout my career I've always enjoyed writing."

When asked about the impact of writing assessments on her teaching, Katrina points out that the assessments have a definite effect on how she teaches. She says, "Well, it's made me feel like I need to be more formulaic because there is a certain way that the state wants...well maybe I shouldn't say the state. The state has their standards, and we have the

rubric, and we see what they want. The way our district has interpreted it is that there's a certain form, there's a certain formula--that if you apply this formula throughout the grades, you're going to come up with that product. We do a lot of writing, but we don't do a lot of narrative writing, and that's what the emphasis is on: narrative writing. It has to be that certain way, so as a teacher it's very stressful to me because it's made me feel like I'm not a good writing teacher."

When asked about how she incorporates writing into other areas of her curriculum, Katrina points to the use of writing to write reports and poetry as well as the daily message her class writes in their planners about a particular thing they have learned during the school day. She says that one of the great stumbling blocks to her teaching writing effectively is conferencing. She says, "Conferencing is the biggest headache for me because if I expect my students to write a piece then I feel like I need to conference with them one-on-one. I just cannot do it. With the fourth grade, one of the things that turned fourth grade around is having all this help and conferencing because if you really want to improve writers, you need that one-on-one conferencing. One teacher cannot make it happen. Also, we're getting less and less help." This last statement refers to the reduction in time for a provided teacher assistant due to staffing needs in kindergarten and first grade in the school building. Katrina has the use of a teacher assistant for about an hour and a half each day. Katrina also refers to the use of prompts provided in the students' basal readers and to the writing they do in science as other ways that she incorporates writing into her instruction.

When asked about what formal writing assessments tell her about her students' writing ability, Katrina points to the artificiality of the whole exercise. She says, "As far as

my students go, we've had one structured prompt this year. Our prompt was, 'Tell about the first time that you did something' and we weren't allowed to talk with them at all, and then said 'Now write.' And my students just didn't do well with the prompt because that's not the way we work. I mean usually when we write we brainstorm as a class, and we talk about the words you might use; and ideas you might use; and then they write. So it's [the on-demand writing] very artificial."

Of the state writing assessments, Katrina indicates the lack of a frame of reference for students to approach a prompt. She says, "I feel like it's really difficult to come up with a prompt that students throughout the state have a frame of reference for, and have the experiences to write a good paper on. I think a portfolio would be a much more appropriate measure of a student's writing ability. Take samples of the work they've produced throughout the year and have that rather than one prompt. I just feel like it's too restrictive. If the goal is to produce students who write, you don't know what kind of writing they're going to have to do in their life. The chances are very good that no one in their working life will ask them to sit down and write a personal narrative about fifteen minutes of an event in their day."

When Katrina discusses her effectiveness as a writing teacher, she is unsure as to whether or not she has improved her skills in the classroom. She says, "I think about it more and I try to meet the standard. I don't know if I am any more effective. If you compared the performance of my students in writing before I started doing all the things that I'm doing and my students now I don't know if there'd be that much difference because I think a lot of writing ability is innate. It's like athletic ability. It's a form of intelligence, and if a child

doesn't have it it's very difficult to teach it to them. But as far as taking a child who's not a writer and turning them into a writer, I don't know how to do that. So, am I effective? I don't know. I see growth in my students' writing from the beginning of the year until the end of the year."

Katrina refers to the use of one program that the school has used in the past to discuss how she tries to increase her effectiveness as a writing teacher. She says, "We did a program called *Write from the Beginning*. It's highly formulaic. Now, one of the things I do with my second graders is what I call 'reverse engineering'. It's when I take a short piece and I pick something that's of a length that they could write like a four or five paragraph story or whatever. And we'll take it apart and I use the *Write from the Beginning* flow map to do that." Katrina goes on to explain how the students look for main events and details during the exercise to reinforce the idea for the narrative, but still claims that she has difficulty teaching the narrative because she is unsure of it herself.

Katrina's discussion of in-service training points to a need for relevant grade-level training to deal with second grade. She points to training that was done at the district level by saying, "We had the writing diamond lady (a reference to district-level training in a program called *Empowering Writers*). This was after that (referring to the school's staff summer writing workshop). We did have people come to us from DPI, a scorer who came and presented a workshop to us and showed us sample writing and she said, 'This is a level three. And this isn't a level three. And I don't know where you get them from here to there! I don't know how you do it. Here it is you need to do it!' I know the upper grades have had writing training this year. We've probably had a week, give or take not counting the

informal things we do, like as a grade level and doing the school-wide prompt and then we scored it together and got input from the fourth grade teachers about how they thought these pieces looked knowing what they know. Also we met as a school and determined what we think our students should be doing in writing at different grade levels, all through the grades. And that's been helpful, but with that we were thinking of writing in the broad sense--we weren't just thinking about the narrative. We included all the genres and things like that when we came up with those characteristics that we wanted our students to have."

As for collegial discussion about how writing is taught, Katrina says that at her grade level it is haphazard. She says, "At second grade level we don't really talk that much about the writing process as a grade level. We'll share pieces that students have written. We'll cry on each other's shoulders about how we're just not getting them to do it like we want to, but as far as regular dialogue or regular sharing, we don't do that."

As for administrative support from the school's principal, Katrina says, "In an ideal world, he would give us time and help so that we can do the conferencing and the things that we need to do. But I know that our principal gives us as much support as he can. I think it's really important to him. And he tries to get us the help that we need, but the demands are too high. And I don't know how he, or if we had a woman administrator, how she could do the job. If you want to do the writing pieces, do a prompt a week and conference with your students." Katrina also makes reference to the added requirements placed on the teachers by No Child Left Behind as well as the mandatory half hour of physical activity to show how the classroom teachers' time to handle instruction has been reduced.

Katrina ended her comments by saying, "I don't see things improving. I think what

they are doing is driving people out of the profession because all of this expectation is taking the joy out of teaching. It's just like with writing. It's taking the joy out of writing because you must do this type of writing. He (the principal) focuses on fourth grade and I think that's where that's appropriate because they're the ones that are in the crosshairs. We have a lot of volunteers who come in and conference with them each week and we have a Principal's Prompt once a week. He does everything to make the experience as positive as he can. But it's focused on fourth grade, and that's where the focus needs to be."

Katrina's comments point to a desire to help her students become good writers; however, she still feels that her skill as a writing teacher is inadequate to meet her students' needs as writers. Katrina does mention the school-wide writing plan and how her grade level fits into the overall school expectations. She also mentions the level of involvement of the school's administration in promoting solid writing performance on assessments, but is quick to point out that her writing instruction would be stronger with the commitment of volunteers in the same manner as is done with the fourth-grade teachers in the school building. As for collegial dialogue, Katrina points out that this is lacking at her grade level.

Debra's Responses

Debra, the final teacher in this focus group, teaches third grade. She has taught third grade for the past ten years with the exception of one year spent as a teacher in second grade. She taught fourth grade for one semester while student teaching, but has never taught in that grade as a regular classroom teacher.

Debra indicates that she enjoys writing and that her love for writing started when she returned to school at age forty to earn a degree in elementary education. She says, "My love

of writing started when I went back to college at 40 and had to write all these papers and stuff. My husband, who is very articulate with his writing taught me how to write. And I enjoyed it--I love writing, stories and stuff. It's taken me 16 years to perfect my writing and now I think I do a pretty good job. It's kind of my forte right now. It's my thing that I do."

When Debra was asked about the impact of state writing assessments on her as a teacher, Debra comments, "As a teacher the impact is 'where do I fit it into my schedule every day?' I don't think that it's fair to watch these kids struggle to try and write a certain style when in real world writing you are allowed two or three opportunities to fix your draft. And we expect them to do it in one 45 minute period. It's very difficult as a teacher to teach a child to do that. Writing assessments really don't regulate my teaching. I mean, we write every day anyway because we journal at the end of the day--a reflection journal. So it really doesn't affect it very much." Debra indicates that she uses writing in relation to her reading instruction through the use of the prompts assigned to the basal reader the grade level uses. She also indicates that writing is used in science. Debra also mentions that her students wrote a book and regularly write poetry as a part of class projects.

Debra is adamant about what she feels state writing assessments show about students' writing ability. She says, "Nothing. Prime example--my daughter is an English major. She is doing her student teaching and she flunked the writing test in tenth grade. And she just writes eloquently. The only reason she does that is because she decided to start writing on her own. It had nothing to do with the state. The state takes all of their creativity away because they have to write this, this, and this. And writing being so subjective, who's to say that's a bad paper? But the garbage coming out of these writing prompts doesn't mean a

thing--doesn't mean a thing. The things that are important in the real world are punctuation, capitalization, and mechanics of a piece. And we don't even take any of that into consideration."

When talking about her increased effectiveness as a writing teacher, Debra responds based on her own recent experience. She says, "For me, having just finished national boards I think that my effectiveness comes from teachable moments really. You can't just sit there-- I don't give my kids a prompt to write to. They have free journal writing. They can choose something to write about. We have a little bucket full of prompts that they can draw out. Effectiveness is probably lacking because of help. The best way to work with a child on their writing is to conference. Well, how can you conference with the child one-on-one when you don't have the time to do it? They say it can be done. Well, show me. Show me how you do it. Only four of my students passed the assessment we took earlier in the year. So, you know they say 'how many are going to pass this time?' I'd say four because we don't have the time to spend on writing. Yes, writing is taken in the fourth grade and it's scored by the state and it does affect your growth. But when the emphasis is on reading and math (referring to the EOG tests for third grade) you better teach reading and math. Writing ends up on the side sometimes."

When asked about the in-service training she receives every year in writing, Debra says that there about a week's worth of in-service in the school or district dealing with writing training. She points to school staff development by indicating what she has participated in over the past few years. She says, "We had that thing here, it was from ECU. I don't even remember what it was--we had that. We had *Write from the Beginning*. I must

have missed it. The last thing I remember the district doing was the recent writing training when they taught us how to write to the fourth grade rubric. It's all formula writing. I don't know, the training, writers are made after years and years and years of experience. I mean you've got to write all the time and not do these formulas that they give us."

Debra goes on to discuss activities that the third grade participated in during the past years. She says, "We had a person who used to be a fourth grade teacher, and she came into my room and another teacher's room once a week and worked with our students, and that's the year we did the best. She came in and she would work with our group and have fun things for them to do that involved writing."

Debra makes a personal observation about the school activities and the staff development planned at the school level. She says, "I don't know whether they are effective. It's nice to get information and compare yourself and what you're doing in the classroom. I don't think it's all that productive because they're teaching, or telling us something that really needs to be done in isolation when in fact we cannot do it in isolation." Debra goes on to discuss the dialogue that she has with her grade-level colleagues. She says, "Oh, we complain a lot. I mean we all get together as a group and mention how messed up the system is as far as the writing goes. And I hear that the fourth grade teachers have testing shoved down their throats and that they're not happy with it. Most of the dialogue is not positive."

When asked about what the school's administration's role is in promoting the school writing program, Debra says, "Our principal is helping out as much as he can. It's not about him, it's about the county. He does the best for us he can and tries to provide us with solutions to some of the problems. He does help out. He has a writing person and he

counsels with him. I'm sure ours is doing much more than other schools, but they're still making him, and us, jump through hoops.”

Debra's responses display a certain frustration with the level of expectation placed on classroom teachers to prepare students for assessments in the core areas. One thing that is obvious is that some areas of the curriculum in this classroom are given precedence over others; especially if there is not a formal state assessment to measure student performance. This is the case with writing in this classroom. Another point of importance is the lack of dialogue about writing at the third-grade level among the teachers.

An Evaluation of Katrina's and Debra's Written Statements

In response to question number four in the teachers' interview guide, the participating second and third grade teacher were asked to prepare a written response discussing how they create an effective writing lesson in the same manner as the participating fourth-grade teachers. As with the fourth-grade teachers' responses, the responses were evaluated by me using the same rubric. Katrina provided a written response; however, Debra did not.

When looking at Katrina's writing lesson, she uses a basic skeleton story to concentrate on teaching her students to focus their stories and elaborate them. She then brainstorms with her students about details and events that happen in the story. This is followed by questions asked to students in order to get them to think about the story. The following day, the students then begin a draft on a prompt that is drawn from the main idea of the skeleton story.

Using the rubric to evaluate the lesson, it is evident that although Katrina does brainstorm with her students, there is no mention of the editing, revision, or publishing

processes. Because of this, the lesson was rated a level of 1 based on the rubric. Katrina has an idea about how writing should be taught, but she is incomplete in the stages that are listed and never really explains how these stages are developed by the individual writer or the class as a whole.

Debra, on the other hand, did not provide a written response, so there is no data to indicate how she teaches writing to her students. While this is merely a point of conjecture, it is my contention that Debra did not provide a written response due to her own insecurity about what she knows about teaching writing. As her reflections gathered in the focus group interview indicate, Debra is quite outspoken about how she feels regarding writing assessments and the school's efforts to improve this part of the curriculum. One thing is for certain, Debra indicates on more than one occasion that she was absent from trainings held for the teachers in the school and furthermore, she is unable to name local school and district initiatives undertaken during the time period this study covers during the interview.

My Interview with the Principal of Croatan Forest School

I interviewed Phillip Smith (a pseudonym for the school's principal) one afternoon after the school day had ended. He has served as the principal of Croatan Forest School since it opened in 1991. Prior to that, Mr. Smith served for a number of years as principal of another school in the district. I began the interview with some trepidation as to what he would share due to my being a subordinate. Mr. Smith's responses indicate many issues that the school has been dealing with for some time.

I asked Mr. Smith how he supports writing in the school. He replied, "I think I (initially) supported the writing process from the standpoint that we needed help to begin

with and pursued that by visiting another school and took some teachers there with me. We brought back the idea of story surgery and conferencing. When we got that started, I basically turned it over to my assistant principal to do a lot of the writing because that's one of his strengths. I also tried to support the writing program any way I can by allowing release time for teachers if they needed that. I am also a part of the conferencing team and help in that respect as well."

When asked about in-service training, Mr. Smith points to the school's summer writing workshop. He says, "We were involved with getting that workshop here. Again, my assistant principal was very much involved with that happening. Basically, any trainings that the teachers need to go to, I provide them with substitutes and the release time that they need there as well." When asked why he chose these types of in-service training, he responds saying, "Well, we had to go in some direction other than where we were going because we were one of the lowest performing schools in writing in our school system. We really didn't have much of a plan. This seemed to be a plan that hopefully would take us up to the level where our students were performing in reading and math." Mr. Smith mentions the school district's use of the PDSA plan to promote performance improvement for the students. He says, "Again, you have to plan and then you have to go with whatever you think is going to get you there, and then study that. And then you look at it and see if it's actually getting you the results you'd like to have."

I asked Mr. Smith about the feedback he gets from teachers about the in-service training that takes place in the school. He referred back to the school's summer writing workshop saying, "Feedback that I heard from the teachers was that it was some of the best

training they had ever experienced. I think the proof is in the results. We have gone from being one of the lowest-performing schools in writing to being the top two or three in the last couple of years.”

When talking about future training for his faculty, Mr. Smith points to what teachers indicate as needed. He says, “If there were particular areas that we needed to work on, we would certainly address that. Again, my assistant principal (referring to me) has been very instrumental in going down and working with individual classes and individual students to help them in areas of need. We’ve also hired a retired fourth-grade teacher who is also assisting in some of the writing training going on in the building. In the past, I think a lot of our training has been about scoring. I think it’s really about the instructional piece. I think the approach that we’re taking is more about instruction.”

I followed this with a question about the impact of assessments on instruction. Mr. Smith replied, “I think it’s impacted this school in that writing has taken the forefront in our building as opposed to what it was at one time. We got, what I feel like, the whole school behind our efforts. The primary grades are now supporting what’s going to take place in the fourth grade. It isn’t just resting on the shoulders of the fourth grade.”

Because he has to observe teachers in classroom lessons, I asked Mr. Smith about what he looks for when observing a writing lesson. He states, “I think you’re looking to see if the kids are grasping the concept that the teacher is trying to deliver. Hopefully, the kids are enjoying what you’re doing because if you’re not enjoying something it becomes too much like a job and you can get burned out quickly I guess.” Mr. Smith says that now when interviewing teachers, writing skill is an area which is highly sought after. He says, “That’s

one (how a teacher feels about teaching writing) of the questions we ask in interviews. You know how they feel about writing, what would be some of their approaches they would take to teaching writing. It's really become embedded in our conversations as we hire someone. We're looking for someone with a strong writing background because that's an area our students have a lot of difficulty with." It must be mentioned that there was less than nine percent teacher turnover until the end of 2005-2006 when one-third of the teachers left the school due to retirement or relocation.

I was curious about the concept of instructional leadership and asked Mr. Smith about this. He stated, "I see myself as providing teachers with whatever resources they need. If it's to send them to a writing training, if it's to get someone to come in. Again I think it's my job to make sure they have the tools to do their jobs." Mr. Smith followed up with some comments about how this role has changed over time. He says, "Over time, I have seen that role change from an autocratic style to one of collaborative leadership. With writing, it has been a change from conventions to actual writing because that (conventions) is the easiest thing to zero in on because that's the way we were taught. My way may not be the best way. I think I have to listen and give credit to those who come up with good ideas. It doesn't have to all come from me."

Mr. Smith says that teachers have certain expectations of principals as instructional leaders. He states, "They probably expect someone to be knowledgeable in curriculum. I think that has probably been a challenge for me as an administrator. Knowing my background has not been in the core subject areas. I have to rely on my experts in the school

to be the leaders. I think this strengthens the whole building really--it validates them as teachers.”

As I closed the interview, I asked Mr. Smith about the importance of test scores to him personally. He said, “I think it’s very important because I think our school should be a school of excellence and to do that you’ve got to have at least 90% of your kids at or above grade level and that includes reading, writing, and math. I think we owe that to our students.” When asked if there was too much emphasis on test scores, Mr. Smith replied, “It’s a different day and time. Now you’re tied to incentives to that as far as pay goes (referring to ABC bonuses paid to teachers in schools meeting performance goals each year). But with writing, I would prefer to see some kind of portfolio process where you show improvement that way as opposed to being based on what a student may do on a particular day because we all have bad days.”

Following the interview and in reviewing the responses, one thing was evident, this principal had some grasp of the need to produce solid writing with the students in the school; however, in the realm of instructional leadership, Mr. Smith struggled with this aspect of the principalship and often delegated those aspects of the school writing program to one of the key teachers in the building or to me as the assistant principal. This indicates that this principal who, incidentally, is in the final years of his career, still operates on a management approach to operate the building. Granted, there needs to be a balance between management and leadership; however, the needs of schools in the era of high-stakes testing dictate that the principal must have a strong knowledge of instructional processes and curriculum.

As the researcher, I found myself somewhat disappointed that there had been a great amount of effort expended to create a school culture which supported writing, but the school's leader had not grasped the main concept of being an instructional leader in the building. True, Mr. Smith did admit that he was not as well-versed in curriculum matters as others in his school; however, this could, and should, have been remedied through his active participation in the training aspect of the school's writing program. What this principal, like many others, failed to do was take his position at the front and lead by example as opposed to relying on others to take the lead or assuming that because they provide resources they are doing all they can to promote the school culture necessary to promote sustained, long-term instructional change.

Summary

Chapter four provided a summary of Croatan Forest School's performance data from 2001-2006. In this summary, issues pertaining to school-wide concerns with student performance on the state writing assessments for fourth grade were explored and the school's efforts to address those needs were addressed. Also, initiatives promoted by the district and the local school were listed, and relevant commentary on each of these initiatives was provided.

The interviews of the five former fourth-grade teachers were used to give a clearer picture of the steps they took to improve student performance were presented giving each teacher participating in the study individual attention. This was done to determine if there were common features in the responses. Also, each fourth-grade teacher's written response to how they create lessons and teach writing was included and evaluated to ascertain the

effectiveness of the individual teachers in that grade level. This data was reported in the text of chapter four to indicate how these teachers had incorporated what they had learned about writing into lesson plan creation and instruction.

The interviews of the second-grade and third-grade teachers in the study were presented to give a picture of the effectiveness of the overall school-wide writing plan at Croatan Forest. Commonalities were explored and differences have been noted as they pertain to grade levels other than fourth grade. Finally, the written response of the participating second-grade teacher was evaluated using the same rubric that was used during the evaluation of the fourth-grade teachers' statements.

The interview with the school principal was conducted to ascertain how he supported the efforts in writing instruction at Croatan Forest School. A key part of this interview was to discuss the relevance of state writing assessments and assessments in general. Another aspect of this interview was to determine the principal's definition of instructional leadership. In addition, the principal's role as instructional leader in the school was explored. Chapter five will explore the findings of this study and provide recommendations for further improvement of the school's writing program and suggestions for instructional leadership as it pertains to writing instruction in this school and others.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

Summary of Findings

This study of writing instruction at Croatan Forest School and the role of the school's administration in supporting that initiative points to a number of issues affecting curriculum and instructional leadership in the school setting. When I began this study, I started with the idea that all of the grade-level areas were working collaboratively with the overall school writing plan to produce competent student writers capable of succeeding on the North Carolina Writing Assessment. As I took the interview data and began to disaggregate it, I realized that there were a host of issues regarding writing instruction in the school which would need to be addressed pedagogically in order promote student success and overall teacher confidence and competence as teachers of writing.

In studying the school data, it is clear that the catalyst prompting a change was the dramatic dip in fourth-grade writing scores in 2001. Had Croatan Forest School finished the year ranked in the middle of the elementary schools in the school district as opposed to finishing dead last in the school district, it is my contention that there would have been little change at the school to address writing instruction aside from district-initiated programs. This is evident from the information gathered from the fourth-grade teachers who participated in the study.

Another revelation from this study is that the school is still basing the relevance of improved writing instruction upon success on the state writing assessments. While test performance is the measure being used to determine the school's effectiveness in the eyes of the state and the local school district, other indicators such as improvement in student

mastery of certain skills on writing prompts administered over a period of time can show improvement for students, especially at the fourth-grade level. The mere fact that these teachers got together to discuss how students were performing and what was working in their respective classrooms shows that, at least in one grade level, collegial dialogue is taking place.

Based on the comments of the teachers from grades two and three participating in the study, there is still a great deal of confusion, from their points of view, about what good writing is and how to get students to understand and create content-rich text when they write. While this might not be typical of others in the school, determining that was beyond the scope of this study. Also, the lack of dialogue on a consistent basis allows for the continual repetition of practices which might not produce desired results. Sergiovani (1992) speaks to the importance of collegiality in the school setting. He writes:

Collegiality has benefits beyond improving the workplace and contributing to learning. Understood as a form of professional virtue, collegiality is another powerful substitute for leadership. The more this virtue becomes established in a school, the more natural connections among people become, and the more they become self-managed and self-led, so that direct leadership from the principal becomes less necessary....For example, teachers need sufficient time to meet. The school schedule must be arranged to encourage rather than impede opportunities for teachers to interact. The pace of teachers must be modified, to permit reflection. (pp. 86-87)

Another aspect leading to confusion that these teachers addressed is that an enormous amount of resources, meaning time to conference and dialogue along with instructional

support personnel, are allocated to the teachers in the fourth grade who are responsible for preparing students for the state writing assessments. This leads to a certain level of animosity on the part of the two teachers who were not fourth grade teachers, due to the fact that these teachers point to the need for time to teach writing in what they perceive as an already hectic school day with a variety of demands being placed upon them by the state, the school district's initiatives, and local school expectations. Further, both teachers from this group base their writing instruction upon programs which are no longer being used in the school or upon what they feel is good writing instead of approaching this from a common consensus of what good writing looks like. It might be safe to say that since there are only two participants here, theirs might not be completely representative of the perceptions of other teachers present in the building, or for that matter their own grade levels.

The interview with the school's principal provides a great deal of insight into how he perceives the school's efforts. Success to this principal is still determined by how well the school performs each school year on state assessments in reading, writing, and math. While this principal claims to be the one to initially get the school working on this area of the curriculum by taking the fourth-grade teachers to other schools to observe writing programs, and through benchmarking with these schools, there is little else to indicate that he works in any other manner than that of a middle-level manager who directs resources to address needs based upon what the teachers say they need. The need to build capacity among the teachers in the building is not actively pursued here, but relegated to others instead of leading the process. Fullan (2003) indicates that building capacity is one of the school principal's primary responsibilities in the modern school. He writes:

First, informed professional judgment is collective, not individualistic. It must be driven by best knowledge, which must be pursued continually through cultures of interaction inside and outside of the school. It must have a solid moral purpose as a foundation....It takes capacity to build capacity, so providing professional autonomy to groups of teachers who don't have the commitment and wherewithal to conduct their work with disciplined knowledge inquiry and moral purpose will do no more than squander resources. (p. 7)

In dealing with the issue of improving writing at this school, it is paramount that the school's principal provide necessary resources and serve as the instructional leader providing insight and guidance through personal study and active involvement on a regular basis.

Simply managing resources, while important, will not create a community of learners who improve the overall standards of learning in schools. It is interesting to note that the lone male participant (Marvin) in this study points to the management aspect of the principal's job as the primary need of teachers when asked about instructional support from the principal. Fullan (2003) says that the practicing school principal must be a continuous learner and encourage others in the school setting to be continuous learners as well. He writes:

Because all organizations need to be learning organizations to be effective, the principal has to be the lead learner. If principals do not go out of their way to learn more (inside and outside of school), regardless of what the system is doing they cannot become a pressure point for positive change. (p. 20)

Teachers follow the lead of the school's principal and will rise, or fall, to the level of expectation of that individual.

As a subordinate to the principal at Croatan Forest, I worked to perform tasks from the instructional side of this school's efforts in order to complement his management style and provide support for the teachers in the classroom. One of the primary areas on which I concentrated was that of providing instructional support to the fourth-grade teachers. I did this through modeling lessons, conducting writing workshops with students, and providing relevant staff development opportunities for the entire staff designed to address the writing needs of the school. This was done in conjunction with the school-wide writing plan to reinforce the need to follow the plan. It is important to note that support here did not include dictating how writing lessons were taught. Instead, I focused on the grade-level objectives as presented in the school's writing plan so that teachers felt safe creating their own classroom instructional plans within the larger framework.

One of the key areas that I observed is that, particularly at grades two and three, there was little evidence that the teachers were following the school-wide plan due to issues with scheduling individual classroom instruction and teachers' confusion about their roles in enacting the overall school plan. In this era of high-stakes assessments, having school plans and particular expectations for each grade level is essential to school, and classroom, success. In discussing school-wide plans, McEwan (2003) says:

A coherent program is connected from the beginning (kindergarten) to the end (12th grade). In a coherent program, preparation for the third-grade assessment does not begin with a mad dash for the finish line at the beginning of the third grade, but at the

beginning of kindergarten. When coherence is present, teachers at every grade level know the expectations for students in both the preceding and succeeding school years. (p. 22)

In order to produce coherence, it is important for schools to spend time planning at the outset of any initiative in order to allow the personnel involved to work out the details as to how to proceed. Also, determining when to measure student performance, and how to do this, is important for the program to be effective. When this school created its school-wide writing plan, certain grade-level writing expectations were designed to scaffold upon previous years' skills to produce solid writing among the students. The fallacy with every school instructional plan, this one included, is that without constant monitoring and reporting of data to those tasked with instruction, the plan is only a document instead of a touchstone text which continually develops and changes to meet student and teacher needs.

Discussion of the Study's Findings

Because this study originally began with an examination of how the fourth-grade teachers at Croatan Forest School approached teaching writing for the purposes of improving state writing assessment scores, it is important to begin with this group of teachers. One positive aspect of how these individuals worked to improve student test performance is that this group of teachers created a network within the grade level to have dialogue about how they were teaching writing. This network has evolved over the years covered by this study and its effectiveness is apparent in improved school performance on assessments. The interesting part of what took place in this grade level is that there was a solid collegiality which continued to grow even though the personnel in the grade level

changed. In fact, the varying levels of experience that each teacher brought to the grade-level team helped to foster the collegiality between these educators because they wanted each other to be successful as writing teachers. These teachers assumed the responsibility of their own training and development by planning for time to get together and discuss student writing, share lesson plans, and discuss best practices to address student needs. Further, I participated as these teachers regularly reflected through their dialogue with each other on their own personal practices, always searching for better ways to reach their students. It must be mentioned that this practice continued through a number of changes in personnel in the grade level which indicates a continual improvement process.

Another aspect this study demonstrates is that the students were aware of individual performance expectations. This was done accomplished through the regular collection of performance data and regular conferencing with students about them. As a result, a feeling of community was created in these classrooms which translated into stronger writing performance, at least as far as the state assessment was concerned.

Jane Pollock (2007) discusses her four areas which must be addressed by teachers in order to improve overall student learning. The 'Big Four' as she calls these areas are

1. *Use of a well-articulated curriculum.* Know and use clearly articulated learning targets-ones that are robust concepts, generalizations, or procedures rather than only statements of daily classroom objectives.
2. *Plan for delivery.* Plan and use instructional strategies that will help the learner remember content and apply information and skills rather than just do schoolwork.

3. *Vary assessment.* Use a range of assessment methods to clarify the learner's status relative to learning targets, and generate the information necessary to help the learner achieve these targets.
4. *Give criterion-based feedback.* Give methods of feedback to the learner based on targets, and refine record keeping and reporting accordingly. (p. 8)

Through the program designed to assess the students throughout the school year at this grade level, and the feedback each student receives on a regular basis, along with the instruction given in the classroom and individually, it is apparent that the teachers at this grade level are operating, for the most part, according to Pollock's four areas of instruction.

The interviews of the teachers at grade levels two and three indicate a lack of collaboration on writing instruction among personnel in both of these grade levels. Another revelation from this study concerning these grade levels is a high level of frustration concerning time and resources. While it is true that a great deal of emphasis is placed on providing the fourth-grade teachers with adequate material resources to address writing needs because of assessment requirements, these teachers feel that there is little or no time at their respective grade levels to spend with their students working on writing, due to what they perceive as higher expectations for reading and math performance at these particular grade levels.

These teachers do mention the school-wide writing plan and the various training opportunities in writing provided at the district and school levels; however, they have not made time for the dialogue that their counterparts in the fourth grade have. Given the time in grade-level meetings to address this area of the curriculum, these teachers could possibly

determine effective ways to include writing across all the disciplines they teach. Roland Barth (2007) discusses the importance of collegial dialogue within the school setting. Barth writes:

More often, we educators become one another's adversaries in a more subtle way-by *withholding*. School people carry around extraordinary insights about their practice-about discipline, parental involvement, staff development, child development, leadership, and curriculum. I call these insights *craft knowledge*....these insights offer every bit as much value to improving schools as do elegant research studies and national reports. (p. 30)

Discussion among colleagues regarding writing for the purposes of providing stronger instruction in this school would pay huge dividends for these second- and third-grade teachers. This is evident in the lesson notes provided by Katrina in her interview. These notes indicate a confusion which possibly does not pertain to only this teacher's classroom. Lessons should have a regular application to student learning, but the data gathered from these teachers indicates that there is the real possibility that they do not view writing as a way to make meaning across the curriculum. Instead, they perceive writing is taught in a self-contained unit in the fourth-grade. What is also clear is that teaching writing for the creation of content-rich text, regardless of academic discipline, is secondary to teaching form, mechanics, and conventions of writing. Further, there appears to be a misunderstanding among these teachers about what students go through to create text. Pritchard and Honeycutt (2007) explain the following about the role of the writing teacher with students. They write:

Teachers must demystify the writing process for students by teaching them that, regardless of how skilled they become, all writers will perform just like professional writers: they will utilize a process, adapted to their needs, to develop their manuscripts; they will go through several stages of revision; they will seek the responses of others; they will edit for errors at the manuscript level; and they will eventually realize that writing is never perfect and always open to revision. (p.33)

The teachers interviewed at grades two and three could improve their own approach to teaching writing with the simple realization that this part of the curriculum is time-consuming and messy at best but crucial to helping students learn how to master other areas of the curriculum besides writing.

Potentially Complicating Issues

Some issues present themselves in this study and should be addressed at this point. Had this study been conducted in another school setting, the addition of more human subjects could have provided deeper insight into how teachers deal with writing instruction in their classrooms and how administrators support those efforts. Because Croatan Forest School is an elementary school with only 31 teachers on the faculty, it is difficult to locate subjects still teaching in the school whom the researcher did not evaluate during his tenure in the school. Also, the study could have been much stronger with representation of all grade levels in order to ascertain how well all grades followed the school's writing plan. It would be advantageous to find out how the kindergarten and first-grade teachers approach the school's plan and how closely they follow it. As the study was designed, teachers in grades two through five were interviewed (Marvin, who was a fourth grade teacher for one year during

the period of the study but now teaches fifth grade is the only teacher at that grade level whom the researcher has not done a performance evaluation). It is this researcher's contention that what happens with writing instruction at the school must take into account all grade levels- not just those represented in this study. This would certainly be the case if this study had been conducted in another school setting.

Another issue arising from this study pertains to the researcher's personal involvement in the school's efforts to improve writing instruction. This researcher had to reflect throughout the research process about whether his active involvement as a participant observer working with the students and teachers has hindered the school's improvement efforts. This causes the researcher to wonder if my involvement could lead the personnel in the school to rely more upon him instead of taking more personal initiative to address these issues in their own classrooms. Had this study been conducted in another school, the researcher might not have been able to gain access to as much information from the subjects in the study, or had the breadth of knowledge about how the school's writing program works in classrooms in the fourth grade. However, the researcher's personal knowledge of the data collected and the documents produced in the school setting could contribute a clearer picture of the efforts going on in the school to improve writing instruction.

Another issue to be addressed is the role of the school's principal. Information from the principal's interview suggests that the school's principal may not understand the school's writing plan nor how to improve student writing competence and, ultimately, performance. Further, does the principal know where to look for help if he had to locate that instructional assistance? Finally, how much of the principal's role in this school is one of instructional

leadership and how much of it is management? From the data collected, it is quite evident that this principal is involved in the process; however, by his own admission, he states that he does not possess the breadth of knowledge necessary to continue to develop this program further on his own. He gives the impression that he wants to be perceived as an instructional leader, but he only talks about sending teachers to trainings and providing release time to score papers and dialogue; however, there appears to be little front-line leadership in the building of capacity and promoting competence of his teachers. While he participates in student conferencing as a member of the group of volunteers and teachers in this program, there is no indication that he could actively instruct students in writing or that he could, or would, lead teachers in writing staff development. He indicates that he delegates these tasks to subordinates. McGhee and Lew (2007) indicate that the principal in the school sets the tone for writing instruction through his or her active interest, or disinterest, in that area of the curriculum. They write:

Principals need to understand the significance or entrenched philosophical and instructional habits that constitute a culture in a school and his or her own power to change that culture: (b) craft leaders; Principals need to know the thinkers and practitioners in the field of literacy instruction who provide fresh ideas and useful models: (c) children's literature to create a community of readers, principals must actively read not only professional literature but also quality children's literature: (d) instructional models: As the primary filter for new programs, principals must be familiar with a wide range of current instructional models. (p. 361)

McGhee and Lew go on to state that aside from these areas, principals need to be able to locate assistance for the teachers in a school in terms of writing instruction and know how to help teachers make sense of curriculum so that they can effectively deliver that curriculum to their students.

The writing program at Croatan Forest School could improve with continued regular staff in-service training at all grade levels. The fourth-grade teachers mention the benefits of the school's staff development efforts to their work. They particularly mention the school's summer writing workshop held in 2003 and how it helped develop the school's writing plan; however, the representative teachers in the grades below them question the pertinence of the same staff development activities to their respective grade levels.

To simply say that improving pedagogy is key to improving student writing is limiting the view of what needs to be a continuous process. Writing training for teachers should be regular, continuous, encompassing not only how to teach the traits of writing to the student, but also how to create writers from the writing teachers. Simply teaching traits of writing associated with state and school district writing rubrics will not make stronger teachers of writing and students will suffer for it. Ruth Culham (2006) states

...there is little magic in writing. But writing is mostly difficult work. Why not tell students so? To ignore the writing process because it is messy, time-consuming, and thought-provoking in favor of canned, rehearsed, teacher- and student-proof lessons from a box labeled 'traits' is taking a big step backward in our practice of teaching writing. (p. 55)

Writing is clearly the one area of the curriculum which has no magic solution to doing it well. To the fourth-grade teachers at Croatan Forest School, they embraced the confusion associated with teaching writing, although there is a certain level of drill still present, and possibly needed, in the school's preparation for the writing assessments. The teachers at the two grade levels below the fourth grade indicate that they are looking for that magic formula and have not realized that writing for the sake of composing is the only way to help students construct meaning from what they are learning. More importantly, the teachers at all grade levels need to actively engage in a sustained dialogue, both in and across grade levels, to keep this issue at the forefront of the school's curriculum improvement process.

Implications for Research

As with all studies, while the subject might be explored and the results examined to draw conclusions, more issues leading to further research present themselves. One of the key areas for further research exposed through this study is how writing assessments affect the students who have to take these assessments. With 37 states administering writing assessments in one or more grade levels, there are ample students to participate in a study to evaluate the effects of these assessments on them. Another aspect of this would be how relevant are writing assessments to other learning across the academic disciplines in schools.

While this study has explored how teachers in one grade level in one school prepare students for state writing assessments, it could be the springboard to a larger study of teacher perceptions about writing assessments that could be undertaken at a school district level involving elementary, middle grades, and high school teachers. As this study demonstrates, a great deal of frustration is associated with preparing students for this assessment. Teacher

perceptions of writing assessments and how they deal with the pressure of preparing students could prove to be beneficial to veteran teachers or to student teachers in internships. A study such as this could shed light on a number of issues from how to locate resources to improve writing instruction, to how to create teacher learning communities to improve individual skills which can be translated to the students.

Another issue which provides implications for research comes from discerning what it means to be a curriculum leader. While this term is often bantered about in educational research articles and books, no clear definition exists about what is involved in turning school administrators into educational leaders with a strong background in instructional practice. Paths to becoming an educational leader are as varied as the experiences each school administrator might bring to the principalship.

In conjunction with this, and directly connected to this study, is the issue of how school administrators become instructional leaders in the era of high-stakes assessments. This is a key issue because, too often, school administrators' effectiveness is determined by the level of performance students achieve from assessments. The central question to be addressed would be How do these individuals become effective leaders and how has legislation such as No Child Left Behind shaped this role for school administrators? This legislation has been a force to contend with for school districts for the past five years and several positions have been filled with new administrators due to retirements of senior administrators in the same time. How these new school administrators have dealt with being educational leaders is an area of great interest for several individuals in the field.

Implications for Practice

This study carries with it a number of implications for improving practice not only in this school but also in others. It is imperative that the teachers at Croatan Forest School take more control of their own training. This means that these teachers need to work to create their own learning communities to address the effectiveness of the instruction, not only in writing, but also in other areas of the curriculum as well. Too often, it appeared that some of the teachers in this study were over-reliant upon the administration or the school district office to provide assistance in instructional needs, and it is imperative that local school administrators take the initiative to become curriculum leaders in their buildings by keeping current with the most recent and effective methods to deliver the curriculum. They must be the ones who take the lead promoting school curricular change, but conversely, they must provide curriculum expectations for the classroom teacher to meet, both in realm of curriculum development and in regard to performance expectations. It is not surprising that these same teachers were quick to fix the blame and then frustration in dealing with instruction on high-stakes testing.

In response to this, these teachers, in conjunction with their colleagues, should create learning communities to explore writing instruction through sharing reading and writing strategies for the purpose of understanding the curriculum and how to deliver instruction to their students. While it is important that the administration support initiatives aimed at improving instruction, often, the best improvement efforts come from the front-line practitioners in schools. When teachers in schools realize that they can have more impact on the quality of instruction by taking the initiative to build capacity, even in the era of high-

stakes assessments, they will be able to take more control of what they do in the classroom and improve the students' ability to learn and apply what they learn.

The participating teachers in this study further show the need to continue to develop and promote collegiality in the school setting. Graves (1994) addresses the isolation of teachers in the school setting. He writes:

Our profession is isolated. In recent years, the proliferation of new curriculum has resulted in less contact time with children and reduces access to our colleagues....Yet each day we work around people who possess valuable lore about teaching, whose experience and wisdom can contribute to our ongoing education. Their classrooms are some of the best contexts for a dialogue about teaching. (p. 362)

The teachers in this study could benefit greatly from the opportunity not only to discuss best practices and ideas, but to work through issues causing them difficulty in teaching writing.

Lessons Learned

In conducting this study, I learned several important lessons, not only about conducting research in school settings, but also about the varied approaches and opinions about teaching writing--even in one school. I spent a great deal of time working to ensure that I was giving a clear description of what was taking place in this school's writing instruction. This proved to be difficult at times due to my own involvement in the school setting as an administrator. I feel like I was able to maintain a certain level of objectivity even though I was an active part of this school's writing efforts.

In the process of conducting this study, I understand why it is important to conduct research at sites where one does not work because of the inherent difficulty associated with

such research decisions. Many times throughout the collection of data and the examination of documents, I found myself wondering whether or not I was presenting this information in its truest form due to my close connection to the school and the personnel present. I feel that the use of the outside facilitator to conduct the focus group interviews provided me with the distance to examine how these teachers felt about teaching writing and their concerns about student learning, testing, and administrative support. Further, when the final analysis of this study was done, I was working in a different school so that provided me the opportunity to examine the gathered data from a more objective stance.

As one of the administrators at Croatan Forest School, I found myself having to consciously make the effort to avoid letting my connection to the school shade what I discovered in the study. As a result of this, I had to be cognizant of the possibility that some of the information I found would be contrary to what I felt-or hoped. For example, while I spent a great deal of time over the past six years analyzing fourth-grade writing and assisting with instruction, the two grades below the fourth grade were largely on their own to implement the school's writing plan as they saw fit and there was a great deal of inconsistency as to how that plan was implemented, as well as a lack of data to indicate that certain areas of the writing curriculum were taught or that the students learned effective ways to create text. Further, I had to be especially careful not to interpret the data I collected in a manner which would jeopardize the stance I assumed as the researcher in this study.

Another important lesson that I learned in studying the writing program at Croatan Forest School was that the teachers, the fourth-grade participants included, are still equating writing instruction to modeling the state writing rubric's criteria, as opposed to allowing

students to create text first before addressing the conventions of writing as indicated in the state rubric. The one instructional change that this school could make is to spend time working with the teachers in the school helping them learn to use the criteria in the state rubric as a language to discuss writing as opposed to using this rubric as the primary instructional tool. Culham (2007) addresses this misuse of traits (rubrics) by teachers teaching writing. She writes:

Traits have no scope and no sequence that unfold from year to year. We use traits for assessment and as shared vocabulary to describe what good writing looks like at every age...The traits should unfold as lessons and activities embedded in the writing curriculum. If a teacher wants to help students learn how to use details to elaborate on an idea...he or she can begin by bringing in a poster-size print of a complex and interesting painting...Students begin by writing down the descriptions they see. (p. 53)

In this school, it is evident that all grade levels do not use the state rubric as a tool, but instead, teachers tend to over-rely on the rubric as the primary unit of instructional practice, or they teach writing in the same manner in which they were taught. Rubrics should not drive the practice of writing--creation of content-rich text must do this.

A third lesson that I learned from this study is that, often, some teachers in the school do not view themselves as writers. Effective writing teachers do not approach instruction from the point of being the ultimate classroom authority on student writing; they realize that they are still developing themselves as writers while teaching their children to write and utilize all areas of the school's curriculum to that end. Donald Graves (1983) writes:

Teachers don't have to be 'expert' writers to 'write' with the children. In fact, there may be an advantage in growing with them, learning together as both seek to find meaning in writing. However, it does take courage to show words to children who haven't seen an adult write before. (p. 43)

Graves gives the teacher of writing a blueprint showing how to create the classroom environment which promotes student writing. His criteria are as follows:

1. Children need to choose most of their own topics. But we need to show them all the places writing comes from, that it is often triggered by simple everyday events.
2. Children need regular response to their writing from both the teacher and other readers.
3. Children need to write a minimum of three days out of five. Four or five days are ideal.
4. Children need to publish, whether by sharing, collecting, or posting their work.
5. Children need to hear their teacher talk through what she is doing as she writes on the overhead or the chalkboard. In this way the children witness their teacher's thinking.
6. Children need to maintain collections of their work to establish a writing history. Collections show that history when they are used as a medium for evaluation. (p. xii-xiii)

While some teachers at Croatan Forest School have included these criteria to some extent in their instruction, it is safe to say that more teachers in the school do not consistently utilize this classroom plan to teach writing.

Finally, a concerted effort is needed to provide time to promote collegiality within the staff. At this point, a great deal of social collegiality exists in the school in this study; however, regular dialogue between grade levels is required if the school is to develop over time. Barth (2007) says of collegiality, “The nature of the relationships among adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else” (p. 28). Teachers at Croatan Forest participate in a goal-team approach expected by the school district to monitor school improvement, but those teams’ purpose is to use data to create school approaches to instructional issues. Time for discussion about curriculum issues without the constant monitoring of data and formal planning must be scheduled so that teachers can dialogue across grade levels.

Conclusion

This study has been a long journey to understanding what being an instructional leader means in a school setting. Teachers expect their administrators to be able to provide support for their efforts with their students every day. Often, administrators are at a loss when it comes to doing this. They buy programs, send teachers to workshops, or rely on the “teach to the test” approach to get through each school year. While this might provide schools with a high level of performance on state assessments, the question that each educator must ask is: Are these assessments really a solid measure of student learning? In the case of writing assessments at this school, one must ask if over-reliance on teaching one

mode of writing, in this case the narrative, prepares students to write in a wide variety of situations. In the ideal situation, students would learn and be able to explore their learning using a variety of modes of writing.

This study concentrated on how the school's administration worked to promote teacher competence and confidence when it comes to teaching writing in this elementary school. While it is clear that the teachers who teach fourth grade feel more confident teaching writing than their counterparts because of their increased competence in this area of the curriculum, there is still much to be done. Writing instruction must cross all grade levels and subject areas to become relevant to both the teacher and the student. Further, it is important to note that teachers will do what they feel comfortable doing. While all of the teachers in the study point to their love of writing when asked about their feelings, varying levels are apparent participation in the craft as well as in time spent writing with their students in class. The written statements provided by the participating teachers in the study indicate which teachers more readily incorporate writing into their regular instruction. These teachers indicate time for revision and sharing as a part of their lessons, whereas the teachers who do not include this time tend to have mechanical, lecture-driven lessons that do not flow from beginning to end. In short, if the teacher does not feel comfortable as a writer, then writing is not included as a regular part of the instructional day.

Fear of failure on assessments is often what drives schools in the era of high-stakes testing. In the case of this school, data indicate that the initial fear of not being proficient on writing assessments pushed these teachers to work on writing; however, in the process of improving writing scores, a real question arose as to whether or not students were writing

across the curriculum for the purpose of learning. Athletic coaches discuss this in terms of playing to win versus playing not to lose. To schools who deal with writing assessments each year, it appears that many have adopted the approach of playing not to lose.

Ralph Fletcher (2006) argues in his study of how boys learn to write content-rich text that it is important to let the student write without fear. He writes

Before we push or prod them to write this or that genre, using this topic sentence or that concluding paragraph, I say let's get out of the way and make space for boys [students] to write about their own subjects, including their own characters, plots, drawings, and jokes. This means creating classrooms that are less about us and more about them. (p. 166)

For students, the blank page can be a daunting obstacle and the fear of not "doing it right" keeps many students from being able create solid text. Teachers need to recognize the language their students use and allow them to use it. Allowing students to find their own voice provides that ownership needed to make writing a personal experience which will evolve into a community experience.

In North Carolina writing assessments are about students telling a good story and being able to order that story so that it paints a picture in words, as they are about evaluating technical aspects of writing. This is not to say that we accept good stories without correct use of mechanics; it indicates that need to teach students to be aware of what takes place around them and present those observations with a novelist's eye. In doing so, we can apply that skill to other areas of the curriculum thereby, making the curriculum relevant to them.

To the administrator tasked with maintaining, or improving, school performance, no single program or text is going to promote performance excellence in writing assessments. Improved writing performance comes through regular writing by both the teacher and the students and providing the venue for teachers to have the time and resources to do this. This means that time to plan collaboratively must be built into the instructional schedule for the school year. Also, it is paramount that the school administrator be an active part in the work as a member of the instructional team as opposed to simply being a manager at the school site. The mere act of making time to conference with a group of students or review student writing portfolios demonstrates a great deal to both the students and teachers in the school setting. Teachers and students are more likely to follow an instructional leader who is willing to demonstrate through his or her actions that there is a real vested interest in their performance.

The school administrator who wants his or her teachers to become competent as teachers of writing must do a number of things. This study indicates that they are modeling lessons, conferencing with students, and scoring student writing. Further, school administrators must schedule time for relevant instruction as well as collegial interaction to address curriculum issues and encourage teachers to take chances with the curriculum. Finally, administrators must keep the focus on the curriculum and students' learning; provide resources and mentors as needed; arrange and participate in relevant professional development while maintaining a positive attitude. These activities lead to development of capacity which in turn leads to more productive, relevant instruction.

Donald Graves (1994) gives good advice to administrators about the importance of staying informed about how students are meeting school writing expectations. He writes:

Principals need to stay informed about how the children in their school are progressing. When I was a principal, I carefully looked at test scores to see how we needed to adjust our curriculum and teaching. At that time I didn't realize how unreliable test data were in giving us a true learning profile. As an administrator, I was also unprepared to teach writing. There were few college courses in the teaching of writing, especially for administrators. I needed to see what progress looked like in the actual stuff of learning-children's papers...Every administrator needs to tell someone else about how the students in there are progressing, but good, solid learning stories from actual classrooms are hard to find. (p. 357)

The administrator who is an instructional leader concerned with students' growth as writers has to know how the students are developing from the time they enter the school until they leave. Further, administrators need to know how help or, at least, where to locate assistance for teachers and students to improve writing as an avenue for deeper learning and understanding. Simply monitoring test data and reporting it will not promote improvement. High visibility and an eagerness to help address instructional issues teachers and students are experiencing do more to improve student performance and teacher efficacy.

As for state writing assessments, it is important to note that writing assessments are only one measure of student performance taken over a 75 minute period on only one day of one year during a child's elementary, middle school, or high school years. It is foolish to say that assessing writing only three times over the course of thirteen years a child is in public

school indicates whether a student is proficient or not. So many variables are present in this scenario. Students who are strong writers sometimes freeze up on assessment day. Sometimes events at home or at school on the day of the assessment affect performance. Further, over-reliance on one mode of writing often leads to formula text which does not allow students to learn to use the craft in a manner which will allow them to make meaning of the curriculum. Finally, there is no time in assessment periods to compose in the same way that people compose who write on a regular basis. What drafting, editing, and revising done by students during these assessment periods is purely superficial and not of the nature, or quality, that those who are creating content-rich text ascribe to.

If states which assess students in writing as part of their testing programs really want to determine how much students are growing as writers, they will devise more authentic ways of measuring student performance. One way to do this would be to assess students more than one time over the course of the school year to determine growth. The portfolio approach, similar to the method used in Kentucky and Washington, allows for a more conclusive determination of whether or not the state curriculum expectations were being met. What is more, the student and the teacher would not feel that the assessments are an all-or-nothing proposition because there would be more than one opportunity to demonstrate growth and competency.

Writing is a key to improving student understanding of the curriculum and is a life skill that is necessary to survive in the information age. It also is an avenue to express oneself in a variety of modes. In writing about how actively writing helped him cope with

his recovery after a near-fatal car accident, Stephen King (2000) sums up the importance of writing to individuals. He writes:

Writing isn't about making money...In the end, it's about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life as well. It's about Getting up, getting well, and getting over. Getting happy, okay? Getting happy...Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So drink. Drink and be filled up. (p. 270)

When we allow our students the flexibility to create text, explore what they are learning, and extend that learning without fear of failure, then we will be able to promote student efficacy in this part of the curriculum. Furthermore, when we allow and expect our teachers to become continuous learners and take chances without fear of poor performance on assessments, then we will be able to address how to improve teacher competence and confidence in writing instruction.

Finally, when administrators take an active role in building capacity and promoting strong writing instruction in their individual schools, then writing will become an avenue to promote authentic learning taught by confident educators who are supported by knowledgeable curriculum leaders who have the best interest of the students at heart.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Guide for Participating Teachers in the Study

1. Tell me about your own experiences as a writer.
2. How long have you been a teacher, and how long have you taught fourth grade?
3. Do you have a degree or some specialized training in English composition?
4. Please explain how you teach writing to your students by describing what you consider to be an effective lesson.
5. Tell me about the impact of state writing assessments on you as a teacher.
 - a) What is the role these assessments play in your instruction?
 - b) How do you use writing in other areas of your grade level curriculum?
6. What does the state writing assessment tell you about your students' writing ability?
7. In what ways have you become more effective as a writing teacher?
8. In what types of in-service, or staff development, training in writing do you have you participated in? (district or school-level)
 - a) How many hours of writing training do you participate in each year?
 - b) Tell me what you think about these activities.
 - c) How do you dialogue about the writing process with your colleagues?
 - d) What types of instructional information do you share with each other?
9. What, in your opinion, is the principal's role in writing instruction?

Appendix B

Interview Questions to be asked of the Principal participating in the study.

1. Give me some insight into how you promote and support writing in this school?
2. What types of writing in-service training do you provide for teachers in your school building?
 - a) Why did you choose these activities for your teachers?
 - b) What feedback do you receive from teachers who participate in these activities? How is that feedback used to plan for future training?
 - c) What in-service writing activities work better with your teachers than others? Why do these seem to work better?
3. In what ways does the state writing assessment impact your school's writing instruction?
 - a) What do you look for when you are observing a writing lesson?
 - b) What do you look for when hiring teachers who will become part of your school's writing community?
4. In what ways do you provide instructional leadership to your teachers?
 - a) How has this role changed over the course of your career?
 - b) What do you think teachers expect of their principal in areas pertaining to curriculum issues?
5. How important is it to you personally to produce strong student writing scores? Please expand on why it is important to you.

Appendix C

**North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
SUBMISSION FOR NEW STUDIES**

Title of Project: Beyond the Test Scores: A Study of One School's Efforts to Promote Teacher Competence and Confidence in Fourth-grade Writing.

Principal Investigator Paul Barrow Gainey

Department
Educational
Leadership
& Policy
Studies

Source of Funding (**required** information): None

(if externally funded include sponsor name and university account number)

Campus Address (Box Number)

Email: paul.gainey@craven.k12.nc.us

Phone: 252-444-5192 work
252-444-5335 home

Fax: 252-444-5154

RANK: Faculty
 Student: Undergraduate; Masters; or PhD
 Other (specify): Ed.D. student

As the principal investigator, my signature testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.

Principal Investigator:

Paul Barrow Gainey

(typed/printed name)

(signature)

11/14/06

(date)

*As the faculty sponsor, my signature testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as the **principal investigator of record**.*

Faculty Sponsor:

Lance Fusarelli, Ph.D.

(typed/printed name)

(signature)

11/14/06

(date)

PLEASE COMPLETE IN DUPLICATE AND DELIVER, ALONG WITH A PROPOSAL NARRATIVE, TO:

Institutional Review Board, Box 7514, or email as an attachment to debra_paxton@ncsu.edu

For SPARCS office use only

Reviewer Decision (Expedited or Exempt Review)

Exempt Approved Approved pending modifications Table

Expedited Review Category: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8a 8b 8c 9

Reviewer Name

Signature

Date

**North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
GUIDELINES FOR A PROPOSAL NARRATIVE**

In your narrative, address each of the topics outlined below. Every application for IRB review must contain a proposal narrative, and failure to follow these directions will result in delays in reviewing/processing the protocol.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Briefly describe in lay language the purpose of the proposed research and why it is important.

This study is being conducted to explore how fourth-grade teachers in one elementary school setting have worked to improve their skills as teachers of writing in the school setting.

This study is important in that this study will examine how teachers deal with state writing assessments and how writing expectations are addressed in this particular school setting. Also, the role of the school administrator as a curriculum/instructional leader who is involved in instructional improvement in the school setting will be explored.

2. If student research, indicate whether for a course, thesis, dissertation, or independent research.

This study is a dissertation research project to satisfy the requirements for the Ed.D. Degree in Educational Administration and Supervision.

B. SUBJECT POPULATION

1. How many subjects will be involved in the research? 10-11 teachers and 1 school principal.
2. Describe how subjects will be recruited. Please provide the IRB with any recruitment materials that will be used.

Subjects for the study are a purposeful sample chosen because of their connection to efforts to improve student writing skills in the fourth grade at the school site being studied. This is a retrospective case project to examine program effectiveness and to shed light on the role of the school administrator as curriculum leader.

3. List specific eligibility requirements for subjects (or describe screening procedures), including those criteria that would exclude otherwise acceptable subjects.

All subjects in the study are certified school teachers who teach or have taught in this study's school setting. The school administrator is a certified administrator who has been in the school since 1991.

4. Explain any sampling procedure that might exclude specific populations.

N/A

5. Disclose any relationship between researcher and subjects - such as, teacher/student; employer/employee.

I am currently serving as a school administrator (assistant principal) at the school site.

6. Check any vulnerable populations included in study:

minors (under age 18) - if so, have you included a line on the consent form for the parent/guardian signature

fetuses

pregnant women

persons with mental, psychiatric or emotional disabilities

persons with physical disabilities

economically or educationally disadvantaged

prisoners

elderly

students from a class taught by principal investigator

other vulnerable population.

If any of the above are used, state the necessity for doing so. Please indicate the approximate age range of the minors to be involved.

C. PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

1. In lay language, describe completely all procedures to be followed during the course of the experimentation. Provide sufficient detail so that the Committee is able to assess potential risks to human subjects.

Participants will be interviewed in two focus groups and there will be member checks for each interview by the interviewees. Two of the participating teachers working in other states will be interviewed by the principal investigator. All participants, the school site, and school district will be assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity.

2. How much time will be required of each subject?

1 to 2 hours will be required of each subject in the study to interview, do member checks, and follow-up meetings. These will be done at times so as not to interfere with regular school-day activity.

D. POTENTIAL RISKS

1. State the potential risks (physical, psychological, financial, social, legal or other) connected with the proposed procedures and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

There are no known risks; however, a request to do research will be sent to the school district office outlining what I intend to do in the study. Also any data collected from student work or school-generated data will be named with a pseudonym to protect the school, teachers, administrators and the school district. Further, all participants will be asked to sign an Informed Consent Form before participating in the study.

2. Will there be a request for information which subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive (e.g. private behavior, economic status, sexual issues, religious beliefs, or other matters that if made public might impair their self-esteem or reputation or could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability)?

No.

- a. If yes, please describe and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

3. Could any of the study procedures produce stress or anxiety, or be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading? If yes, please describe why they are important and what arrangements have been made for handling an emotional reaction from the subject.

N/A

4. How will data be recorded and stored?

Data will be stored by the researcher in a secure location away from the school site, and all connection to individuals at the site or to the school district will be removed.

- a. How will identifiers be used in study notes and other materials?

Assigned numbers and pseudonyms will be used.

- b. How will reports will be written, in aggregate terms, or will individual responses be described?

Individual responses will be described; however, there will be no connection in name to the participants or to school-generated, or school district generated data.

5. If audio or videotaping is done how will the tapes be stored and how/when will the tapes be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Audiotapes will be made of the teacher focus groups and administrator interviews and transcribed by a transcription service. Any tapes made will be destroyed after the dissertation project has been completed.

6. Is there any deception of the human subjects involved in this study? If yes, please describe why it is necessary and describe the debriefing procedures that have been arranged.

No.

E. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

This does not include any form of compensation for participation.

1. What, if any, direct benefit is to be gained by the subject? If no direct benefit is expected, but indirect benefit may be expected (knowledge may be gained that could help others), please explain.

Subjects will benefit through reflection of instructional processes used in the fourth-grade writing classroom and the school setting . This is a voluntary endeavor and no subject is expected to participate if uncomfortable; however, there will be the opportunity for collegial interaction to discuss and explore curriculum issues.

F. COMPENSATION

1. Explain compensation provisions if the subject withdraws prior to completion of the study.
2. If class credit will be given, list the amount and alternative ways to earn the same amount of credit.

G. COLLABORATORS

1. If you anticipate that additional investigators (other than those named on **Cover Page**) may be involved in this research, list them here indicating their institution, department and phone number.
2. Will anyone besides the PI or the research team have access to the data (including completed surveys) from the moment they are collected until they are destroyed

No

H. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. If a questionnaire, survey or interview instrument is to be used, attach a copy to this proposal.
2. Attach a copy of the informed consent form to this proposal.
3. Please provide any additional materials that may aid the IRB in making its decision.

Appendix D

North Carolina State University is a land-grant university and a constituent institution of The University of North Carolina

**Office of Research
and Graduate Studies**

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

Sponsored Programs and
Regulatory Compliance
Campus Box 7514
1 Leazar Hall
Raleigh, NC 27695-7514

919.515.7200
919.515.7721 (fax)

*From: Debra A. Paxton, IRB Administrator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board*

Date: January 19, 2007

**Project Title: Beyond the Test Scores: A Case Study of One School's Efforts to Promote
Teacher Competence and Confidence in Fourth Grade Writing**

IRB#: 601-06-12

Dear Mr. Gainey;

The project listed above has been reviewed in accordance with expedited review procedures under Addendum 46 FR8392 of 45 CFR 46 and is approved for one year from its date of review. **This protocol expires on December 15, 2007, and will need continuing review before that date.**

NOTE:

1. This board complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU the Assurance Number is: M1263; the IRB Number is: 01XM.
2. The IRB must be notified of any changes that are made to this study.
3. Your approval for this study lasts for one year from the review date. If your study extends beyond that time, including data analysis, you must obtain continuing review from the IRB.

Please provide a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor. Thank you.

Sincerely,
Debra Paxton
NCSU IRB

Appendix E

Revised 11/2006

**North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board For The Use of Human Subjects in Research
GUIDELINES FOR PREPARATION OF INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

An **Informed Consent Statement** has two purposes: (1) to provide adequate information to potential research subjects to make an informed choice as to their participation in a study, and (2) to document their decision to participate. In order to make an informed choice, potential subjects must understand the study, how they are involved in the study, what sort of risks it poses to them and who they can contact if a problem arises (see informed consent checklist for a full listing of required elements of consent). Please note that **the language used to describe these factors must be understandable to all potential subjects, which typically means an eighth grade reading level**. The informed consent form is to be read and signed by each subject who participates in the study **before** they begin participation in the study. A duplicate copy is to be provided to each subject.

If subjects are **minors (i.e. any subject under the age of 18)** use the following guidelines for obtaining consent:

0 - 5 years old – requires signature of parent(s)/guardian/legal representative

6 - 10 years old - requires signature of parent(s)/guardian/legal representative and verbal assent from the minor. In this case a minor assent script should be prepared and submitted along with a parental consent form.

11 - 17 years old - requires signature of both minor and parent/guardian/legal representative

If the subject or legal representative is *unable to read and/or understand the written consent form*, it must be verbally presented in an understandable manner and witnessed (with signature of witness). If there is a good chance that your intended subjects will not be able to read and/or understand a written consent form, please contact the IRB office (919-515-4514) for further instructions.

For your convenience, attached find a sample consent form template that contains necessary information. In generating a form for a specific project, the principal investigator should complete the underlined areas of the form and replicate the bold areas.

North Carolina State University

INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study BEYOND THE TEST SCORES: A CASE STUDY OF ONE SCHOOL'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE TEACHER COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE IN FOURTH GRADE WRITING

Principal Investigator Paul Barrow Gainey
of Educational

Faculty Sponsor (if applicable) Dr. Lance Fusarelli, Dept.
Leadership and Policy

Studies

We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine how teachers in one elementary school addressed problems associated with teaching writing to fourth-grade students from 2001-2006 and how their efforts were supported by the school's administration.

INFORMATION

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to submit a brief explanation of how you plan and teach a writing lesson to your students. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group interview conducted by an outside facilitator to discuss your experiences with teaching writing as well as your expectations for instructional support from the school's administration. You will also be asked to attend a follow-up meeting to evaluate your personal responses based on the transcripts from the focus group session you participate in during the study. This member check is to be done to insure that you are comfortable with your comments from the sessions and to allow you to be sure that the material you share is the most accurate and reflects exactly what you wish to say.

RISKS

There are no perceived risks with your participation; however, the principal investigator is someone with whom you work or used to work. In order to protect you from coercion to participate while also allowing you to speak candidly in the focus group, all elements of the focus group will be run by an outside facilitator. You will be assigned a pseudonym and referred to by that pseudonym during the session, and in the transcripts, to protect your anonymity as well as that of the school, the school's administration, and the school district. Should you feel that your participation could prove detrimental to you, personally or professionally, you may withdraw at any time during the study.

BENEFITS

The primary benefit which will be gained through this study will be gaining information which will be helpful in assisting students and teachers with teaching writing in the fourth grade. Further, your participation will allow for open and frank discussion about writing instruction in this elementary school. Finally, this study will allow for collegial discussion which will shed light on the school writing program thus providing information for overall program improvement.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked file box in the primary researcher's residence until the study is complete and then will be destroyed. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Paul Barrow Gainey, at 112 South Forest Drive, Havelock, NC 28532, or [252-444-5335 home]. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. David Kaber, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-3086) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. Your participation is not a condition of your employment any information shared will not affect your employment. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed at your request.

CONSENT

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.”

Subject's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix F

**Croatan Forest School End-of-Grade Test Reading, Math, and Fourth-grade Writing
Data for 2001-2006**

Year	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math	4th Grade Reading	4th Grade Math	5th Grade Reading	5th Grade Math	North Carolina Writing Assessment	School Performance Designation
2001	86.9%	89.4%	86.1%	100%	94.8%	100%	29%	No state recognition
2002	Greater than 95%	86.6%	91.8%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	27%	North Carolina School of Excellence
2003	88.9%	90.7%	77.6%	94%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	27%	North Carolina School of Excellence
2004	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	53%	North Carolina Honor School of Excellence
2005	Greater than 95%	Greater than 95%	93.7%	Greater than 95%	94.8%	Greater than 95%	62.5%	North Carolina Honor School of Excellence
2006	91.9%	73.3%*	91.5%	71.8%*	Greater than 95%	78.8%*	55.1%	North Carolina School of Progress

- From 2002-2005, the North Carolina Writing Assessment was not included in the school's ABC performance composite.
- 2006 math assessment changes and score indicate the new scoring composite.

Appendix G

Performance Data from Fourth-grade Writing Prompts Administered
During 2004-2005 and 2005-2006

2004-2005 Prompts	Percentage of Students Writing Acceptable Narratives	2005-2006 Prompts	Percentage of Students Writing Acceptable Narratives
Diagnostic Prompt	12.5%	Diagnostic Prompt	27.04%
Fall Prompt #2	41.8%	Fall Prompt #2	15.71%
Fall Prompt #3	37.5%	Fall Prompt #3	34.78%
Fall Prompt #4	34%	Fall Prompt #4	52.24%
Fall Prompt #5	41.1%	Fall Prompt #5	48.53%
		*Fall Prompt #6	36.76%
Spring Prompt #1	47.35%	Spring Prompt #1	59.15%
Spring Prompt #2	26.6%	Spring Prompt #2	36.71%
Spring Prompt #3	60.0%	Spring Prompt #3	62.08%
Spring Prompt #4	50.0%	Spring Prompt #4	58.01%
Spring Prompt #5	62.7%	Spring Prompt #5	47.06%
		*Spring Prompt #6	75.36%
		*Spring Prompt #7	82.09%
North Carolina State Writing Assessment Score for 2004-2005	62.5%	North Carolina Writing Assessment Score for 2005-2006	55.1%

- The asterisk (*) in the 2005-2006 data indicates that these prompts were added due to the increase in the number of weeks in the school calendar from the beginning of the school year until the state writing assessment. The state-wide school calendar was changed in this year as a result of legislative action.
- Prompt data on the fall and spring narratives was generated using the rubric created by the fourth-grade teachers at the school site. This rubric is based on the criteria present in the North Carolina Writing Assessment rubric.