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# The Nature of Classroom Instruction and Physical Environments That Support Elementary Writing

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The Nature of Classroom Instruction and  
Physical Environments that Support  
Elementary Writing

By

Monica Thomas Billen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## **Abstract**

### The Nature of Classroom Instruction and Physical Environments that Support Elementary Writing

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Department of Teacher Education

Master of Arts

The purpose of this study was to document the nature of elementary writing instruction and classroom physical environments in eight Utah school districts. One hundred seventy-seven full-day observations were completed throughout a one-week period. Results indicated teachers included at least one of the following types of writing: writing workshop/writing process, non-process writing, and writing conventions and mechanics. Process writing time was dominated by instruction from the teacher. Other elements of the writing workshop were implemented, but in a fragmented way. Only five teachers combined aspects of the workshop simultaneously. Non-process writing activities were dominated by prompts and formulas that resulted in one-draft products created with limited teacher assistance and no expectation for revising, editing, or publishing. Conventions of writing were taught regularly, but always in isolation, rather than being integrated with other aspects of writing. Classroom physical environments were generally not literacy rich, showing more evidence of traditional resources instead of resources to support the writing process. Process-oriented teachers had richer environments than those focused on conventions. In fact, classroom environment could be better predicted by the kind of writing the teachers and students did rather than the amount of time spent writing.

Keywords: writing instruction, physical environment, process writing

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

As the world becomes more complex, concern for student achievement also increases. To increase student achievement, many look to the teacher as the most important factor (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Effective teachers can create safe learning environments in which students can become critical thinkers (Wong & Wong, 2001).

In order to increase children's critical thinking, young people must become proficient in their ability to think clearly and express their thinking in writing. Writing has been called "one of humankind's most powerful tools" (MacArthur, Graham, & Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 1). Writing is powerful for many reasons. Writing is a medium in which to convey one's own knowledge, as well as learn from another's knowledge. Written information allows texts to be used in education, written laws to create societal order, genealogy and history of events to be kept, and everyday directions such as cooking a dinner to be used (MacArthur et al., 2006).

Writing allows individuals to connect and communicate with others. Whether sending a brief e-mail to a close friend or writing a lengthy letter, writing promotes communication. Writing can connect us with close loved ones as well as "with more than just our immediate circle of associates" (MacArthur et al., 2006, p. 1).

Writing promotes understanding of one's self. "Writing allows us to hold our life in our hands and make something of it" (Calkins, 1986, p. 17). Writing is often beneficial while one is exploring who he or she is. The power of writing is so strong that writing about one's feelings and experiences can be beneficial psychologically and physiologically because it can reduce depression, lower blood pressure, and boost the immune system (Smyth, 1998; Swedlow, 1999).

Writing promotes cognitive growth. Vygotsky (1986) believed that cognition was social in origin. Based on Vygotsky's theory of social learning, Wilcox (1996) wrote that as cognition is a product of language use and writing is language, then writing promotes cognitive growth. Thoughts are created in the act of writing. It is a myth that you must have something to say in order to write. Often one must write in order to have something to say (Smith, 1981).

In order to promote such benefits in the classroom, teachers must plan writing instruction but also create physical environments that promote writing. Effective teachers prepare and organize the classroom before students arrive. These classrooms should be "caring, thought-provoking, challenging and exciting" (Wong & Wong, 2001, p. 3). Manning and Bucher (2003) suggested that one should first identify the atmosphere you want to create in your classroom and "then be sure that this atmosphere is reflected in the physical environment" (p. 278). Classroom environments should be created with relationships, structures, and resources that support learning (Calkins, 1986).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Although writing is a basic and powerful aspect of education (Calkins, 1986) studies have shown a decline in focus on writing. Wilcox, Morrison, and Wilcox (2008) looked at trends in literacy research over the last 50 years and discovered a dramatic decline in the focus on writing in publications of the National Reading Conference. It has also been stated by the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003) that writing has become the neglected "R" (p. 9). In 1998, results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that students demonstrated only partial mastery of the writing skills and knowledge needed at their respective grade levels.

The *New York Times* published a front-page article on March 26, 2006 (Dillon, 2006), titled, “Schools Cutting Back to Reading and Math.” Writing was not mentioned in this article, indicating that it is indeed dropping from the attention of educators and the general public. Over the last decade, the *What's Hot/Not Hot* survey conducted by Cassidy and Cassidy (2009/2010) and published in the International Reading Association’s newsletter, *Reading Today*, has reported writing on the “not hot/should be hot” list. Similarly, during the last several years writing appears to be declining as a focus of research (Kara-Soteriou, & Kaufman, 2002). The decline may be due, in part, to the focus on reading instruction and assessing reading skills and school performances on standardized tests (Brandt, 2001).

This decline in writing instruction and research is of concern for educators who realize the importance of writing (Bridge & Hiebert, 1985; McGrath, 1996). It is essential to identify what is or is not happening in writing classrooms. The most current writing research focuses primarily on middle schools and high schools and relies on teacher reports that may mask actual instructional practices. Applebee and Langer (2006) have called for more studies focused at the elementary grades and using careful observations of teacher practices. There has also been a call for research that will focus on classroom environments that are highly motivating for all children (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to observe elementary writing instruction and classroom physical environments in eight Utah school districts. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed.

1. What aspects of writing instruction were observed in K–6 classrooms?
2. What evidences of writing products and writing instructional resources were observed in K–6 classroom physical environments?

3. In what ways did observed K–6 teachers’ classroom physical environments relate to their writing instruction practices?
4. In what ways did teacher demographics influence the aspects of writing instruction observed, the evidences of physical environments, and the relation between the two?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Process writing.** A series of stages that describe what writers think and do as they write; the stages are pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. The process involves recurring cycles rather than a linear activity (Tompkins 2010).

**Balanced literacy.** A comprehensive view of literacy that combines explicit instruction, guided practice, collaborative learning, and independent reading and writing. It is often referred to as reading and writing to, with, and by children (Mooney, 1990).

**Writing workshop.** An organizational structure for teaching composition skills that can be modified as needed. Instruction can be organized into a variety of phases including teacher sharing time, mini-lesson, state of the class, workshop activities, and student sharing time (Reutzel & Cooter, 2004).

### **Limitations**

This study included classroom observations, but one limitation is that each observer only spent one day in a single classroom; however, the large number of classrooms (n=177) observed in this study allowed for a broad representation of classroom practice despite this limitation. Also important to note is that the number of classrooms observed was similar across grade levels (K–6) and a similar number of observations were conducted on each day of the school week. Still, this study may over- or underestimate the amount of writing instruction and quality of classroom physical environment because only one observation was completed during a one-week period. If

observations had been completed in the same classrooms for more than one day, and throughout various times of the year, different amounts of writing instruction and various classroom environments may have been observed.

In order to observe in 177 classrooms, 193 pre-service teachers participated as data gatherers. This large number of different observers constitutes another limitation that could lead to a large variety of perceptions. Two measures were taken to address this limitation: first, identical training was conducted for all the observers and the observers were evaluated in their ability to identify literacy aspects consistently; second, during actual classroom observations, two individuals were assigned to observe the same set of 17 classrooms at the same time. The high inter-rater reliability that resulted from these observations indicates the trustworthiness of the data, despite the large number of observers.

Another limitation of the study relates to the labels that the observers were assigned to record for each classroom activity. From their training, pre-service teachers learned common activity labels to use as they labeled various classroom events. Under the activity label they also gave a detailed description of what they saw. It is important to note that the observers' activity labels were not taken at face value. The researchers judged whether the activity descriptions provided by the observers matched their descriptions. If they did not, the researchers worked together to negotiate and record the appropriate activity label.

This study examined writing instruction and classroom physical environments in 177 classrooms in eight Utah school districts. Methodology, results, and discussion are presented to answer the four research questions that were asked in this study.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

As writing instruction has been shown to be decreasing in recent years, (Applebee & Langer, 2006) some believe that a first step toward improved writing instruction is to examine the quantity and quality of literacy instruction and determine the richness of literacy environments (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). Since many teachers observed in this study were trained to incorporate writing process in their classroom and such was the expectation in the respective districts, a history of writing process is given. Next, as classroom environments are influential in student learning (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000) and because classroom physical environments were observed, a description of literacy-rich environments is discussed. Finally, because teachers are an important factor in both the writing instruction that takes place as well as organizing the classroom environment, a description is given of what influences teachers to make choices about their instruction and physical classroom.

### Writing Process

Some believe that writing is a process, rather than just a product (Graves, 1983). Decades of research has focused on the stages that writers go through when producing a written piece. These stages have sometimes been labeled *pre-writing*, *drafting*, *revising*, *editing*, and *publishing*. These stages involve recurring cycles rather than a linear activity (Tompkins, 2010).

During the past 40 years, researchers and educators have made great strides in understanding effective practices and methodologies for teaching writing. The 1960s typically mark the beginning of a focus on the process of writing. In 1968, Pulitzer Prize winner Murray wrote *A Writer Teaches Writing*, in which he shared an insider's view of the writing process. He

explained the process and steps he went through as a writer while highlighting the importance of revision, which he believed to be key to effective writing.

In 1971, Emig reported her landmark study on the composing process of twelfth-grade students. She found that students in her study used methods similar to those of professional authors, rather than those taught in their English classes. Although Murray discussed the importance of revision in 1968, Emig stated that revision was not taught. She wrote, “There is no time for major reformulation or reconceptualizations” (p. 99). Emig also discussed that many writing teachers were not successful writers and oversimplified the time-consuming hard work of creating a written piece. She was not in favor of the red pen. “There is little evidence that persistent pointing out of specific errors in student themes leads to elimination of these errors, yet teachers expend much of their energy in this futile and unrewarding exercise” (p. 99). Her work, confirmed by others (Elbow, 1973; Macrorie, 1970), pioneered a departure from traditional methods of teaching writing to an emphasis on the writing process.

The 1980s sparked even more interest and research in the writing process. The whole language movement increased the amount of writing in elementary classrooms (Stahl, Pagnucco, & Suttles, 1996). Hayes and Flower (1980) looked at writing as a form of problem solving, and Hillocks (1982) showed that significant gains in skills were possible over a short time as students engaged in revision. At the same time, practical guides became available to teachers and teacher educators (Kirby & Liner, 1981; Romano, 1987). Graves (1983) made an impact at the elementary level with his book, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*, in which he documented experiences of children engaged in process writing. Graves claimed that children were successful writers when they focused on ideas instead of conventions. One of Graves’ university students, Calkins (1983, 1986), continued the focus on elementary writing instruction.

Atwell (1987) wrote about transforming writing by describing her work with eighth graders engaged in authentic writing tasks across the curriculum.

The 1990s continued to be a period of great interest in the writing process in public school classrooms. Fisher (1991) presented effective approaches to use in early childhood settings. Calkins and Harwayne (1991) and Graves and Susstein (1992) showed ways to keep writing instruction natural and evaluate writing holistically. During this time, work in Oregon and Montana identified six qualities of effective writing as a form of assessment: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, conventions, and sentence fluency (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2010). These qualities came to be known as the six traits. Since the year 2000, use of the six-trait model has been prevalent in many states for assessing student writing as part of statewide testing programs. Several books have gone beyond using six traits as evaluation to promote use of them in an instructional program (e.g., Bellamy, 2005; Culham, 2003; Spandel, 2007). While these traits are far from being a complete definition of what constitutes quality writing, such work has made a significant impact on the methods used to teach writing and the emphasis placed on student writing in the classroom.

Three key features of process writing were identified by MacArthur, Graham, Schwartz, and Schafer (1995). These features included communicative purpose for writing, flexible structure, and interactions between student and teacher. As part of the communicative purpose for writing, students participated in authentic writing tasks and shared their work with an audience. Allowing flexible structure through the recursive processes—planning, drafting, revising, and editing—encouraged children to work at their own pace and cycle through the stages. Teacher demonstrations, class discussions, and individualized instruction during one-on-one conferences aided interactions between students and teachers (MacArthur et al., 1995).



In the 2000s, educational reform made it so that writing in schools became almost obsolete. Despite decades of focus on effective writing instruction, many teachers were not fully implementing good practices, or they may have been using the practices in ways that detracted from full effectiveness. Applebee and Langer (2006) reported that, while process-oriented writing has dominated teacher vocabulary since the 1990s, it is still unclear what teachers mean by this term and how it is implemented in their classrooms. Kara-Soteriou and Kaufman (2002) found that some teachers implemented process writing in a rigid, formulaic fashion that does not reflect how writing naturally occurs. They also found teachers were not modeling for their students, providing time for student sharing, or providing choice of topics.

Undoubtedly, writing as a process has become a well known term throughout the past 40 years; however, some claim that writing process is not the best way to teach writing. Boscolo (2008) argues that attitudes and beliefs toward writing greatly affect learners, stating that often teachers focus too much on writing skills instead of focusing on writers' beliefs and the construction of students' attitudes. Petraglia (1999) criticized writing process and labeled it as a rigid writing sequence. Although there have been criticisms of writing process and alternative methods suggested in literature (e.g., Petraglia, 1999; Williams 1998), this study focuses on writing process because it reflects the expectations of the districts involved.

### **Classroom Physical Literacy Environment**

The environment of a classroom can greatly contribute to a child's sense of well being. There are many factors that influence environment: the climate, the atmosphere, the teacher's sensitivity, and the actual physical environment. Although all aspects of an environment are important, this review will focus on physical environments. The classroom physical environment can be a powerful tool in the support of children's learning (Loughlin & Martine,

1987) and more specifically their literacy development (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). This section will discuss literacy props and resources, classroom areas, student and teacher writing, and instructional supports.

**Literacy props and resources.** Literacy props have proven to be effective in children's learning. Neuman and Roskos (1990, 1992) found a marked increase in literacy learning with the use of a variety of literacy props. These researchers found that when surrounded by literacy props students were more inclined to spontaneously show play behaviors with these props. As literacy props increased, literacy behaviors increased.

Reutzel and Cooter (2000) listed many possible literacy props including books, pamphlets, magazines, message boards, notepads, and signs. As teachers stock classrooms with literacy props there are several things to consider. Neuman and Roskos (1990) provided some guidelines for teachers to follow as they decide on literacy props for the classroom: appropriateness, authenticity, and utility. Appropriateness involves a teacher asking whether or not the items are appropriate for the particular students in his or her classroom. The teacher may look at whether or not the props are age appropriate, if the prop is safe, and if it is purposeful. Teachers must also evaluate whether the props are authentic. The teacher should think about whether or not the prop is something the children will typically use in their normal lives. Finally, teachers should consider whether the prop fits the criterion of utility. The teacher should evaluate whether this prop will serve a literary function for the students.

The way literacy props are arranged within a classroom greatly affects children's literacy learning (Morrow & Rand, 1991). Reutzel and Cooter (2000) identified three major points to consider when arranging classroom props: providing accessibility, giving students suggestions, and changing props often. When arranging props teachers should consider how accessible these

props are to students. Teachers can mark and label boxes or containers to organize and make props more accessible. A student must feel comfortable using these props and have free accessibility to the items without having to ask for the teacher's approval. Teachers must also help students understand how to use the available props, or give students suggestions. For example, if a message board is in the classroom, a teacher should recommend possible uses such as personal communication or posting announcements. Changing props often keeps students engaged and involved in the props available. Props should be added to, deleted, and mixed up for variety.

Many instructional resources should be available to students. Instructional resources include trade books, basal readers, leveled books, decodable books and resource books. Trade books are picture books and storybooks. A variety of trade books should be available in a classroom library, which should include wordless picture books, big books, books with print, and chapter books (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). Stoodt (1989) recommended at least ten books per student for a balanced literacy program. Basal readers can be used as a springboard into a balanced literacy program as well as for modeling and choral reading in the younger grades (Johnson & Louis, 1987). Leveled books are often used in guided reading after students are grouped by reading ability to provide enough challenge for students as well as some familiarity. Decodable books are used to teach emergent or early readers with books that exemplify phonics rules and patterns. Resource books include books such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and writing textbooks. Including many of these resources in a classroom allows for students to have choice in their learning.

Along with resources that promote reading, classrooms should also have resources that promote writing. These can be a variety of different types of papers, pencils, markers, chart

paper, and materials to make covers for books. Some educators believe that these materials should be made accessible to students in a writing center (Calkins 1986). Writing materials can also be placed in a backpack and sent home with students with the expectation that they create a traveling tale that is brought back to class for sharing with other students (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). The computer can also be an effective resource for both reading and writing.

**Designated classroom areas.** Often teachers face a common challenge of how to arrange the physical space in a classroom. The teacher must consider arranging materials, providing adequate space for easy movement, ensuring there is a clear view of demonstration areas, and forming spaces that allow children to be creative (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000). Teachers should divide classrooms into designated areas to allow for optimal use of space and learning. Some possible areas include whole-class sharing areas, writing and publishing areas, conference areas, and display areas. Each area can accomplish a designated task. Although there are many things to consider, Reutzel and Cooter (2000) suggested, “A major objective of the physical design of any literacy classroom is to encourage children to learn from the environment, each other and the teacher” (p. 311).

**Student and teacher writing.** Both student and teacher writing should be evident in classrooms. Often teacher modeling is helpful for children to understand a concept. Teachers can use large posters to display teacher modeling or technology that is available to them (Spandel, 2001). Although in traditional classrooms only teachers’ writing is usually seen posted around the room, Tompkins (2010) suggested that teachers and students should work together as a “community of learners” (p. 16) in which students are valued and make contributions around the classroom. Students can contribute to the physical environment by posting their writing on the walls and sharing their writing aloud. Classrooms can designate a chair and call it the

“author’s chair” (p. 59). This chair gives the students an opportunity to share their writing and participate in the community without having their work physically hanging on the walls. Along with evidences of individual and student writing, classrooms can also have group writing posted in the classroom and shared before class. Group writing can bring reluctant or challenged writers together to brainstorm and learn from one another (Spandel, 2001).

Teachers can use the physical environment to help organize their classroom and writing time. An organized classroom should be “deliberately kept predictable and simple” (Calkins, 1986, p. 183). Morning messages, directions, and class schedules can be used to help establish a predictable and consistent environment for children (Calkins, 1986; Spandel 2001).

**Writing instruction support.** As students are going through several stages of the writing process, there are many support items that can help them. A simple and common tool is a word wall. A word wall is helpful as students are drafting or revising and questioning how to spell a word. Word walls can have both commonly used words and less familiar words that may be difficult for students to remember (Spandel, 2001).

Visual representations of the components of the writing workshop can also be posted. Calkins (1986) posits that children should know what to expect during their writing time. The components of the workshop include mini-lessons, work time, peer conferring, and sharing sessions. Posting the components of the writing workshop and the phases of the writing process allows students to understand what is expected of them. The students may also be asked to post their names on the phase of the writing process in which they are currently engaged. This will allow the teacher to understand each child’s status.

Allowing children to view the six traits of quality writing is also a good option for writing classrooms. Six traits include ideas, mechanics, organization, wording, and voice. The six traits

can be used as a rubric to assess students' writing. Giving students the opportunity to be familiar with the rubric in which they will be assessed allows them to be more effective in their writing (Spandel, 2001).

A writing center is often used to allow children to have a space to revise their own writing and review other students' writing in peer conferences. Within these designated areas are usually materials used for publishing and revising. Revision is a crucial aspect of writing and cannot be shortchanged. Allowing a special place with resources for revision encourages students to participate in this process (Calkins, 1986).

### **Effects of Teacher Experience on Instruction**

Providing a literacy rich environment and rich instruction as Reutzel and Cooter (2000) have outlined allows the classroom to be "classrooms for children" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991, p. 11) instead of a teacher-centered area. As teachers set up these classrooms, it is well understood that individual teacher beliefs influence the decisions that are made in instruction as well as in their environment. How a teacher views teaching and learning will greatly affect the outcome of both. (Borko & Putnam, 1996).

Throughout the past 30 years, research on teacher cognition, teacher knowledge, and teacher beliefs has grown rapidly (Calderhead, 1996). Research has indicated that teachers come to their teacher education programs with preconceived notions and prior beliefs about education, learning, and teaching (Borko & Putnam, 1996). Teacher beliefs can be defined as "unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (Kagan, 1992, p. 65) as well as "psychologically held understandings, premises or propositions about the world that are felt to be true" (Richardson, 1996, p. 103).

Lortie (1975) presented the idea that teachers come into education already knowing the workplace—the classroom, through observation. Numerous hours have been spent in the classroom as the student, and as these students become teachers, they already possess myriad experiences that affect their own classrooms (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975). These countless hours spent in their future workplace formulate the beginning of teachers' thoughts, stand at the core of their future teaching, and are an inextricable part of their decision making (Goodson, 1992; Theriot & Tice, 2009). Teachers' prior beliefs affect the way in which they think, act, learn, and shape their practice (Borko & Putnam, 1996; Bullough & Baughman, 1997).

Experiences dramatically influence teachers' beliefs (Richardson, 1996) because learning and growth are based on meaningful experiences (Dewey, 1938). Richardson (1996) proposed three categories of experiences that influence teachers: personal experience, experience with schooling and instruction, and experience with formal knowledge. Although these three categories are discussed separately, they are not mutually exclusive and often are studied in conjunction with one another.

**Personal experience.** Personal experiences can be described as life events or experiences that influence an individual's world view. Personal experience may include "ethnic and socioeconomic background, gender, geographic location, religious upbringing, and life decisions" (Richardson, 1996 p. 105). While studying two teachers, Smith (2005) found that the teachers' out-of-school experiences greatly influenced the way in which they viewed learning and teaching. The two teachers entered their teacher education program with extremely different out-of-school experiences, which led both teachers to embrace different teaching methods. These individuals' early life experiences influenced how they believed students learned.

Bullough and Baughman (1997) discussed the personal experiences of a teacher, Kerrie, who related teaching to her personal experiences as a mother. She viewed teaching as an extension of mothering—nurturing and caring for young people. Throughout Kerrie’s first year of teaching, this personal experience as a mother became evident as she “was sharply focused on serving students” (p. 81).

**School experience.** Along with personal experience, experience with schooling and instruction also influence teachers. Richardson (1996) suggested that teachers are greatly affected by their own previous experiences in the classroom and that previous schooling is very powerful in shaping teachers. Lortie (1975) stated that it is difficult for pre-service education to have an impact on teachers as their personal beliefs have become so deeply rooted from their own schooling experience. Through a study of 12 student teachers, Calderhead and Robson (1991) found that teachers’ school experience is a socializing agent, “which ‘washes out’ the effects of training” (p. 2). These students were found “to hold particular images of teaching, mostly derived from their experiences in schools as pupils” (p. 1). The particular images of teaching held by these individuals greatly influenced their image of what “good” teaching is. One individual identified in the study remembered her schooling experience with a teacher who shouted quite often and disliked students asking questions, and therefore she identified good teaching with patience.

**Formal knowledge experience.** Experience with formal knowledge is also an experience that influences teachers. Richardson (1996) defined formal knowledge as “understandings that have been agreed on within a community of scholars as worthwhile and valid” (p. 106). Formal knowledge has two influential aspects: school subjects and pedagogical knowledge. Teachers often gain beliefs about school subjects throughout their own schooling experience. Pedagogical



knowledge relates to the practice of teaching and is usually first introduced in teacher education programs. Hollingsworth (1989) studied the influence of prior beliefs on pre-service teachers. In her write-up of the first year of a longitudinal study, the author found value in cognitive dissonance as influential in aiding teachers in increasing pedagogical knowledge. Clift (1987) found in a case study that a secondary English teacher frequently referred back to her pedagogical knowledge, although she did not believe she had a high level of it. Teachers' experiences influence his or her beliefs, which influence the classroom, which in turn affects children's lives. Because of this influence, more research into the relationship between these aspects of experience and teacher instruction and classroom environments is needed; this study was created to fill that gap.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

Procedures and methodology were planned in order to answer the stated research questions about writing instruction, classroom physical environment, the relation between the two, and the relation with teacher demographics. This chapter will explain the setting, participants, instrumentation, design, procedures, and data analysis of this study.

#### **Context**

This study was part of a larger study completed from 2008 to 2010 by a team of nine researchers at two universities in Utah Valley: Brigham Young University (BYU) and Utah Valley University (UVU). Seven of the researchers were faculty members in the two departments of teacher education and two were graduate students. The team met regularly and worked cooperatively to plan and carry out the larger study, which included surveys, observations, and interviews. While the larger study focused on a broad range of issues and content areas, this study focused specifically on writing and only included observation data relating to writing instruction and physical environments.

#### **Setting**

The setting of this study was elementary school classrooms located in eight suburban and rural school districts in Utah. These districts were selected because they are included in the partnership that exists between both universities and the public schools. These districts have a range of low to high socioeconomic levels and research has ensured that each socioeconomic group was represented in the sample based on number of students receiving free and reduced-price school lunch.

These eight districts represent a typical cross section of districts in the state of Utah. Recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2007) data ranked Utah slightly below the national average in eighth grade writing scores for all 50 states (Utah = 152; national mean = 154), Washington, DC, and Department of Defense Schools; however, there are 31 states ranked above Utah and only 14 below (no scores were given for six states). Similar data for fourth grade students (NAEP, 2002) show Utah ranked below the national average (Utah = 145; National mean = 153) with 34 states ranking above Utah, three states equal to Utah, and seven states below (no scores were given for seven states). This puts Utah writing scores in approximately the bottom 20 to 30% of states.

### **Participants**

Only elementary schools were used in this study. In order to observe many classrooms, the researchers chose districts that were partnership districts with BYU and UVU so that both BYU and UVU undergraduate students could be used to collect data. A stratified random sample of the schools within each district was chosen. The sample represented the population of all elementary schools across these eight school districts, thus more teachers were observed in the larger districts. Schools were also divided by three socioeconomic levels (high, medium, and low), based on the number of students receiving free and reduced price lunch. Once it was determined how many schools needed to be chosen from each district in order to fairly represent the number of students, those schools were randomly selected from within the three socioeconomic groups.

From within the selected schools, a sample of 177 K–6 grade teachers were observed. Participants also represented a proportional sample of teachers by grade level across these districts. Twenty-five were kindergarten teachers, 28 taught first grade, 26 taught second grade,

21 third grade, 24 fourth grade, 25 fifth grade, and 23 sixth grade. Five classrooms were combination of grade levels: second and third; third and fourth; fourth and fifth; and two classes of fifth and sixth. Once it was determined how many grade levels needed to be represented in each school, teachers were randomly selected from within that grade level.

All participants were full-time public school teachers in regular education classrooms. Written consent was obtained from all participants. Each of the 177 teachers was given a written survey to complete regarding his or her writing instruction. This survey also requested demographic information. The survey data was not included in this study, but the demographic information was. Sixty-three percent of the total sample of teachers returned the survey ( $n = 112$ ). Ninety percent of the 112 teachers were female, 6% were male, and 4% did not mark gender. The majority of teachers (73%) held bachelor's degrees and 24% held master's degrees. One teacher held a doctoral degree, one had an educational specialist degree, and one teacher did not report a degree. Eighty-five professional endorsements to teachers' licenses were reported, with the majority being in the areas of English as a second language, early childhood education, and math. Only seven reported endorsements related to literacy.

The teachers also reported the number of years they had taught. Six provided no response. The range of teaching experience spanned from one year to 40, with the average being 12 years. Approximately half of the teachers were 45 years or older. Only six teachers were younger than 25 years old. Eight teachers did not report their age. The large majority of teachers were white, with less than 1% from minority groups.

### **Instrumentation**

Along with the survey that asked for basic demographic information, two measures were developed by the researchers to address the research questions—an instruction observation form

(see Appendix A) and an environment observation form (see Appendix B). The content of the environment form reflects the recommended practices identified in the literature (e.g., Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Smith, 1994; Spandell, 2001).

**Classroom instruction observation.** In order to assess writing instruction, an observation form was developed (see Appendix A). The form consists of a series of boxes where observers labeled and described instructional activities, as well as the duration of the activities and the number of students involved. The form also had space available for teacher demographic information, including grade level taught, gender, education level, endorsements, number of years taught, age, and ethnicity. After a draft of the form had been completed, the form was field-tested in several classrooms. Revisions were made based on experiences using it. The researchers then prepared observation instructions that were used in training all observers. The instructions contained guidelines for how to conduct observations, as well as definitions and examples of typical classroom instructional practices and procedures observers would likely see in elementary classrooms.

**Classroom environment observation.** In order to assess literacy environments, the researchers developed a classroom environment observation form (see Appendix B). The observations focused on four major areas identified in professional literature (e.g., Calkins, 1986; Reutzel & Cooter 2000; Tompkins, 2010): evidence of student writing displayed in the classroom, evidence of teachers writing to students, evidence of writing instruction/support in the classroom, and evidence of writing resources. The observation form consisted of three parts: the first section used a Likert scale with a range of 1–4, with a score of 1 indicating no evidence of writing resources, 2 indicating one or two writing resources in evidence, 3 indicating three or four in evidence, and 4 indicating five or more in evidence. The second section of the form

consisted of yes or no items, where observers were asked to identify evidence of specific writing resources in the classroom, with 0 indicating no evidence and 1 indicating evidence. The third section of the form, *other*, was a place where the observer could list anything that was not accounted for in the other sections. If an item was not visible to the observer, it was not counted. Observers did not look in drawers, desks, or cupboards.

### **Design**

The researchers used a mixed method design as identified by Creswell (2007). Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed. The majority of data gathered using both observation forms were analyzed quantitatively but there was a section of the environment observation form labeled *other*. The researchers qualitatively analyzed the responses recorded in this section.

### **Procedures**

Permission was granted by all school districts to complete observations and surveys. Prior to data collection, all teachers were sent a letter informing them of their selection as a participant in the study. Teachers were not informed that writing instruction was the focus of the observation. Rather, they were told that observers would record a general distribution of time and practices in their classrooms. They were also given the day the observation would occur. If the selected teacher was absent, another teacher in the school was randomly selected to participate. The pre-service teachers completed the observations during a one-week period in November 2008. Thirty-six of the teachers were observed on Monday, 42 on Tuesday, 35 on Wednesday, 33 on Thursday, and 31 on Friday, so the full week of instruction was represented.

One-hundred and ninety-three pre-service teacher candidates attending BYU and UVU completed observations. Pairs of students observed in 17 classrooms to establish inter-rater

reliability. This resulted in 177 total teachers observed. Observers were all elementary education majors in their senior year who were in their last semester prior to student teaching or completing an internship.

The pre-service teachers attended a 90-minute training session during a regular class period of a literacy course. The same researchers conducted the trainings. All training sessions followed identical formats—explanation of the study objectives, description of the observation forms, practice with the forms using video clips, assessment using a video clip, and explanation of instructions and procedures to follow on the observation day (see Appendix C). On the assessment video, which required observers to view a literacy event or environment item and attach the correct label, an 85% level of agreement was achieved among the observers. A high level of agreement gave the researchers confidence that all 193 observers would identify instructional practices and environmental artifacts consistently.

Pre-service teachers were then assigned specific classrooms, days, and times to complete their observations using the classroom instruction tool and environment form. Observers were instructed to refrain from participating in the class or helping individual students. If the students as a whole class left the room for other activities (e.g., library, computer lab, P.E.), observers remained with the students to record instruction they received. A total of 193 environment observation forms were distributed and 186 were returned and analyzed. This constituted a 96% return rate.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to answer question one, researchers analyzed observation data from the writing observation forms to identify the types of writing practices observed. The pre-service teachers labeled observed activities and the researchers compared those labels with the descriptions of the

activities to be sure the labels and descriptions matched. For example, when “Interactive Writing” was listed as the activity label by one observer, the researchers checked to be sure that the accompanying description contained words indicating that a group of students worked with a teacher to write a piece of text together. If the label did not match the activity, the researchers relabeled the activity to ensure accuracy and consistency. Some categories that were similar in nature were also combined. For example, an activity called Mountain Language, in which students focus on conventions of writing, was combined with Daily Oral Language which requires students to edit conventions. Several instances of cross-age tutoring were combined with the peer conferencing category.

The researchers calculated the average number of minutes spent in each writing activity to answer question one. Each observation indicator was entered into a spreadsheet and mean scores were calculated for all evidences by grade level. A cumulative mean was also calculated. These data allowed researchers to identify those teachers who had been observed demonstrating any aspect of writing. Minutes per activity for classes with combinations of grade levels were assigned to the higher of the two grade levels. For example, minutes recorded for a fourth and fifth combination class were combined with minutes for all fifth grade classes. When observers saw writing activities as centers during guided reading, the total time spent on center work was divided by the number of centers, including the group meeting time with the teacher. The researchers calculated total minutes, averages, and percentages for each writing aspect.

In order to answer question two, researchers analyzed environment observation forms. Each environment form was entered into a spreadsheet and totaled. The researchers also separated the indicators by grade level. Each indicator, grouped by grade level, was calculated to find an average. The researchers determined that higher averages constituted richer



environments. This form also had an *other* section that was analyzed qualitatively. As is consistent with qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2008), several researchers repeatedly read the forms and searched for commonalities. They identified text segments and assigned a code word that accurately described the meaning of the segment. Codes were then examined and collapsed into broader themes, eliminating redundancy and overlap. In an effort to establish face validity and to check for clarity of definition (Johnson & Christensen, 2004), another researcher also read the forms and assigned code words separately. The group of researchers met and came to full agreement on the themes to be used. No predetermined codes were assigned prior to the study and all codes used emerged as data were examined.

In order to answer question three, the researchers analyzed information from both observation forms. There were six items on the environment form that were most descriptive of writing process-oriented classrooms (Calkins, 1986). The researchers separated these six items for this analysis; they were (a) evidence of teacher writing, (b) student writing, (c) group writing, (d) six traits, (e) writing workshop, and (f) student sharing.

Based on the activity labels on the observation forms, teachers were grouped into one of four groups: process writing, non-process writing, conventions, or zero writing. Those who had the most occurrences of the following labels were put in the process writing group: (a) mini-lesson, (b) response to lesson, (c) sustained silent writing, (d) teacher conferencing, (e) peer conferencing, (f) shared and interactive writing, (g) student sharing, and (h) teacher sharing. Those who had the most of the following labels were put in the non-process writing group: (a) prompted, (b) formula, (c) morning message, (d) response to read aloud, (e) response to literature, and (f) response to content instruction. Those who had the most of the following labels were put in the conventions group: (a) spelling, (b) daily oral language, (c) word wall, and

(d) handwriting. Those who had no labels associated with writing were put in the zero writing group. Each of the four instructional groups (process, non-process, conventions, and zero) were then correlated with the total score on the six items from the environment survey. This was done to see if the writing instruction the teachers chose to do in their classroom correlated with the kind of classroom physical environment that was present.

Question four addresses the three previous questions in relation to teacher demographics. The teacher demographics used were grade level taught, gender, education level, endorsements, number of years taught, age, and ethnicity. Regression analysis was used to see the trend teacher demographics have on teacher's observed classroom instruction and classroom physical environment score. Results were found using the specified methodology.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This study examined writing instruction and classroom physical environments in 177 elementary classrooms in eight Utah school districts. Results are presented to answer the four research questions that were asked in this study:

1. What aspects of writing instruction were observed in K–6 classrooms?
2. What evidences of writing products and writing instructional resources were observed in K–6 classroom physical environments?
3. In what ways did observed K–6 teachers' classroom physical environments relate to their writing instruction practices?
4. In what ways did teacher demographics influence the aspects of writing instruction observed, the evidences of physical environments, and the relation between the two?

#### **Classroom Writing Instruction**

In order to answer question one, observation forms were analyzed. Nearly all teachers were observed teaching some aspect of writing with only 12 (7%) not engaging in any writing instruction. All kindergarten and fifth grade teachers included some aspect of writing during their observations. At all other grade levels, one to three teachers did not engage their students in any writing activities.

On the average, teachers in this study spent just under one hour a day on all aspects of writing (53.9 minutes). Third grade teachers spent the most time on writing (63.2 minutes) and kindergarten and first grade teachers spent the least (31.8 minutes and 47.7 minutes, respectively); however, most of the kindergarten classes met for only half a day. Classroom

instruction data yielded both qualitative and quantitative results. This section will discuss both aspects from the data source.

The observers recorded many writing activities that were evident in teachers' instruction. Observed aspects of writing fell into three sections—activities associated with the writing workshop/writing process, various types of non-process writing, and mechanics/conventions. The aspects of writing that were observed and the average amount of time for each grade level are reported in Table 1.

**Writing process.** Teachers participated in a variety of activities associate with the writing process: (a) mini-lessons, (b) response to lessons, (c) sustained silent writing, (d) student conferencing, (e) peer conferencing, (f) interactive writing, and (g) student sharing. Mini-lessons referred to whole-class instruction on a variety of concepts and skills—everything from idea selection, voice, and organization to conventions. Response to lessons referred to writing that students completed immediately following the lesson and related directly to the content of the lesson. Teachers sometimes helped individuals, but this was not considered conferencing because the writing was to practice the skill and was not being revised. Sustained silent writing referred to student writing with no teacher help or prompting.

In this study, the majority of independent student writing was completed in journals/writers' notebooks. Student writing/teacher conferencing referred to the time spent by students on various drafts of writing they generated on their own with the teacher providing support to individuals and small groups. Student writing/peer conferencing was similar, but with time allotted for students to conference with each other rather than with the teacher. Shared/interactive writing referred to a teacher working with the whole class to create a single text with varying levels of student participation. At times the focus was on generating the text,

but at other times the focus was on revising, editing, and copyediting a final draft of the text. Student sharing referred to students reading their own writing to the whole class or in small groups. This was sometimes referred to by teachers as author's chair. Teacher sharing referred to the teacher producing and/or reading examples of his or her own writing as a model for students.

**Non-process writing.** Various forms of non-process writing were observed: (a) prompted writing, (b) formula writing, (c) response to literature, and (d) response to instruction. These writing activities were assigned with no expectation of revision or editing. Prompted writing meant that the teacher gave the topic and provided no systematic support (e.g., "What did you do over the weekend," thank you letter, and things you are thankful for). In formula writing, students filled in blanks. Examples were generating speech bubbles in cartoons, creating outlines, and completing Mad-libs. If teachers spent time reading or commenting on student work, that interaction was recorded. Responses came in three forms. Some teachers had students respond in writing to a book that was being read aloud. Others asked students to respond to literature that was being read as a class or in small groups. Teachers also asked students to respond to instruction in content areas such as science, math, social studies, etc.

**Mechanics/conventions.** Many teachers spent a lot of time doing writing mechanics activities: (a) spelling, (b) daily oral language, (c) word walls, and (d) handwriting. Spelling referred to tests, activities or games, and study assignments. Daily oral language referred to the process of correcting text that was presented with deliberate mistakes. Students completed the activity individually by rewriting the text and correcting their errors. The teacher then discussed orally the corrections with input from students explaining the reasoning behind the changes. Word wall referred to time spent focusing on words displayed alphabetically on a classroom wall or bulletin board. Some were high frequency words, while others related to a unit of content

Table 1

*Average Minutes per Day Spent on Aspects of Writing Instruction*

Aspects of Writing	K n=25	1 n=28	2 n=26	3 n=22	4 n=25	5 n=26	6 n=25	Total n=177
Writing Process Aspects								
Mini-lesson	1.8	4.0	7.3	10.6	4.1	9.8	6.9	6.3
Response to Lesson	1.3	2.9	3.3	5.6	4.5	4.2	7.9	4.2
Sustained Silent Writing	2.4	2.3	1.3	2.7	.90	2.6	1.7	2.0
Student Writing/ Teacher Conferencing	2.4	1.8	4.1	3.6	10.4	5.0	1.6	4.1
Student Writing/ Peer Conferencing	0.0	0.7	0.2	0.7	0.8	0.2	.60	0.5
Shared/ Interactive	3.3	3.0	2.7	2.7	1.0	0.1	0.0	1.8
Student Sharing	1.8	3.1	4.3	2.4	1.8	1.2	2.1	2.4
Teacher Sharing	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>13.0</b>	<b>17.9</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>20.8</b>	<b>21.3</b>
Non-process Aspects								
Prompted	6.4	7.0	13.9	4.4	2.0	6.4	4.8	6.9
Formula	0.0	1.3	1.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	2.4	0.8
Morning Message	0.1	0.6	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.5	0.1	0.2
Response to Read Aloud	0.1	0.0	0.8	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.2
Response to Literature	1.4	2.7	1.7	3.2	3.9	1.9	5.2	2.8
Response to Content Instruction	0.3	1.0	2.1	0.9	1.1	8.1	2.2	2.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>12.6</b>	<b>19.5</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>14.7</b>	<b>13.2</b>
Conventions Aspects								
Spelling	2.4	6.3	10.3	9.4	13.1	9.6	9.8	8.7
Daily Oral Language	0.8	2.9	2.9	8.1	6.7	8.5	8.0	5.3
Word Wall	1.0	3.4	0.9	2.1	0.0	1.4	0.4	1.3
Handwriting	6.3	4.6	3.9	6.7	7.0	0.4	0.3	4.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>17.2</b>	<b>18.0</b>	<b>26.3</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>19.9</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>19.4</b>
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>31.8</b>	<b>47.7</b>	<b>60.8</b>	<b>63.2</b>	<b>58.3</b>	<b>59.9</b>	<b>54.0</b>	<b>53.9</b>

*Note.* Number of minutes is rounded to the nearest tenth.

study (for example, discussing words like *hieroglyphic* and *pyramid* when the class is studying Egypt). Handwriting referred to time spent practicing manuscript or cursive writing. It also included handwriting instruction provided by the teacher.

The majority of time for those who taught writing was spent on seven aspects:

- spelling (an average of 8.7 minutes per day; a range of 3 minutes to 48 minutes; and a mode of 15 minutes per day)
- prompted writing (6.9 average, 5 to 100 range; 10 mode)
- mini-lessons (6.3 average; 5 to 37 range; both 10 and 15 for mode)
- daily oral language (5.3 average; 2 to 48 range; 10 mode)
- responses to mini-lessons (4.2 average; 5 to 74 range; both 5 and 25 for mode)
- handwriting (4.1 average; 5 to 54 range; 10 mode)
- student writing/teacher conferencing (4.1 average; 3 to 105 range; 15 mode)

The writing aspects observed least often were the following:

- teacher sharing (observed in only two classrooms for an average of 0.03 minutes)
- morning message (observed in only seven classrooms for 0.2)
- response to a read aloud book (observed in only three classrooms for 0.2)
- student writing/peer conferencing (eight classrooms for 0.5), and formula writing (eight classrooms for 0.8)

Time was nearly evenly divided between the writing workshop/writing process and mechanics/conventions. In both of these sections there was a division. In writing process, approximately half of the average time (10.5 minutes out of 21.3) was spent on mini-lessons and responding to those lessons. In conventions, the majority of the average time was spent on spelling and daily oral language (14.0 minutes out of 19.4). While many teachers used parts of

the writing workshop, only five teachers in the study were observed implementing the three major components of the writing workshop—mini-lesson, students writing/teacher conferencing, and student sharing—on the same day.

Across grade levels, average times were seen to increase or decrease for various aspects of writing. For example, in upper grades more time was spent on responses to mini-lessons (K=1.3 minutes; sixth grade= 7.9), and daily oral language (K=0.8 minutes; sixth=8.0). In lower grades, more time was spent on shared writing (K=3.3 minutes; sixth grade= 0.0) and word walls (first grade= 3.4 minutes; sixth grade= 0.4). Handwriting was a focus in all grade levels until fourth grade (7.0 minutes), and dropped dramatically in fifth grade (0.4 minutes) and sixth grade (0.3 minutes). Prompted writing was much higher in second grade (13.9 minutes) than in any other grade. Student writing/teacher conferencing was dramatically higher in fourth grade (10.4 minutes) than any other grade level and was extremely low in first grade (1.8 minutes) and sixth grade (1.6 minutes).

### **Classroom Physical Environment**

In order to answer question two, which focuses on evidences of writing products and instructional resources, researchers analyzed the classroom physical environment forms. The observation form had Likert scale items, yes/no items, and an *other* category. Each category is discussed below.

**Likert scale items.** Likert scale items had a range of 1–4, with a score of 1 indicating no evidence of writing resources, 2 indicating 1–2 writing resources in evidence, 3 indicating 3–4 in evidence, and 4 indicating 5 or more in evidence. Researchers determined that higher averages indicated richer environments. Results showed there was evidence of more individual student writing displayed (2.38) than group writing displayed (1.82). The highest recorded display aspect



was teacher-written directions and labels (2.81). The lowest recorded display aspect was teacher-written morning messages (1.52) with very few grade level differences. Second-grade classrooms had the most individual student writings displayed (2.57), and fifth-grade classrooms had the fewest (2.09). First-grade classrooms had the most group writings displayed (2.27), and sixth grade the fewest (1.30). The mean scores of the Likert scale items are represented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Mean Scores of Evidences of Student and Teacher Writing*

Evidences	K n=24	1 n=27	2 n=23	3 n=22	4 n=22	5 n=24	6 n=25	Total n=167
Displayed Student Writing								
Individual	2.54	2.48	2.57	2.41	2.36	2.09	2.20	2.38
Group	2.17	2.27	1.72	1.67	1.95	1.58	1.32	1.82
Displayed Teacher Writing								
Morning Message	1.38	1.62	1.45	1.55	1.38	1.77	1.54	1.52
Directions/ Labels	2.83	2.85	3.00	2.84	2.64	2.91	2.64	2.81
Teacher's Own Writing	2.83	2.77	2.64	2.50	2.50	2.61	1.96	2.54
Daily Schedule	1.44	1.96	1.73	2.10	2.25	2.22	2.28	1.99
Teacher Modeling	2.29	2.69	2.25	2.34	2.09	2.21	2.04	2.27

*Note.* Likert scale 1–4 (1 is no evidence, 4 is evidence of five or more examples)

**Yes/no items.** On the yes/no items, the highest recorded evidence of displayed writing was charts and prompts created without student input (91%). This coincides with findings in Table 2 that show evidence of teachers' own writings rather than displays of students' own writings. The lowest recorded evidence was the traits of writing (40%), followed closely by

evidence of the writing workshop/process (41%) and author's chair (41%). There was very little difference across grade levels; however, as grade level increase from primary grades to intermediate grades, so did the display of the six traits and elements of writing workshop. There were more charts made with student input in primary grades than in intermediate grades. As grade level decreased, so did the use of word walls. Writing resources, such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and spelling books were more prevalent in the intermediate grades than in the primary grades. The yes/no items are represented in Table 3.

**Other items.** Relatively few observers wrote additional evidences beyond those specified on the form; however, some observers wrote multiple comments about additional evidences for the same classroom. All writing on the form was analyzed qualitatively and six themes emerged: content prompts, (n= 44; e.g., spelling charts and comprehension strategies), support books (n= 19; e.g., picture books and encyclopedias), writing helps (n= 17; e.g., idea charts and word collections), writing projects (n= 14; e.g., class books and thank you notes), organization (n= 10; e.g., classroom helper charts and menus), and student recognition (n= 6; e.g., star student displays, and birthday charts).

### **Relationships between Writing Instruction and Physical Environments**

In order to answer question 3, which approaches the relation between physical environments and writing instruction practice, both instruction forms and environment forms were used. All aspects of writing instruction were categorized into four groups: process, non-process, conventions, and zero writing. Teachers were placed into the category that represented the type of writing most frequently observed in their classrooms. There were 70 teachers in the process-oriented group, 26 in the non-process group, 61 in the conventions group and 12 in the

Table 3

*Percentages of Classrooms Showing Evidences of Writing Support and Resources*

Evidences	K n=25	1 n=28	2 n=26	3 n=22	4 n=25	5 n=26	6 n=25	Total n=177
Writing Support								
Traits of Writing	13	23	39	42	64	46	63	40
Writing Workshop	8	15	52	50	59	67	44	41
Author's Chair	33	52	44	50	48	39	24	41
Charts/Prompts without Student Input	96	94	94	87	86	100	80	91
Charts/Prompt with Student Input	67	74	72	50	55	52	29	58
Writing Center	63	65	63	71	5	69	52	61
Content Area Writing	54	61	55	55	59	64	54	.57
Word Wall	100	100	98	64	59	42	32	71
Writing Resources								
Dictionaries	13	46	85	86	91	96	96	73
Thesaurus	0	15	48	62	61	67	88	48
Writing/ Spelling Textbooks	26	61	70	82	83	71	80	67

zero writing group. Regression analyses revealed an insignificant beta value ( $\beta = 0.486$ ,  $p = 0.056$ ). This means that teacher categories based on time spent in writing instruction did not significantly predict the richness of the writing environment as defined by the literature (e.g., Calkins, 1986; Reutzel & Cooter 2000; Tompkins, 2010) and by the researchers (higher averages = richer environments); however, because the regression approached significance, further investigation was warranted.

Six elements from the classroom environment observation form were most closely associated with process-oriented classrooms (Calkins, 1986): (a) displays of individual student writing, (b) displays of group writing, (c) teacher writing, (d) author's chair, (e) environmental evidence of writing workshop, and (f) the six traits of writing. These elements were analyzed separately: When a regression was performed looking at only these aspects, a significant difference was found for all four groups ( $p = .003$ ). This means that a process-oriented classroom environment can be predicted by the kind of writing (i.e., process, non-process, conventions, and zero) that is done in the classroom.

Using the average scores on the environment observation form, one-sample  $t$  test was conducted on the four groups to test the differences in the means on their classroom environment score. Of the 6 possible comparisons, only 1 showed a significant difference between their means. The process group, with a mean of 7.39, was significantly higher than the conventions group, with a mean of 6.14 ( $p = .002$ ). This means that process-oriented teachers in this study had more evidences of teacher and student writing and resources to support writing than teachers more focused on conventions. A regression was performed to test whether amount of time spent on writing would predict classroom environment score. No significant relationships were found. Time spent on writing did not predict classroom environment scores in this study.

### **Relationship between Results and Teacher Demographics**

In order to answer question 4—which focuses on the relation between teacher demographics, writing instruction, and physical environments—both instruction and environment observations were used. Only 112 of the 177 teachers returned the questionnaire that asked about their writing instruction and requested demographic information. Survey results are not included in this study; however, the demographic information was used to look for relationships with the results. The demographics information used in the regression analyses were teacher gender, grade level taught, educational degrees earned, professional endorsements held, number of years taught, age, and ethnicity.

Classroom environment forms were analyzed by these demographic variables and a regression analysis was conducted with the items on the environment forms to test whether they would predict amount of time spent on writing. The data indicate that higher grade levels was related to more evidence of writing resources in the classroom ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $df = 76$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The grade the teachers were teaching came very close to significantly predicting time spent on teaching writing ( $p = 0.056$ ), but no significant relationships were found for any of the other teacher demographics.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine writing instruction and classroom physical environments in elementary school classrooms located in eight Utah school districts. Additional purposes of this study were to compare observed instruction and environmental elements as well as compare each of these with teacher demographic information. This chapter will discuss results and provide recommendations for further research.

#### Reflections on Results

**Classroom writing instruction.** In this study, teachers were sporadic in implementing all aspects of the writing process. They seemed unable or unwilling to put it all together. Kara-Soteriou and Kaufman (2002) found that teachers implemented the writing process in a rigid and segmented fashion. This study draws into question Kara-Soteriou and Kaufman's finding. While many teachers used parts of the writing workshop, only five teachers in the study were observed implementing the three major components of the writing workshop—mini-lesson, students writing/teacher conferencing, and student sharing—on the same day. This could be due to lack of training. It could also be due lack of belief that a full writing workshop is meaningful. It is possible that many may have the desire to orchestrate all parts of the writing workshop, but may not yet have the ability to do so. It could be that their desires exceed their current abilities. It could also indicate that they are simply more comfortable implementing some aspects of the writing workshop than others.

Students frequently wrote pieces that required only one draft. While this engages students in writing, they are not involved with the thinking required by completing the writing process. This is consistent with Applebee and Langer's (2006) concern that most students are not required

to write lengthy or complex pieces. NAEP results show that 40% of twelfth graders have never written papers more than three pages long. Fourteen percent have never been required to write a paper longer than two pages. Students need chances to explore and develop arguments in greater depth. Students are rarely assigned to write analyses or interpretations. Instead, they write summaries, reporting on what they have learned. Results of this study are consistent with the NAEP results even though there is a direct link between drafting and writing achievement. The one-draft writing that was prevalent in this study limits students' engagement in pre-writing activities that are also linked to writing achievement.

While the mechanics of writing were taught by teachers in this study, they were largely covered in isolation. There was no indication that spelling, daily oral language, word walls, or handwriting were connected to authentic writing tasks. Observations revealed little integration of mechanics. Mechanics seemed to be taught as a subject separate from actual writing.

**Classroom physical environment.** In this study, question two referred to the observed classroom physical environments. Results indicate that the observed classroom environments were generally not writing rich. While it appears that teachers' own writing was prominently displayed and modeled, it is important to note that this writing consisted of teacher-made displays, instructions, and charts rather than indications of process writing. The environments tended to focus on teacher-made materials rather than being "classrooms for children" (Calkins & Harwayne, 1991, p. 11). On the yes/no items, the highest recorded evidence of displayed writing was charts and prompts created without student input (91%). This coincides with findings that show evidence of teachers' own writings rather than displays of students' own writings. Reutzel and Cooter (2000) discuss the importance of having a literacy-rich environment with an array of different books and props for children. This was not seen in the observed

classrooms. The physical classrooms seemed to be similar to the instruction: fragmented and non-process oriented.

In general, classrooms showed evidence of more traditional resources (e.g., dictionaries and textbooks) than support needed for a writing workshop. This also matched the instruction results, indicating that a full writing workshop was not employed in many of the classrooms. This finding is consistent with other research in this field (Applebee & Langer, 2006) and is a cause for concern.

Although in general the classrooms showed evidence of more traditional resources, classrooms that had evidences of writing instruction were moderately correlated with the three subgroups on the form. The low to moderate correlations (.20–.36) with the other subgroups (evidence of writing displayed in the room, evidence of teacher writing to students, and evidence of writing resources) reaffirms the finding that as writing instruction is present, the environment is also writing rich. As classrooms showed physical evidences of writing instruction, there were also evidences of displayed writing, teacher writing to students, and writing resources.

Most classrooms were found to be teacher-centered classrooms dominated by teacher-made materials and teacher-directed instruction. How a teacher views teaching and learning greatly affects the outcome of his or her classroom (Borko & Putnam, 1996). As teachers set up their classrooms, it is well understood that individual teacher beliefs strongly influence the decisions that are made. In this study, one can conclude that the majority of teachers believed that a writing-rich environment was not necessary, or was less important than the other subject matter in their environment. If classroom environments need to be changed, teachers' beliefs about writing environments need to be addressed.



**Relationship between instruction and environment.** Question three referred to the relationship between instruction and environment, and this study's findings reveal a connection between the two. Those teachers who were found to have process-oriented instruction were also found to have writing-rich classroom physical environments. This leads one to consider connections between instruction and classroom environments. The connection between a teacher's environment and instruction can perhaps be attributed to that teacher's foundational core beliefs about teaching and learning. Teacher beliefs can be defined as "unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught" (Kagan, 1992, p. 65). These findings show that these teachers' "unconsciously held assumptions" (p. 65) were evident and consistent throughout their instruction and classroom environments. Teachers' philosophical stances were obvious in both how they spent their instructional time and how they set up their classroom. This is consistent with the research of Borko and Putnam (1996), who posited that teachers' views about teaching and learning greatly affect the outcome of classroom instruction and their environment.

If literacy-rich environments are the goal in classrooms—an ideal some have espoused (Reutzel & Cooter, 2000)—then the pathway to that end seems clear. In this study those who engaged in process writing did have literacy-rich environments. It does not appear that more emphasis on writing will be enough since more time spent on writing did not necessarily lead to rich environments. The implication is that teachers need to undergo a philosophical change. They need to be engaged in pre-service education and on-going professional development that affects their beliefs about process writing. Based on the results of this study, it appears current efforts are not affecting teachers' philosophies. It brings into question whether academic courses and professional development has led to a fragmented form of writing instruction and an eclectic

gathering of environmental resources. The instruction and environments observed may be filling time and space, but may not be inspiring children and improving elementary writing.

**Relationship between results and teacher demographics.** It is interesting to note that teachers who taught higher grade levels were found to have more evidence of writing resources in the classroom. This could be due partly to the standardized writing assessment that occurs in Utah school districts in the upper grades. It may also reflect teacher beliefs that writing as a process and writing workshops are best taught in intermediate grades once children have mastered basic transcription skills and have prepared to face more instruction on composition. This finding warrants more investigation.

### **Future Research**

This study may indicate possible connections between teacher practice and beliefs surrounding writing in elementary schools. Future research should be completed to explore teachers' past experiences—including personal, school, and professional developments experiences—that have shaped teacher beliefs. Future research should examine the context of method courses in teacher development programs and professional development.

While this study documented the presence of aspects of writing like mini-lessons, student sharing, and teacher conferences, it did not examine the quality of those aspects. It only documented the presence of these aspects in classrooms. Future studies should describe these aspects in greater detail. Another fruitful avenue of research could be to examine why teachers are or are not teaching writing and why they set up their classrooms as they do. This study only reported on the current state of writing instruction and classroom physical environments without reporting on the motives behind that state. More information about the causes behind current instruction and environment practices is needed to fully implement effective change.

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### Appendix A

### Classroom Instruction Observation Form

Teacher #: \_\_\_\_\_ Observer #: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Activity Label	Start time	Stop time	# of students

Description

Activity Label	Start time	Stop time	# of students

Description

## Appendix B

### Classroom Environment Observation Form

District \_\_\_\_\_ School \_\_\_\_\_ Grade \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher Number \_\_\_\_\_ Observer Number \_\_\_\_\_

#### 1. Evidence of Student Writing Displayed in the Classroom

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Individual Student Writing   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. Group Writing (Shared, Interactive Writing)  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. Other: _____   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1 = none      2 = 1-2 in evidence      3 = 3-4 in evidence      4 = 5 or more in evidence |   |   |   |   |

#### 2. Evidence of Teacher Writing To Students

- |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. Morning Message  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| b. Directions/Labels  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| c. Teacher's Own Writing  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| d. Daily Class Schedule   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| e. Teacher Modeling   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| f. Other: _____   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1 = none      2 = 1-2 in evidence      3 = 3-4 in evidence      4 = 5 or more in evidence |   |   |   |   |

#### 3. Evidence of Writing Instruction/Support in the Classroom

- |   |           |          |
|---|-----------|----------|
| a. Traits of Writing (e.g., Six Traits)                     | yes _____ | no _____ |
| b. Phases of Writing Workshop                               | yes _____ | no _____ |
| c. Author's Chair   | yes _____ | no _____ |
| d. Charts or prompts- without student input                 | yes _____ | no _____ |
| e. Charts or prompts- with student input                    | yes _____ | no _____ |
| f. Writing Center (including publishing supplies/materials) | yes _____ | no _____ |
| g. Content Area Writing (including L.A. block)              | yes _____ | no _____ |
| h. Word Walls   | yes _____ | no _____ |
| i. Other: _____   |           |          |

#### 4. Evidence of Writing Resources

- |                               |           |          |
|-------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| a. Dictionaries               | yes _____ | no _____ |
| b. Thesaurus                  | yes _____ | no _____ |
| c. Writing/Spelling Textbooks | yes _____ | no _____ |
| d. Other: _____               |           |          |

## Appendix C Observer Training Packet

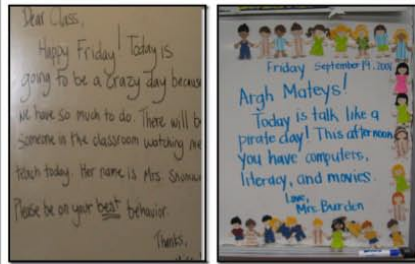
### EVIDENCES OF WRITING CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Evidence of writing displayed  
individual students  
group writing  
teacher writing



Evidence of Student Writing Displayed in the Classroom.

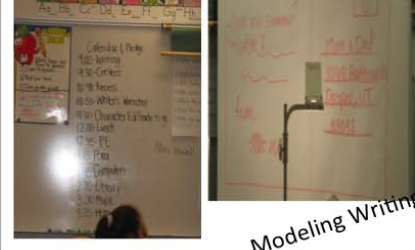
### Morning Message



### Writing with students Shared Writing



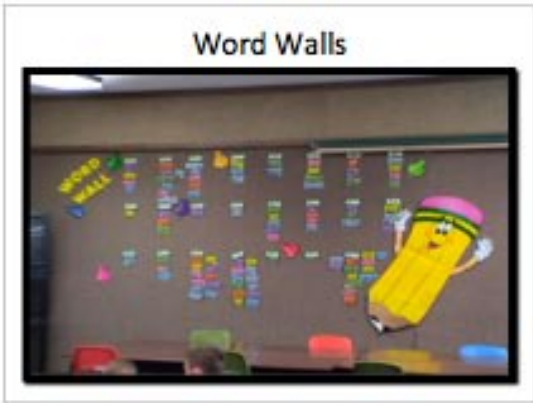
### Class schedule



### Modeling Writing



**Evidence of writing instruction**



### Mountain Language

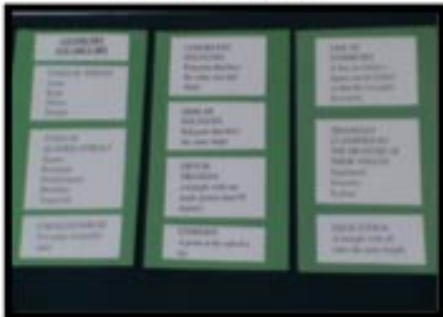


### Content Area Writing

### Using math to write poetry



### Writing in Math

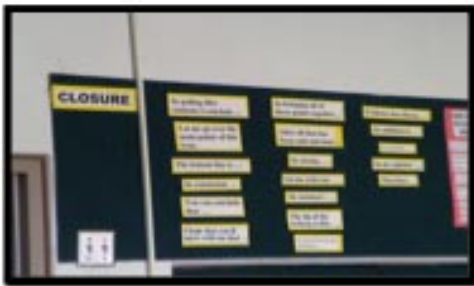


Evidence of writing resources

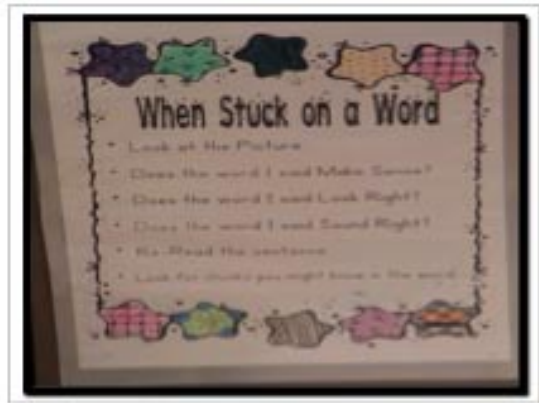
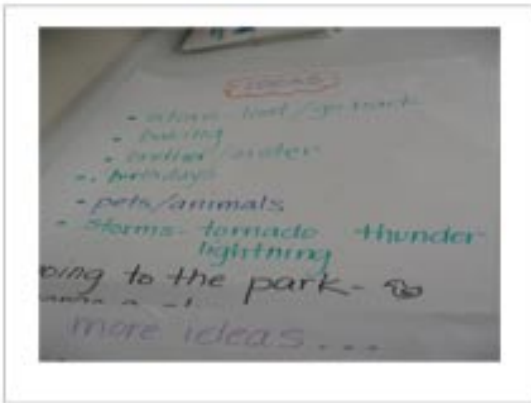


WRITING  
RESOURCES

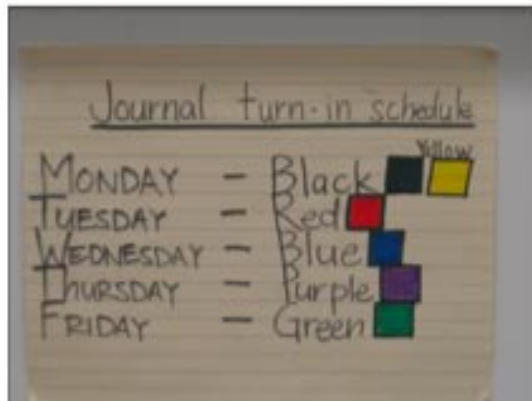
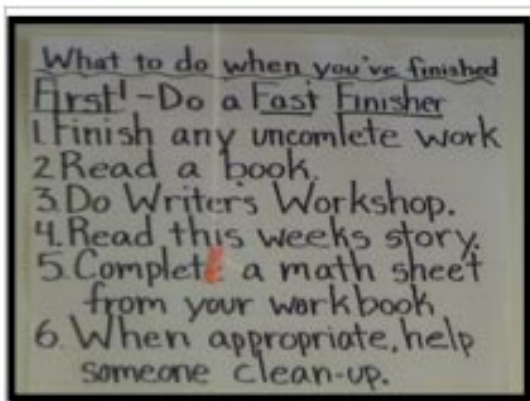
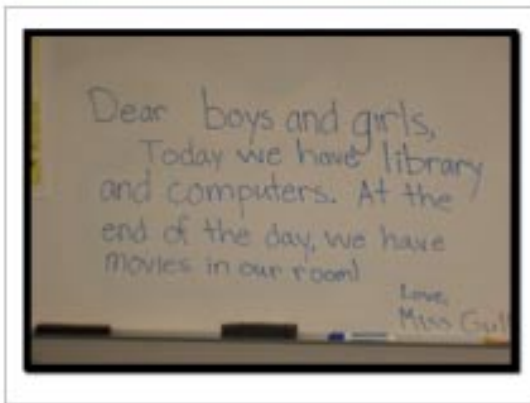
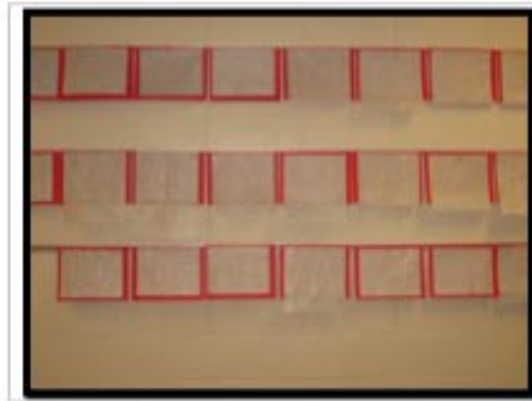
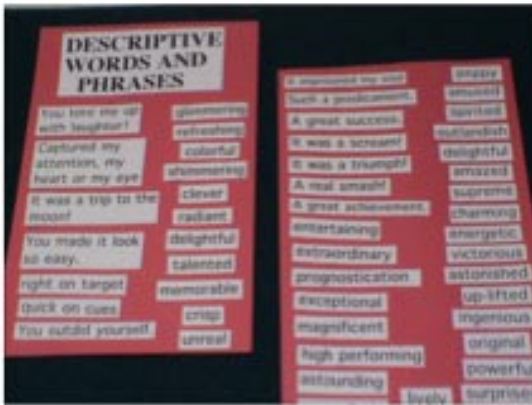
Support for writing







How would you mark the following slides







Cheat Sheet  
Activity Labels

Labels	Description
<b>Content Area</b>	
Content Area Instruction	Math, Science, Social Studies, Art, Music, Health, P.E
<b>Reading Instruction</b>	
Guided Reading	Teacher leads small group with guided books.
Shared Reading	Student follows a lead reader. (Big Book, overhead, charts)
Buddy Reading	Two students reading together.
Book Talks	Book summaries or book projects.
Mini Lesson	Whole group or small group, brief description of reading procedure, skill, strategy, or concept.
SSR	Independent reading
Teacher Read Aloud	Whole class listens to teacher.
<b>Writing Instruction</b>	
Conferencing	Individuals or small groups receive feedback from teacher or peer.
Shared Writing	Whole class or small group collaborate ideas with chart, overhead, or whiteboard.
Buddy Writing	Writing with partner.
Mini Lesson	Whole group or small group, brief description of writing procedure, skill, strategy, or concept.
Author's Chair	Student shares own writing.
Morning Message	Teacher writes to students on board or chart.
Journal Writing	Independent writing
<b>Daily Routines</b>	
DOL- Daily Oral Language	Correcting errors in sample sentences.
Morning Meeting	Whole class discusses class rules, issues, reviews calendar, etc.
Mountain Language	Bulletin board with series of tasks
Word Wall	Referencing to word wall for writing, guessing game, writing sentences, etc.

### Observer Checklist

- Bring clipboard or surface to write on
- Check in with the school secretary 20 minutes before school starts
- Ask secretary for the classroom location and find your classroom
- Introduce yourself to the teacher
- Explain you are there to observe and record, not to evaluate or help
- Ask teacher to sign consent form, and put the form in an envelope
- If the teacher declines, go to the alternate teacher's classroom. If alternate teacher is not available, ask principal for another teacher to observe.
- Carefully record the events of the day on the observation forms
- Stay with students (e.g., library, computers)
- Complete the Classroom Environment Form
- At the end of the day give the survey and the return envelope to the teacher
- In your envelope there should be:
  - Teacher Consent Form
  - Classroom Environment Form
  - Classroom observation forms
- Return the envelope to your university instructor

## Observer Training

1. Introduce Study
2. Go over checklist
3. Fill out packet
  - Number on observation forms
  - Date on forms
4. Two observation forms
  - Classroom Environment
  - Observation of Instruction
5. Give out power point hangout and form
  - Review Indicators
  - Go through test slides
  - Model observation form using test slides
  - Collect powerpoint handout
6. Fill out observation form as you observe the activities
  - Discuss labels
  - Watch video clip and discuss what the trainer sees
  - Watch 2<sup>nd</sup> video clip- fill out observation form together
  - Watch 3<sup>rd</sup> video clip- fill out observation form together
  - TEST- video clip 4 on yellow paper
  - TEST- video clip 5 on blue paper
7. Collect yellow and blue Power Point handouts
8. Questions

### Classroom Instruction Observation Form Example

Teacher #: \_\_\_\_\_XXX\_\_\_\_\_ Observer #: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_10/27/09\_\_\_\_\_

Activity Label	Start time	Stop time	# of students
Content Area- Science	1:25	2:00	25 Whole class

#### Description

<p>Topic- Plants and Seeds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher had set up learning stations that students were to work at with a partner:</li> <li>1. Sorting activity- how seeds travel</li> <li>2. Labeling parts of plants</li> <li>3. Using modeling clay to create a plant- students wrote about how they created their plant</li> </ul> <p>Each student wrote a summary of what they did that day in their plant study by individually responding to written teacher questions.</p>

Activity Label	Start time	Stop time	# of students
Writing Workshop- Mini-Lesson	2:00	2:45	25 Whole Class

#### Description

<p>Topic- Author Study</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher showed students samples of how an author had used sound words</li> <li>- Teacher wrote a story then added sound words</li> <li>- “You can do this too. Write your own story and write sounds that go with them.”</li> <li>- The teacher gave students directions for each student to talk to a partner about a story he or she is writing and to tell about what sound words could be added.</li> </ul>
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