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THE EFFECTS OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN WRITING TOPIC SELECTION
ON ACHIEVEMENT AND MOTIVATION

by

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Dedication

It is with an incredible sense of gratitude that I dedicate this work to my wife, Linda, and children, Greyson and Molly, for their patience and understanding. I also dedicate this to my parents who have taken great pride in my work. Finally, I would like to dedicate this to my students—past, present, and future—who make me strive to be a better teacher.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all of the instructors in the online Curriculum and Instruction program, but especially Dr. Kenneth Vogler and Dr. Susan Schramm-Pate for their guidance throughout this entire process. It is because of their tireless efforts on my behalf that this work came to fruition.

Abstract

This action research study examined 18 high school student-participants' perceptions of essay writing both with teacher-generated standardized prompts and prompts where students were included in the development of the writing assignment. The students consisted of 12 white females, 2 Asian females, and 4 white males enrolled in an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class from a rural, southern school located in South Carolina. Quantitative methods were used to determine the impact of the prompts on the students' motivations for writing essays. Writing samples, surveys and observations comprised the data. Teacher-participants and instructional leaders reflected on the data with the participant-researcher to determine an instructional strategy to implement for the ELA curriculum in the 2017-2018 academic school year. As a group, a large portion of the students mostly felt that they did higher quality work on the writing assignment where the teacher created the writing prompt, but only slightly more students reported that they would rather the teacher-researcher create future writing prompts. A significant amount of students still wished to be included in the formation of the writing prompt. These findings are evident in the Action Plan that includes differentiation of instruction that allows both groups of students to feel successful in their future writing assignments.

Key Words: Writing, prompts

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Chapter 1: Research Overview

Introduction

The class had completed studying *The Catcher in the Rye* and the unit had been better received than the teacher-researcher could have imagined. Each day was filled with robust, lively discussion about Holden Caulfield and what makes him the character that still enthuses audiences today. When the teacher collected the writing assessments he could not wait to read what the students had submitted—based on the quality of the classroom discussions, he knew this would be amazing work. However, after reading a class set of boring, drab, lifeless essays, he began to wonder what had gone wrong. Upon returning the papers to the students, he expressed his dismay and asked them what had happened. One brave student raised her hand and boldly stated, "The book was fantastic, but your prompt was so boring. I could have answered it in one paragraph."

Unfortunately, this scenario is all too common. Teachers do not intend to create boring, lifeless writing prompts; on the contrary, good teachers spend a great deal of time and effort trying to create prompts that students will enjoy and at the same time assess what the teachers are trying to measure with that particular assessment. However, in this era of high-stakes testing that not only assess the student, but also the teacher, the teacher is forced to create prompts that more closely mirror those that appear on standardized tests—boring, lifeless, and dull prompts that have little or nothing to do with the students and their interests.

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The dilemma is that writing assessment is one of the most powerful assessments at a teacher's disposal, yet standardized tests have, by and large, bastardized the practice and, many argue, have actually done more harm than good. Writing assessment, in its truest form, should allow the student to communicate to the teacher what he thinks, what he has learned, and how the teacher's instruction has affected that learning.

Unfortunately, teachers currently think they have to mimic standardized test prompts, and those prompts often require formulaic responses that focus more on form than on content. In the language arts classroom, however, depending on what the teacher is trying to assess, both content and form are of great importance. Many researchers now are arguing that one of the best ways that teachers can improve their writing instruction and truly assess what the student has learned is by bringing the student into the development of the assessment.

Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, and Konrad (2014) discuss the difficult position teachers find themselves in with the balance of preparing students for the test, yet wanting to provide meaningful writing instruction: "At this time, when teacher performance is being measured as a function of student performance, teachers may be reluctant to actively work on increasing student ownership of the learning process" (p. 106). By contrast, they also point out the necessity of including students: "Granting students an active role in their learning can increase school completion; teach students valuable skills, like setting and attaining goals; and help students develop independence" (p. 106). Stiggins and Chappuis (2010) agree and add that, "Student-involved classroom assessment opens the assessment process and invites students in as partners…to play a role in defining the criteria by which they will be judged" (p. 3).

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Lorna Earl (2003) asserts that the assessment must be relevant to the student in order to achieve optimum results. She states that, "When assessment capitalizes on students' interests, enthusiasm, and talents and provides images of the world that lies ahead of them, it is much more likely to engage and inspire them so that the learning is itself the motivator" (p. 68). All of this functions to build a sense of empowerment and ownership in the student and their writing benefits from this.

Problem of Practice

The problem of practice for the action research study involves a rural, southern Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classroom where students report that while they enjoy the assigned readings for the course and engage in vigorous in-class discussions about the readings, they feel they would be able to produce better writing assignments if they had more input into the development of the writing prompts assigned to them. These students also argue that when essays and writings are assigned to them that they are boring and lifeless and that they do not reflect on the discussions that took place in my class or the students' writing ability. These students report that when asked about a particular text or text analysis problem, that they had so much to say about the reading, but that the teacher-made or text-book-made prompts did not inspire them. These students requested the opportunity to be able to write about topics of their choice and they argue that given the opportunity to do so that they will be enabled to write much better essays.

The problem of practice also involves the high-stakes testing that these students are required to excel on in the Advanced Placement course and the ways in which the teacher-researcher negotiated the classroom to enable them to both succeed on the exam

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and also have the best ELA experience possible to ensure they have a life-long love of reading and success in higher education and their chosen careers.

Research Questions

The over-arching question for this study is *how do students perceive their own writing abilities when faced with standardized, teacher-generated prompts compared to writing prompts that they help to develop?* That large, over-arching question will have to be addressed, initially, with smaller questions: How do students respond to assigned writing prompts? How do students respond when they can create their own writing topics? How do those two writing samples compare? How do students feel about assigned writing prompts? How do students feel about the writing when they can create their own topic? If the feelings are more positive towards the student-generated writing topic, does that affect the quality of the writing sample? If the feelings and the achievement are both positive, how can the teacher then incorporate student-generated writing topics and still prepare for high stakes tests?

The teacher-researcher collected writing samples from a teacher-generated prompt, designed to mirror those that appear on the College Board's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition exam, and then samples from a student-produced prompt on the same reading. The teacher-researcher than had students complete a Likert-type scale survey that allowed them to report their perceptions of the two assignments.

Participants in the study were high school juniors and seniors enrolled in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classes. 18 students and their parents granted permission to be included in this study. The teacher-

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researcher, in accordance with advisor suggestions, purposely worked with a smaller, more manageable sample size as appropriate for action research. The students consisted of 12 white females, 2 Asian females, and 4 white males from an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class from a rural, southern school located in South Carolina. All students were native English speakers and none had any special accommodations recorded. In order to maintain ethical standards for action research, identities remained anonymous and each participant was assigned a numerical identifier and the information was kept in an encrypted electronic device by the researcher. The student and parent/guardian were informed that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. Data collected in the form of surveys were strictly confidential and remained with teacher-researcher at all times under lock and key or password protected on electronic devices.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of writing to a prompt and then writing to a topic of choice. After the analysis of the writing, another aspect of analysis is to determine the effect these different types of writing have on student attitude and if that attitude affected student motivation. To clarify, the specific purpose of the study (the quantitative component) is to examine student perception of achievement for teacher-generated prompts compared to topics they choose themselves.

Scholarly Literature

Vygotsky's "Mental Development of Children and the Process of Learning" (1978) discusses the interaction between learning and development. He asserts that learning and development are interrelated and describes this connection as the zone of

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proximal development. The zone of proximal development "is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). While Vygotsky was one of the first modern psychologists to explore the role of social situations in learning, he also studied the importance of language in learning and development. He "saw the linguistic and cognitive development of children as growing out of social interactions" (Buoncristiani and Buoncristiani, 2012, p. 58). Further, Vygotsky's work, "assumes that teachers can create environments that support students as they engage in these complex tasks" (Hillocks, 1995, p. 55).

Famed educators John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky share similar ideas on learning and development and especially concerning the role of social interaction. In his *My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey opens with the statement that he believes "all education proceeds by the participation of the social consciousness of the race" (Dewey, 2013, p. 33). Dewey specifically addresses the importance of the social element to the development of language:

At present we lose too much of the value of literature and language studies because of our elimination of the social element. Language is almost always treated in the books of pedagogy simply as the expression of thought. It is true that language is a logical instrument, but it is fundamentally and primarily a social instrument. Language is the device for communication; it is the tool through which one individual comes to share the ideas and feelings of others. When treated simply as a way of getting individual information, or as a means of

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showing off what one has learned, it loses its social motive and end. (Dewey, 2013, p. 37)

Eisner (2005) says Dewey saw human beings as organisms who live *in* and *through* their environment and, therefore, a child is not a creature to be molded, but an individual who "brings with him needs, potentialities, and experiences with which to transact with the environment" (p. 28). Eisner also states that, for Dewey, what was important educationally "was for the child to obtain increasing, intelligent control in planning their own education" (p. 28). The true goal of any educator should be that they have nurtured a desire to learn and grow long after the child has left the classroom. This learning can continue through a social interaction with the individual's environment.

Writing assessment is also beneficial as it helps to develop metacognitive skills—especially when the student either creates, or has a hand in creating, the writing prompt. Buoncristiani and Buoncristiani (2012) discuss metacognition as "an essential skill for learning because it enables the learner to take control of the learning process by revealing his thought processes to himself, thereby enabling him to monitor his own understanding and refine his learning strategies" (p. 64). They claim that it is only through developing metacognition skills that students can become independent learners. They also make a very clear and close connection between metacognition and language development, especially concerning writing skills: "As our children develop greater facility with the written language, they have another essential tool of metacognition" (p. 64). The authors elaborate on this by adding, "By developing the ability to write our thoughts down, we increase both the breadth and the depth of metacognition because we are no longer limited by what we can actually recall" (p. 64). In other words, the ability to think about

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and reflect on what was learned, in order to appropriately develop a topic and respond to it, is one of the most powerful tools to develop metacognitive skills.

While so many researchers see the importance of the writing process to the development of the learner, others see what has happened to writing through the development of objectives, or standards, and standardized testing as doing the reverse—actually eliminating any positive aspect of the writing assessment. Learning objectives and standards were created in order to ensure that the proper concepts and strategies where being taught to all children and to provide a sort of uniformity to the education process. Eisner (2013) states that educational objectives need to be clearly specified for at least three reasons: "first, because they provide the goals toward which the curriculum is aimed; second, because once clearly stated they facilitate the selection and organization of content; third, because when specified in both behavioral and content terms they make it possible to evaluate the outcomes of the curriculum" (p. 109). Eisner admits that it is difficult to argue that these objectives would be anything but rational in an approach to curriculum development. However, that is exactly what he continues to do throughout the rest of his essay. He states,

> I want to argue in this paper that educational objectives clearly and specifically
> stated can hamper as well as help the ends of instruction and that an unexamined
> belief in curriculum as in other domains of human activity can easily become
> dogma which in fact may hinder the very functions the concept was originally
> designed to serve. (p. 109)

He continues by saying that when teachers begin to plan their curriculum guides for the year, the standards or objectives are often the last component they consider. Eisner argues

that if the objectives were useful instruments, then teachers would use them. He carefully develops four main points that he argues through the rest of his paper.

His first point is "that the dynamic and complex process of instruction yields outcomes far too numerous to be specified in behavioral and content terms in advance" (p. 111). In other words, too much takes place in the day-to-day classroom instruction to be able to accurately predict in the development of the objective or standard. Classroom discussion could veer off into an unexpected, but worthy, avenue in a literature study. A mathematic concept may be especially challenging for a group and the pace of instruction would have to be slowed. The process of teaching is often too unpredictable to establish and maintain rigid objectives or standards set at the beginning of a unit of instruction.

Eisner continues by stating that a "second limitation of theory concerning educational objectives is its failure to recognize the constraints various subject matters place upon objectives" (p. 111). He explains that in some subject areas like math and science it may be easier to predict the particular operation or behavior the student is to perform, but in other subject areas like the arts or literature study, the operation may not be predictable at all; often times the student responds to the art or literature in an unexpected manner. The unexpected is not incorrect, it is simply not plannable. Eisner contends that the strict adherence to these standards could be "due to the fact that few curriculum specialists have high degrees of intimacy with a wide variety of subject matters and thus are unable to alter their general theoretical views to suit the demands that particular subject matters make" (p. 112).

Eisner's third point "deals with the belief that objectives stated in behavioral and content terms can be used as criteria by which to measure the outcomes of curriculum

and instruction" (p. 112). He argues here that application of a standard is not a measure of achievement, but rather a judgement. He uses several examples in this section to illustrate his point, but especially useful is the example of a literary critic. Eisner states that the judgement of the critic is not achieved "merely by applying standards already known to the particular product being judged" but that it requires a judgement based on experience and sensibilities (p. 112). He claims that it is only in a "metaphoric case that one can measure the extent to which a student has been able to produce an aesthetic object or an expressive narrative" and that standards, in these cases are inapplicable as judgements are required (p. 112).

The final point Eisner makes "deals with the function of educational objectives in curriculum construction" (p. 113). Essentially, Eisner here is arguing that a teacher can develop activities and assessments at the beginning of the curriculum development process, but then, through the course of the instruction, realize that these activities and assessments are not adequate in measuring the growth of the student. If teachers are limited to constricting objectives and standards, they are then unable to adjust their instruction to best meet the needs of their students. Eisner quotes MacDonald to succinctly argue his point:

> There is another view, however, which has both scholarly and experiential referents. This view would state that our objectives are only known to us in any complete sense after the completion of our act of instruction. No matter what we thought we were attempting to do, we can only know what we wanted to accomplish after the fact. Objectives by this rationale are heuristic devices which

provide initiating consequences which become altered in the flow of instruction. (p. 113)

These researchers argue the valid point that while standards and objectives are clearly written, they provide solid goals and focus for quality instruction; however, when the standards, and not the instruction itself, becomes the focus, the spirit of the standards has been compromised.

Key Words

There are a few key terms that, for the sake of this research, should be clarified for thorough understanding. While most of the terms are common knowledge, it is important that the author and readers have the same understanding of some terms.

1. *Assessment* is used as any means to evaluate student learning. Many people use assessment and evaluation interchangeably. Eisner (2002) explains, "assessment is more an aspiration than a concept that has a socially confirmed technical meaning…evaluation, although not particularly ancient in the literature of American education, is no longer as popular as it once was; the term assessment has given it a gentle but firm nudge" (p. 195).

2. A *writing assessment* is simply an assessment where the student is required to provide an extended written response, typically consisting of more than one paragraph.

3. *Advanced Placement (AP)* refers to courses designated by The College Board as college-level courses that are conducted in the high school classroom setting.

4. *Prompt* is another word for writing assignment or topic. The College Board uses the term and it is used in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement classes in this study.

5. When assessments are given on a larger scale, it is often referred to as a *high-stakes test or high-stakes assessment*. Wayne Au (2012) defines an assessment as high-stakes "when its results are used to make important decisions that affect students, teachers, administrators, communities, schools, and districts" (p. 236).

Potential Weaknesses

Assumptions. It was assumed that all study participants were genuinely interested in improving their writing skills and the content of the teacher-researcher's writing curriculum. It was assumed that study participants were honest in response to the survey questions. It was assumed that study participants comprehended the survey questions. It was assumed that study participants saw participation as a way to guide future educational practice and provided thoughtful feedback.

Limitations. As this is an action research study, the sample size was limited to the teacher-researcher's students. In particular, the teacher-researcher conducted the study with his Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classes. Possible response bias due to the study being conducted early in the school year before a sense of trust has been established between the teacher-researcher and the students, students may be reluctant to share their honest opinions.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is the belief that students will be more motivated and achievement will be greater if they become active participants in the development of

the writing topic. This participation will lead to a sense of ownership of their own learning. These ideas are grounded in constructivism, which states that learning is an active process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it. By creating, or contributing to, a writing topic, the student has reflected on previous knowledge and is making assessment part of the learning process. Vygotsky argued that allowing students to problem-solve instead of simply examining what they already know is important to the learning process. Allowing students topic choice follows this line of thinking.

Assessment is such a vital part of what the teacher does, it is easy to understand that there is a multitude of research on the topic. However, most of the research involves assessing the student product and creating the ideal assessment that gives teacher and student feedback on what has been learned in the classroom. And while recent studies have turned to the student's role in the assessment process, most of that research examines the student's involvement in the middle (peer revisions and edits) and end (self-assessment) of the process. This inquiry will be about bringing in the student from the beginning of the process—at the development of the topic for writing assessment.

If teachers can trust students to provide feedback for each other through peer revising opportunities, or trust students to use rubrics or other tools to self-assess, why is it that teachers are reluctant to give up control in the developing of the assessment itself? High-stakes testing environments have led teachers to believe they must control the type of assessment, or writing topic, because teachers have knowledge of the type of prompts being presented on those tests. Since both students and teachers are being evaluated on many of these high-stakes tests, teachers want to ensure that students are prepared to address these prompts. While acknowledging this very real issue, Chan, Graham-Day,

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Ressa, Peters, and Konrad (2014) argue that "granting students an active role in their learning can increase school completion; teach students valuable skills, like setting and attaining goals; and help students develop independence" (p. 106). Further, many believe that student choice in writing topic leads to greater motivation. Because the students either developed their own topic, or helped develop the topic, they are more interested in the topic and that, hypothetically, will lead to greater achievement. Not only will students be more motivated if they have created or chosen their own topic, but, as Stiggins (1999) argues, empowering the students in this manner results in, "…classrooms in which there are no surprises and no excuses. This builds trust and confidence" (p. 196).

Conclusion

In Chapter 2, the literature review cites research on the theoretical base that grounds the rest of the work as well as analyzing the points of view of leading researchers and summaries of their work, both with primary and secondary sources. The literature review will provide analysis of writing as assessment, standards of writing and standardized tests, and student involvement in writing prompt creation. Chapter 3 details the research methodology of the study and includes a description of the research site, study participants, and the instruments used in data collection. A description of the data analysis procedure is also included. Chapter 4 will report the findings of the study through analysis and reflection of the research process. The findings focus on student perceptions of the quality of their writing samples. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of the study and provides an action plan that facilitates educational change in the teacher-researcher's classroom and school. Suggestions for further studies will also be included.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Many educators believe that one of the best, most accurate forms of assessment is a writing assessment where students can explain what they think and what they have learned instead of selecting a best answer from a multiple-choice list. Writing essays or papers provide for a deeper level of thinking; analysis is a more sophisticated example of the students' level of cognitive and affective learning objectives. Further, when a student is involved in the development of the writing assessment prompt, metacognitive skills are developed as the writer must think about his or her thinking and learning process in order to develop a prompt with a well-developed response. Unfortunately, standardized tests, or teacher-generated prompts designed to imitate standardized test prompts, are robbing the writing assessment of its value. The standardized test teacher-made prompt is usually generic at best and an inaccurate tool of students' thinking at worst. And because these standardized tests have become high-stakes assessments, used to rank and measure not only students, but teachers, schools, districts and states, teachers often feel that they must mimic these inadequate prompts in their classroom instruction in order to better prepare their students for the tests. Standardized tests seem to be a part of the education system for the foreseeable future—educators have little to no control over that aspect. However, ideally, writing curricula should be in the hands of the teachers. Unfortunately, standardized testing companies and textbook companies have dominated the landscape marginalizing both students and teachers. Teachers realize that developing strong writing

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skills will enable the student to write well for life as well as for a standardized test. The difficult part is convincing the general public and the federal government that teachers know best how to create constructivist progressive classrooms where students generate knowledge and make meaning for themselves.

This chapter will briefly provide an understanding of the importance of a literature review to action research and then move on to provide a theoretical base for the grounding of the research. Then, themes in writing curricula are explored, as well as points of view and summaries of the literature from the leading experts and researchers in the field of writing instruction. The ideas of writing as assessment, standardized testing and the complications involved therein, and student choice in writing will all be carefully analyzed.

Importance of Literature Review

Mertler (2014) borrows Johnson's definition of a literature review and states it is "an examination of journal articles, ERIC documents, books, and other sources related to your action research project" (p. 60). Conducting a thorough review of the literature available for a topic is of utmost importance for several reasons. By reviewing related literature, one is able to more carefully determine, focus, and narrow a topic. The researcher can also find research that has already been conducted to help determine if the study is even necessary so as not to be redundant or, as Mertler (2014) puts it, "there is no reason to reinvent the wheel when it may not be necessary" (p. 61). Reading what previous researchers have already discovered makes the new research more efficient and effective. It is important to use both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are "firsthand accounts of original research" while secondary sources are "summaries,

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compilations, analyses, or interpretations of primary information" (p. 63). Further, and perhaps most obviously, the researcher needs to be fully educated on the topic so that he/she can present an informed, articulate response to the issue being researched.

Theoretical Base

Vygotsky's "Mental Development of Children and the Process of Learning" (1978) discusses the interaction between learning and development. He asserts that learning and development are interrelated and describes this connection as the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development "is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). While Vygotsky was one of the first modern psychologists to explore the role of social situations in learning, he also studied the importance of language in learning and development. He "saw the linguistic and cognitive development of children as growing out of social interactions" (Buoncristiani and Buoncristiani, 2012, p. 58). Further, Vygotsky's work, "assumes that teachers can create environments that support students as they engage in these complex tasks" (Hillocks, 1995, p. 55).

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Eisner (2005) says Dewey saw human beings as organisms who live *in* and *through* their environment and, therefore, a child is not a creature to be molded, but an individual who "brings with him needs, potentialities, and experiences with which to transact with the environment" (p. 28). Eisner also states that, for Dewey, what was important educationally "was for the child to obtain increasing, intelligent control in planning their own education" (p. 28). The true goal of any educator should be that they have nurtured a desire to learn and grow long after the child has left the classroom. This learning can continue through a social interaction with the individual's environment.

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metacognition skills that students can become independent learners. They also make a very clear and close connection between metacognition and language development, especially concerning writing skills: "As our children develop greater facility with the written language, they have another essential tool of metacognition" (p. 64). The authors elaborate on this by adding, "By developing the ability to write our thoughts down, we increase both the breadth and the depth of metacognition because we are no longer limited by what we can actually recall" (p. 64). In other words, the ability to think about and reflect on what was learned, in order to appropriately develop a topic and respond to it, is one of the most powerful tools to develop metacognitive skills.

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He continues by saying that when teachers begin to plan their curriculum guides for the year, the standards or objectives are often the last component they consider. Eisner argues that if the objectives were "really useful tools…teachers…would use them" (p. 111). He carefully develops four main points that he argues through the rest of his paper.

His first point is "that the dynamic and complex process of instruction yields outcomes far too numerous to be specified in behavioral and content terms in advance" (p. 111). In other words, too much takes place in the day-to-day classroom instruction to be able to accurately predict in the development of the objective or standard. Classroom discussion could veer off into an unexpected, but worthy, avenue in a literature study. A mathematic concept may be especially challenging for a group and the pace of instruction would have to be slowed. The process of teaching is often too unpredictable to establish and maintain rigid objectives or standards set at the beginning of a unit of instruction.

Eisner continues by stating that a "second limitation of theory concerning educational objectives is its failure to recognize the constraints various subject matters place upon objectives" (p. 111). He explains that in some subject areas like math and science it may be easier to predict the particular operation or behavior the student is to perform, but in other subject areas like the arts or literature study, the operation may not be predictable at all; often times the student responds to the art or literature in an

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Eisner's third point "deals with the belief that objectives stated in behavioral and content terms can be used as criteria by which to measure the outcomes of curriculum and instruction" (p. 112). He argues here that application of a standard is not a measure of achievement, but rather a judgement. He uses several examples in this section to illustrate his point, but especially useful is the example of a literary critic. Eisner states that the judgement of the critic is not achieved "merely by applying standards already known to the particular product being judged" but that it requires a judgement based on experience and sensibilities (p. 112). He claims that it is only in a "metaphoric case that one can measure the extent to which a student has been able to produce an aesthetic object or an expressive narrative" and that standards, in these cases are inapplicable as judgements are required (p. 112).

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instruction to best meet the needs of their students. Eisner quotes MacDonald to succinctly argue his point:

> There is another view, however, which has both scholarly and experiential referents. This view would state that our objectives are only known to us in any complete sense after the completion of our act of instruction. No matter what we thought we were attempting to do, we can only know what we wanted to accomplish after the fact. Objectives by this rationale are heuristic devices which provide initiating consequences which become altered in the flow of instruction. (p. 113)

These researchers argue the valid point that while standards and objectives are clearly written, they provide solid goals and focus for quality instruction; however, when the standards, and not the instruction itself, becomes the focus, the spirit of the standards has been compromised.

Historical Context

  Writing as assessment. Lorna M. Earl (2003) believes that there are three roles of assessment in the classroom: assessment *of* learning, assessment *for* learning, and assessment *as* learning. Assessment *of* learning is typically done at the end of something like a unit or a course or a program. Assessment *for* learning "shifts the emphasis from summative to formative assessment, from making judgments to creating descriptions" and usually consist of "observation, worksheets, questioning in class, student-teacher conferencing, or whatever mechanism is likely to give them information that will be useful for their planning and teaching" (p. 24). Assessment *as* learning emphasizes the role of the student "as active, engaged, and critical assessors, [who] can make sense of

information, relate it to prior knowledge, and master the skills involved" (p. 25). Writing assessment is such a powerful tool because it has the potential to involve all three of those purposes. Certainly students compose essays at the end of a unit in order to communicate to the teacher (and themselves) what they have learned throughout the unit; written responses can be used *for* learning as a way for the teacher to monitor the student's progress and then adjust his/her instruction in order to meet the needs of the student; and written responses also can be used *as* learning if the student has been involved in the development of the prompt so that he can display internalization of the knowledge gained.

Writing assessment is particularly interesting because the educator must consider what exactly is being evaluated—the content, or message of the writing, the writing proficiency of the student, or a combination of the two. Richard J. Stiggins (1997) explains that, "We can use essays assessments…only if we remain constantly aware of the fact that being able to write about a good product and being able to create that product are different things" (p. 165). When an educator uses a writing assessment to focus on the student's mastery of the content, the ideas that are expressed are the focus of the assessment, "but when writing is the medium used to produce a term paper or research report, the criteria used to evaluate performance typically include issues of form as well as those of content" (Stiggins, 1997, p. 166). A classroom educator typically uses writing assessment to evaluate mastery of content. In an English/Language Arts classroom, form is obviously added to the evaluation as well as content. With standardized tests, however, the assessment is mostly for form and the prompts are disconnected to the student and any learning that has taken place—the instrument is designed to measure writing ability

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instead of content mastery. Most researchers argue that this is the least effective type of writing and that a student should have a connection to the writing assignment in order to be truly successful.

James H. McMillan, in his *Classroom Assessment—Principles and Practice for Effective Instruction* (2001), elaborates on the importance of the writing assessment. He explains that essay writing requires a more complex level of thinking from the student as the student must accomplish several different tasks through the writing process, including organizing thoughts, integrating and interpreting information, arguing, reasoning, and evaluating as a few examples. Further, McMillan argues that students learn more when they know they will have a writing assessment because they prepare more for that assessment:

> Research on student learning habits shows that when students know they will face an essay test they tend to study by looking for themes, patterns, relationships, and how information can be organized and sequenced. In contrast, when studying for objective tests students tend to fragment information and memorize each piece.
> (p. 184)

However, McMillan acknowledges that constructing the essay prompt is key in obtaining the higher-level thinking that the evaluator desires.

While it is certainly more challenging, one could argue that even writing prompts that appear on large-scale standardized test have their place, if constructed well. Dahl and Farnan (1998) suggest that there are a few such benefits from these types of tests: "these assessments and their results keep the importance of writing to the front of the public" and they also "provide motivation for educators to develop increasingly valid and

consistent scoring criteria and processes" (p. 112). Teachers benefit as well in that they have the opportunity to read a wide variety of student work outside of their own classrooms. And, finally, the most significant contribution of these assessments is that they have raised student performance expectations. And while this is all data that is beneficial for different reasons, it does little to tell the educator what the student has learned. These large scale standardized tests provide valuable information, but not necessarily the type of information that is most useful for the classroom teacher.

Standards and standardized writing. After the creation of the standards and objectives, educators had to find ways in which to evaluate if teachers were adequately teaching those standards—part of the responsibility of the standardized test. These assessments, in their various forms, exist at the local, state, and national level and are not new to academia. However, where standardized tests once held the title for most nerve-wracking experience for students and teachers, now the world of education has the "high-stakes" test. Since standardized tests are now being used to measure everything from student learning to teacher effectiveness to quality of a school district, these tests that once simply measured student growth (and many argued against the effectiveness of even that function) now garner more attention than ever. Wayne Au (2012) defines an assessment as high-stakes "when its results are used to make important decisions that affect students, teachers, administrators, communities, schools, and districts" (p. 236). Au goes on to claim that these high-stakes tests do not do what they were designed to do, but instead "undermines education because it narrows curriculum, limits the ability of teachers to meet the sociocultural needs of their students, and corrupts systems of educational measurement" (p. 236).

Au analyzed and studied the data from 49 qualitative studies conducted by the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search, and Education Full Text databases to examine the relationship between high-stakes testing and curriculum at the K-12 classroom level. Essentially, Au was seeking to discover if teachers tailored their curriculum to align more closely to what was being expected from the standardized tests. The findings of his study "suggest that there is a significant relationship between the implementation of high-stakes testing and changes in the content of a curriculum, the structure of knowledge contained within the content, and the types of pedagogy associated with communication and the content" (p. 242). Further, "a more detailed analysis finds that the narrowing of curricular content was strongest among participants in the studies that focused on secondary education, with the most narrowing found in studies of social studies and language arts classrooms" (p. 243). And while writing assessment or instruction is not specifically mentioned in Au's study, one can acknowledge that writing is a significant part of the language arts classroom and, therefore, part of the narrowing of curriculum that Au found.

Brimi (2012) conducted a similar study in Tennessee where he studied the impact of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) on the curriculum formatted by the teachers. With Brimi's studies, writing assessment was the emphasis of his research. The teachers he worked with indicated that the "TCAP palpably affected their instruction" in that they "struggled to teach the writing process and showed reluctance to teach or assign multi-genre writing" (p. 52). Teachers felt the need to focus on the five paragraph persuasive essay as that is the type of prompt that appears on the TCAP. The teachers indicated that they "felt motivated to teach students how to negotiate

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and pass the test" (p. 71). Further, the teachers believed that the content was not of great importance but that the structure and format of the persuasive essay take precedence. Persuasive writing is certainly a valuable skill to teach students; however, the focus should be on content just as much, if not more, than the mere structure. Further, educators need not feel as if they have to sacrifice a well-rounded writing program in order to focus on the mode mandated by the standardized test.

George Hillocks (2015) spent several years studying the writing assessments of five states—Illinois, Kentucky, New York, Oregon, and Texas. He and his assistants interviewed "about eighty teachers and administrators in six school districts in each state; examined state, local, and commercial materials related to the assessments; and examined the writing assessments produced by the other forty-three states that have them" (p. 63). The most significant finding of his study is that writing assessment heavily influences instruction. Hillocks found that most states use a similar writing assessment—format is of greater value than content. Hillocks found that the standard for proficient, for most of these assessments, may be well-developed and grammatically sound, but are not well-reasoned or developed in an effective manner. Hillocks was particularly troubled by his findings in Illinois where he saw a focus on the five paragraph essay, a lack of fiction in the curriculum, and a format for writing that specifically instructed students where to place certain sentences and what those sentences should look like. He found that students are subjected to this type of writing instruction for eight to ten years and it becomes so ingrained in them that it follows them to college where "Directors of freshman English at three Illinois state universities have complained about the extent of the problem (p. 70). The English department at Illinois State University even goes so far so to publish a

manual "advising their incoming freshmen that while the five paragraph essay may have been appropriate in high school, it is not appropriate in college and should be seriously avoided. It shuts down thinking" (p. 70).

Eisner (2012) also agrees that standards have veered from their original intent. He states that "standards and the measurement of performance were intended to tidy up a messy system and to make teachers and school administrators truly accountable. The aim was then, as is today, to systemize and standardize so that the public will know which school are performing well and which are not" (p. 279). However, "with 50 departments of education…16,000 school districts…more than 100,000 schools" and each district shaping its own education policy, the tidying up that standards were supposed to accomplish does not appear to have occurred (p. 279). One of those approaches to reform that standards addressed was the standardized test. Eisner argues that because everything else in education is so messy, standardized tests seem to offer one of the only true, definitive forms of measurement to know how schools are performing. Unfortunately, those tests are having a negative impact as well.

Eisner points out that tests have come to define the education system's priorities. He discusses the focus on the core subjects and the marginalization of the arts. The education system has chosen to focus on the core subjects because it is easy to test for core subjects. As Eisner states, "Our idea of core subjects is related to our assessment practices and the tests we use to determine whether or not schools are doing well" (p. 281). However, Eisner argues that "what test scores predict best are other test scores" (p. 281). He asserts that our assessments need to predict performances that matter outside of

the context of the school and what would enable students to be successful for life outside of school and for the rest of their lives.

While many educators would argue that standardized testing and the problems that accompany it have been around for quite some time, Bronwyn T. Williams (2005) contends that *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002) and its "focus on broad comparisons of students, with little regard to their differences, and severe punishments for schools and teachers who fail to meet the 'standards'" has led to the current pressure of high-stakes testing (p. 152). He asserts that writing is about an individual's opinion and what they bring to the topic at hand. Writing is how we communicate and no one thinks, communicates, or writes exactly the same. However, "Standardized testing, to be standardized, must create questions and answers that leave no room for interpretation" (p. 154). Williams claims that the writing prompts that students face on standardized tests have no connection to their lives, communities, or interests. Then their writing samples are graded by anonymous, disinterested readers or even computers. All of this teaches students, and administrators, that the final grade is what matters and not the content or who it is communicated. Williams uses the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and its writing prompt as an example. The SAT is the main factor many universities consider when determining to accept a student. The 25 minutes limit for the writing portion of the test is taken by thousands of students hoping to attend college, but surely a 25 minute response to a generic prompt really is not what the admissions officers want to determine if that student is ready for college courses. Williams states that the writing samples on the SAT "are apparently scored on such generalizable characteristics of writing as smooth transitions and varied sentences rather than on content or overall effect (p. 154). One has

to wonder if the SAT is truly accomplishing anything by offering this type of writing assessment.

Standardized writing prompts encourage, as already shown in studies by Hillocks and Brimi, a certain type of formulaic writing. One of the most common formulas for responding to standardized prompts is the five paragraph essay; but there are several different models and methods that encourage quick, efficient writing to prompts. Vicki Spandel (2005) has studied the effects on formulaic writing and insists that the type of writing some teachers use to prepare for standardized tests is not the type of writing that English teachers should be teaching. Spandel disagrees with these advocates and says, "It can have the opposite effect. Struggling writers who follow a formulaic approach may seem to improve significantly at first, but in fact it is very hard for them to rise above a level we might call functional" (p. 121). Spandel states that offering students a formula essentially tells them that the teacher does not trust them enough to create their own ideas in their own way, so the teacher will provide the formula for the student. She says,

> We must remain open, always, to the possibility that students are capable of
> thinking at a much deeper level than their initial attempts at writing would
> indicate. And we must remember that formulas, drills, and fill-in-the-blank
> exercises have one important feature in common: They are deadly dull. (Spandel,
> 2005, p. 121)

Dull formulas are used to respond to dull prompts and these combine to form dull writing from students. This was not the goal, obviously, when standards were created and then assessments devised to measure the implementation of the standards, but this is what writing assessment has become.

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Student involvement. The dilemma is that writing assessment is one of the most powerful assessments at a teacher's disposal, yet standardized tests have, by and large, bastardized the practice and, many argue, have actually done more harm than good. Writing assessment, in its truest form, should allow the student to communicate to the teacher what he thinks, what he has learned, and how the teacher's instruction has affected that learning.

Unfortunately, teachers currently think they have to mimic standardized test prompts, and those prompts often require formulaic responses that focus more on form than on content. In the language arts classroom, however, depending on what the teacher is trying to assess, both content and form are of great importance. Many researchers now are arguing that one of the best ways that teachers can improve their writing instruction and truly assess what the student has learned is by bringing the student into the development of the assessment.

Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, and Konrad (2014) discuss the difficult position teachers find themselves in with the balance of preparing students for the test, yet wanting to provide meaningful writing instruction: "At this time, when teacher performance is being measured as a function of student performance, teachers may be reluctant to actively work on increasing student ownership of the learning process" (p. 106). By contrast, they also point out the necessity of including students: "Granting students an active role in their learning can increase school completion; teach students valuable skills, like setting and attaining goals; and help students develop independence" (p. 106). Stiggins and Chappuis (2010) agree and add that, "Student-involved classroom

assessment opens the assessment process and invites students in as partners…to play a role in defining the criteria by which they will be judged" (p. 3).

Lorna Earl (2003) asserts that the assessment must be relevant to the student in order to achieve optimum results. She states that, "When assessment capitalizes on students' interests, enthusiasm, and talents and provides images of the world that lies ahead of them, it is much more likely to engage and inspire them so that the learning is itself the motivator" (p. 68). All of this functions to build a sense of empowerment and ownership in the student and their writing benefits from this.

Kelly Gallagher (2006) argues that one reason students do not write well is because they do not care what they are writing about. He asserts that teachers have to move away from requiring what he called fake writing. Gallagher states that giving student choice in their writing assessment is one way to try to generate interest in the assignment. Students have a choice in the writing when they are included in the development of the writing prompt. Gallagher says, "Choice generates a welcome chain reaction: it creates student buy-in, which in turn generates writing motivation, which in turn causes students to write better" (p. 91). He claims that there are two main benefits to allowing students that level of choice in their writing assessment:

1. Choice fosters a feeling of ownership in the writer. When a student develops ownership, she is much more likely not only to start a paper, but to maintain a stronger work ethic while in the drafting process.

2. Choice drives better revision…A student who cares about her paper is much more likely to closely revise; a student who does not care about her paper will treat the revision process lightly, if at all. (p. 91)

Students should care about what they are writing. It only makes sense that they would do a better job when they care about the topic. Unfortunately, standardized test prompts do not make the needed connection with students and their lives or studies in order to promote that level of devotion.

Because writing is a fluid process, having students involved from the beginning of the assessment enables them to become active participants in their learning. In other subject areas, a final assessment stands alone. For example, a math test is given at the end of a unit to determine how well the student has learned those math concepts. However, with a valuable writing assessment, the teacher must function more as a coach—working and developing the student's skills as he progresses. Townsend, Fu, and Lamme (2015) argue that teachers should act more like coaches and not judges. They insist that young writers should see their work not as an end product up for evaluation, but as something more fluid and malleable. They continue by stating that in order for this to take place "requires a curriculum that integrates reading and writing, requires children to choose and develop topics that matter to them personally, builds a sense of real audience and real purpose in their writing…" (p. 72).

Since writing is a fluid process that utilizes the teacher as a coach, teachers need to look at the writing process for instructional purposes as well as assessment purposes. Nagin (2003) asserts that there are five components for teachers to incorporate in order to ensure that they are properly monitoring their students' progress: "(1) extended writing samples; (2) writing in multiple genres; (3) valid rubrics; (4) writing over time, across genres and content areas; (5) *student participation in developing assessments* (emphasis mine)" (p. 77). Nagin continues by stating that many writing teachers find engaging

students in the assessment process is important as it enables the students to assume more responsibility for their learning and it also helps them develop as writers. When they create their own writing topics they have reflected on their own learning to develop further learning. This requires metacognitive thinking that leads to better, more proficient writers.

One of the most challenging aspects of the writing process to teach is voice—the personality of the writer shining through their words. When a writer develops, or helps to develop, their own topic, voice is easier to detect because the writer initiates this process from the beginning. Vicki Spandel and Donald Graves have both conducted research on topic choice and the development of voice in writing. Spandel (2005) states that "Writers who discover their own topics write with voice and commitment…When the voice is strong, the writing literally becomes an extension of self" (p. 18). Graves (1994) refers to voice as the "driving force" of the writing process (p. 81). He continues by saying that voice is the "imprint of ourselves on our writing" and that it "underlies ever part of the process" (p. 81). Graves asserts that what happens when voice is absent results in dry, lifeless, mechanical writing—the type of writing all too often seen in standardized testing. He reinforces his point by stating, "Our data show that when a writer makes a good choice of subject, voice booms through. When voice is strong, writing improves, along with the skills that help to improve writing. Indeed, voice is the engine that sustains writers through the hard work of drafting and redrafting" (p. 82). Unfortunately, standardized tests and their time constraints prevent this drafting and redrafting that is also so very important in producing quality writing.

However, both of these authors also recognize the limitations to allowing student choice in developing their own writing prompt as well. This is where the coaching aspect of the writing teacher is developed. Spandel (2005) clearly argues for the continued valued presence of the teacher when she says that allowing students to "write about anything you want" is, in effect, like pushing our students off a cliff: "If we teach them to hang glide, and provide the necessary equipment (and confidence), they'll leap from the cliff themselves" (p. 19). Calkins and Harwayne (1987) concur and state that when teachers allow free reign without proper coaching and development, that there is the potential to see trivial self-chosen topics like, "My Summer Vacation" and "When I Went to My Aunt's House" (p. 23). Instead, through careful coaching and working with the students, teachers need to encourage "students to write about the topics that matter most to them" (p. 23).

Another reason that voice is such a difficult concept in writing is because the voice that most assessors, especially of standardized tests, expect to read is from the perspective of a white, middle-class student. Asao Inoue (2014) explains that

Past discussions about…basic writing…have questioned the nature and production of failure by questioning who the basic writer is, the inherent racism in basic writing programs and concepts, and the relationship between the kinds of languages used by students (often marked by culture, class, gender, and race) and dominant, White, middle-class, academic discourse. (p. 330)

The classroom teacher can honor and respect the diverse background and abilities of students, whereas a standardized test seeks a standardized perspective—the dominant White perspective. Inoue continues by stating, "Writing failure stems from irreconcilable

differences between expectations of White, middle-class literacies in school and the raced, cultured, classed, and gendered home literacies that learners attempt to use at school" (p. 331).

Mary Ryan and Georgina Barton (2014) refer to this double-speak as "code mesh." According to the authors, code meshing occurs in several different formats—from urban to standard English, in English language learners and their native tongues, and then even within some rural dialects and standard English. They argue that in order for students to be successful on standardized tests, they must "choose how to perform as writers for different texts and contexts. The opportunity to 'code mesh' by blending, merging, and hybridizing language and dialect for the purposes of constructing ethnic identities in writing must be considered in writing assessment" (p. 307). One of the ways to do this is by bringing the student into the prompt development. By allowing the students choice in developing the prompt, the student can feel comfortable enough with the topic that s/he can then focus on the difficult task for code meshing.

Michelle Crotteau (2007) writes about her experience with Appalachian English (AE) and trying to get students from that region to adhere to Standard American English (SE). She explains that AE "differs grammatically and phonologically from (SE)" and that "dialectical speakers are not tracked in the school's statistics because as white English speakers, they are not considered a subgroup" (p. 27). Crotteau also used a form of code meshing as she relates the story of Bucky, one of her students that she worked with the pass Virginia's End-of-Course Writing Test. She explains, "Bucky's dialect is a powerful connection to his family, history, and place. I could not tell him the way he uses language is wrong; rather, I had to teach him how to use SE in addition to his home

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language so he could pass the writing test" (p. 29). She further argues that, "Honoring students' dialect in the age of standardized testing is a complex teaching task, but it is essential if we are to give all students access to a full education that results in a high school diploma" (p. 29). Crotteau explains that she was able to bridge Bucky's AE with SE by allowing him choice in his in-class writing assignments. By allowing Bucky to write about hunting, an activity that is crucial to his family and community, but also a topic that he is knowledgeable about, Bucky felt that what he had to write about the topic was valued—that he was valued. Crotteau concludes by stating that "Authentic writing instruction and test preparation are not antithetical … Narrowing acceptable classroom writing to only SE disenfranchises students whose future depends on fluency in both SE and their home dialect" (p. 32).

Key Terms

There are a few key terms that, for the sake of this research, should be clarified for thorough understanding. While most of the terms are common knowledge, it is important that the author and readers have the same understanding of some terms.

1. *Assessment* is used as any means to evaluate student learning. Many people use assessment and evaluation interchangeably. Eisner (2002) explains, "assessment is more an aspiration than a concept that has a socially confirmed technical meaning…evaluation, although not particularly ancient in the literature of American education, is no longer as popular as it once was; the term assessment has given it a gentle but firm nudge" (p. 195).

2. A *writing assessment* is simply an assessment where the student is required to provide an extended written response, typically consisting of more than one paragraph.

3. *Advanced Placement (AP)* refers to courses designated by The College Board as college-level courses that are conducted in the high school classroom setting.

4. *Prompt* is another word for writing assignment or topic. The College Board uses the term and it is used in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement classes in this study.

Conclusion

The problem for the language arts teacher is that s/he knows the best way to teach writing—teach the entire writing process, involve the student in both the process and the development of the writing topic, and then coach that student forward to the most proficient piece possible. However, high-stakes standardized tests and their writing assessments require almost the exact opposite of quality writing instruction. There is no coach, there is not drafting process, and there is no student involvement in the topic selection. One could see where the teacher would be tempted (or even instructed) to teach to the test since everything from student learning to teacher ability to district quality is all measured by these high-stakes tests. In writing instruction, the emphasis needs to return to what works best. Creating intelligent, sophisticated, confident writers will enable those writers to respond well in *any* writing situation—even standardized tests.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Today, high-stakes assessments determine so much—where students can get accepted to college, what types of scholarships the students will receive, how the school is ranked, and now, potentially, how teachers will be paid—it is understandable that teachers are hesitant to place learning where it truly belongs—in the hands of the student. Teachers know what the standardized tests expect and, at least in general, the structure of the questions. Preparing students to do well on those tests are clearly high priorities for teachers. However, true learning does not work that way. Students learn best when they become active participants in their own education. When students learn to think about their own thinking, when they develop those metacognitive skills, true learning has occurred. In order for students to experience meaningful learning, and also perform well on those high-stakes tests, the teacher has to be ready to have a more student-involved classroom. Stiggins (1997) explains this process: "Student-involved classroom assessment opens up assessment development and brings students in as full partners…We invite students to learn about the criteria by which their work will be judged…We teach these lessons by having students actually devise sample assessment exercises and scoring criteria…The path to success is clear to them; there will be no surprises and no excuses" (p. 47).

One of the best ways to assess students is through writing essays. McMillan (2001) explains the significance of the essay: "The essay is an excellent way to measure

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deep understanding and mastery of complex information…when students know they will face an essay test they tend to study by looking for themes, patterns, relationships, and how information can be organized and sequenced" (p. 184). However, he cautions that in order for an essay to be a quality tool for assessment, there must be a quality essay prompt. McMillan continues by suggesting four components of a quality essay. The second component, "Write an item so that students clearly understand the specific task" (McMillan, 2001, p. 186) is vital. If students cannot understand what is being asked of them, they cannot be successful with the assessment. One way to ensure that students understand what is expected of them is by bringing them into the prompt-development process.

One of the more difficult traits of writing to teach is voice. However, many argue that it is the most important. Graves (1994) argues that voice, "underlies every aspect of the [writing] process" and "Take the voice away and the writing collapses of its own weight" (p. 81). One way to ensure that a writer instills voice in their writing sample is by choosing, creating, or helping to create the writing topic. Not only does involvement in the topic creation help empower the student and give them a sense of ownership of their own learning, but, "Our data show that when a writer makes a good choice of subject, voice booms through. When voice is strong, writing improves, along with the skills that help to improve writing" (Graves, 1994, p. 81-82). Unfortunately, teachers are reluctant to allow students to choose their own topics or create their own topic because of high-stakes testing situations. Teachers often feel that they know best the types and formats of questions that will appear on standardized tests and they want to ensure that their students are prepared for those situations.

Unfortunately, the types of prompts that appear on standardized tests, and the prompts that teachers use to prepare their students for those tests, are often dry and lifeless. They do not inspire or motivate the student to engage in the assessment. Richard Stiggins (2002) argues that the best way to improve assessment results is by using assessments *for* learning instead of simply having assessments *of* learning and that, "assessment *for* learning must involve students in the process" (p. 761). Stiggins and Chappuis (2010) further developed this idea and state that, "In short, student-involved assessment helps learners see and understand our vision of their academic success" (p. 12).

Moreover, because students were involved in creating their own topic, and because they know they have had success with this in the past, this increased their motivation. Gallagher (2006) sees involving students in assessment as producing a chain reaction: "Choice generates a welcome chain reaction: it creates student buy-in, which in turn generates writing motivation, which in turn causes students to write better" (p. 91). Earl (2003) supports this idea by stating, "When assessment capitalizes on students' interests, enthusiasm, and talents and provides images of the world that lies ahead of them, it is much more likely to engage and inspire them so that learning is itself a motivator" (p. 68).

Purpose statement. The purpose of this quantitative action research study was to examine the effects of writing to a prompt and then writing to a topic of choice. After the analysis of the writing, another aspect of analysis was to determine the effect these different types of writing have on student attitude and if that attitude affected student motivation. To clarify, the specific purpose of the study was to examine student

perception of achievement for teacher-generated prompts compared to topics they choose themselves.

Problem statement. The problem of practice for the action research study involved a rural, southern Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classroom where students report that while they enjoy the assigned readings for the course and engage in vigorous in-class discussions about the readings, they felt they would be able to produce better writing assignments if they had more input into the development of the writing prompts assigned to them. These students also argued that when essays and writings are assigned to them that they are boring and lifeless and that they do not reflect on the discussions that took place in my class or the students' writing ability. These students reported that when asked about a particular text or text analysis problem, that they had so much to say about the reading, but that the teacher-made or text-book-made prompts did not inspire them. These students requested the opportunity to be able to write about topics of their choice and they argued that given the opportunity to do so that they will be enabled to write much better essays.

The problem of practice also involves the high-stakes testing that these students are required to excel on in the Advanced Placement course and the ways in which the teacher-researcher negotiated the classroom to enable them to both succeed on the exam and also have the best ELA experience possible to ensure they have a life-long love of reading and success in higher education and their chosen careers

Research question. How do students perceive their own writing abilities when faced with standardized, teacher-generated prompts compared to writing prompts that they helped develop?

Research objectives. The first objective was to determine student achievement on writing assignments with a teacher-generated prompt and then determine student achievement on writing assignments with a topic that the student has chosen. The next objective was to survey students and determine if their attitudes differed based on which prompt they were addressing. If a significant difference was discovered, the next objective would be to determine if the difference could have affected the difference in the achievement levels.

Action Research Design

This quantitative study sought to determine if the two prompt styles affected student attitudes about the writing assignments and if that attitude change affects the level achievement. The idea being, as Lorna Earl (2003) states, "When assessment capitalizes on students' interests, enthusiasm, and talents and provides images of the world that lies ahead of them, it is much more likely to engage and inspire them so that learning is itself the motivator" (p. 68). This component will incorporate surveys and interviews to record student attitudes about the different prompts.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of writing to a prompt and then writing to a topic of choice. After the analysis of the writing, another aspect of analysis was to determine the effect these different types of writing have on student attitude and if that attitude affected student motivation. To clarify, the specific purpose of the study was to examine student perception of achievement for teacher-generated prompts compared to topics they choose themselves.

First, the teacher-researcher gained permission from both the district level and the school level to conduct this action research study in his Advanced Placement English

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Language and Composition class. After permission was obtained, the teacher-researcher sent out consent forms to both parents (Appendix B) and students (Appendix C) to complete if they were willing to be participants in this study. Eighteen students and their parents returned completed consent and assent forms granting permission to be included in this study. As Mertler (2012) states, "The basic idea of getting permission for conducting action research and collecting data on students is to protect the privacy of both students and their families" (p. 108). Then, the teacher-researcher developed the encoding system to maintain the student-participants' anonymity.

Students in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class were assigned a writing topic based on the reading of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*--a work that had recently been studied in class. The prompt was teacher-generated and modeled closely after what appears on the College Board AP English Language and Composition exam. Students completed and submitted that writing assignment. The teacher-researcher assessed those assignments, but did not return them to the students.

Then, students worked collaboratively to create their own writing prompts for another assessment for *In Cold Blood*. The teacher-researcher modeled the thought process behind creating writing prompts so that students knew they must create challenging writing prompts that induce higher-level thinking skills. After the teacher-researcher modeling, students were responsible for the creation of their own prompts. The teacher-researcher assessed those writing samples as well, but did not return those to the students, either. The teacher-researcher did not want the students to see what their teacher

thought of the two assignments before they provided their own feedback in the form of the survey.

The class session following the completion of the student-created writing sample, the students were asked to complete the Likert-type rating scale survey (Appendix A). A Likert-type scale is most appropriate in this study as, according to Mertler (2014), "this type of scale also exists on a continuum, but something other than extent of agreement is being measured" (p. 142). The teacher-researcher collected and analyzed the surveys. The teacher-researcher kept hard copies of the surveys in a binder in a locked cabinet in his classroom as well as scanned the documents into PDF format to store on the teacher-researcher's personal computer.

Researcher

The teacher-researcher first gained permission from both the district level and the school level to conduct this action research study in his Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class. After permission was obtained, the teacher-researcher sent out consent forms to both parents (Appendix B) and students (Appendix C) to complete if they were willing to be participants in this study. As Mertler (2012) states, "The basic idea of getting permission for conducting action research and collecting data on students is to protect the privacy of both students and their families" (p. 108). Then, the teacher-researcher developed the encoding system to maintain the student-participants' anonymity.

Students in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class were assigned a writing topic that was generated by the teacher-researcher and modeled closely after what appears on the College Board Advanced

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Placement English Language and Composition exam. After students completed the assignments, the teacher-researcher assessed those assignments, but did not share the results with the students.

The teacher-researcher then modeled creating writing prompts for the students. The teacher-researcher assessed the writing assignments that were completed with the students creating their own prompt. Those graded assignments were not returned to the students, either. The teacher-researcher did not want the grades of the two assignments to affect how the students completed the survey.

The teacher-researcher created a Likert-type rating scale survey (Appendix A). A Likert-type scale is most appropriate in this study as, according to Mertler (2014), "this type of scale also exists on a continuum, but something other than extent of agreement is being measured" (p. 142). The teacher-researcher collected and analyzed the surveys. The teacher-researcher kept hard copies of the surveys in a binder in a locked cabinet in his classroom as well as scanned the documents into PDF format to store on the teacher-researcher's personal computer.

Finally, the teacher-researcher reflected on the gathering of the data and then the findings of this study were shared with the other members of the English department. Mertler cites Johnson (2008) as claiming that "the most appreciative audience for presentations of action research results is often your own colleagues" (p. 43). As Mertler suggests, this sharing was in an informal manner and took place during an English department meeting. Besides colleagues in the English department, results were also shared with the Curriculum Coordinator and Principal of the school where research was conducted.

Sample

Participants in the study were high school juniors and seniors enrolled in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classes. 18 students and their parents granted permission to be included in this study. The teacher-researcher, in accordance with advisor suggestions, purposely used a smaller, more manageable sample size as appropriate for action research. The students consisted of 12 white females, 2 Asian females, and 4 white males from an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class from a rural, southern school located in South Carolina. All students were native English speakers and none had any special accommodations recorded. In order to maintain ethical standards for action research, identities remained anonymous and each participant was assigned a numerical identifier and the information was kept in an encrypted electronic device by the researcher. The student and parent/guardian knew they were able to withdraw from the research at any time with no penalty. Data collected in the form of surveys and writing samples was strictly confidential and remained with teacher-researcher at all times under lock and key or password protected on electronic devices.

Setting

All research was conducted at a rural high school which is located in the upstate of South Carolina. The county is located in the upper left corner of South Carolina and the high school is located close to the South Carolina/Georgia state line. Based on the school report card, issued by the state of South Carolina, during the 2013-2014 school year, the high school had 1,003 students enrolled. On the state report card, the school received a "good" absolute rating and a "below average" growth rating. 16.3% of the

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students were categorized as disabled, 10.4% of students were enrolled in Advanced Placement classes, and there was a 5.2% annual dropout rate. The student/teacher ratio in core classes is 29.6/1. $7,703 dollars were spent per pupil. 195 seniors graduated in 2014 and 69% of them received the LIFE scholarship. The graduation rate for 2014 was 78.8%.

Instrumentation and Materials

In addition to the consent forms (Appendix B and C), the teacher-researcher created a Likert-type rating scale (Appendix A) to gauge students' perceptions. The class session following the completion of the student-created writing sample, the students were asked to complete the Likert-type rating scale survey. A Likert-type scale is most appropriate in this study as, per Mertler (2014), "this type of scale also exists on a continuum, but something other than extent of agreement is being measured" (p. 142).

Data Collection

The teacher-researcher collected and recorded the surveys. The teacher-researcher recorded the numerical identifier with the surveys. The teacher-researcher kept hard copies of the surveys in a binder in a locked cabinet in his classroom as well as scanned the documents into PDF format to store on the teacher-researcher's personal computer.

Data Analysis and Reflection

The teacher-researcher then analyzed and reflected on the gathering of the data. The findings of this study were shared with the other members of the English department. Mertler cites Johnson (2008) as claiming that "the most appreciative audience for presentations of action research results is often your own colleagues" (p. 43). As Mertler suggests, this sharing was in an informal manner and took place during an English

department meeting. Besides colleagues in the English department, results were also shared with the Curriculum Coordinator and Principal of the school where research was conducted. The reflection was to consider changes to the English curriculum based on observations and data collected and an action plan developed with careful consideration from all parties involved based on the data collected during the study.

Conclusion

This quantitative action research study was designed to address the concerns of the teacher-researcher and his students concerning student perceptions of writing and motivation comparing standardized writing assignments and assignments where the students were involved in creating the prompt. The sample size was appropriate because it involved the concerned parties. Because the teacher-researcher wanted to investigate student perception and opinion pertaining to the two writing prompts, quantitative action research was the ideal design and a Likert-type scale was the appropriate instrument. As Mertler states, "Anything that can be quantified can be considered quantitative data. This includes not only items that can be counted but also ratings of one's feelings, attitudes, interests, or perceptions on some sort of numerical scale" (p. 137).

Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretation of Results

Introduction

In this age of high-stakes assessments dictating so much—where students can get accepted to college, what types of scholarships the students will receive, how the school is ranked, and now, potentially, how teachers will receive raises—it is understandable that teachers are hesitant to place learning where it truly belongs—in the hands of the student. Teachers know what the standardized tests expect and, at least in general, the structure of the questions. Preparing students to do well on those tests are clearly high priorities for teachers. However, true learning does not work that way. Students learn best when they become active participants in their own education. While Vygotsky was one of the first modern psychologists to explore the role of social situations in learning, he also studied the importance of language in learning and development. He "saw the linguistic and cognitive development of children as growing out of social interactions" (Buoncristiani and Buoncristiani, 2012, p. 58). Further, Vygotsky's work, "assumes that teachers can create environments that support students as they engage in these complex tasks" (Hillocks, 1995, p. 55).

With careful scaffolding from teachers, students can learn to think about their own thinking. When they develop those metacognitive skills, true learning has occurred. In order for students to experience meaningful learning, and also perform well on those high-stakes tests, the teacher has to be ready to have a more student-involved classroom. Stiggins (1997) explains this process: "Student-involved classroom assessment opens up

assessment development and brings students in as full partners…We invite students to learn about the criteria by which their work will be judged…We teach these lessons by having students actually devise sample assessment exercises and scoring criteria…The path to success is clear to them; there will be no surprises and no excuses" (p. 47).

One of the best ways to assess students is through writing essays. McMillan (2001) explains the significance of the essay: "The essay is an excellent way to measure deep understanding and mastery of complex information…when students know they will face an essay test they tend to study by looking for themes, patterns, relationships, and how information can be organized and sequenced" (p. 184). However, he cautions that in order for an essay to be a quality tool for assessment, there must be a quality essay prompt. McMillan continues by suggesting four components of a quality essay. The second component, "Write an item so that students clearly understand the specific task" (McMillan, 2001, p. 186) is vital. If students cannot understand what is being asked of them, they cannot be successful with the assessment. One way to ensure that students understand what is expected of them is by bringing them into the prompt-development process.

One of the more difficult traits of writing to teach is voice. However, many argue that it is the most important. Graves (1994) argues that voice, "underlies every aspect of the [writing] process" and "Take the voice away and the writing collapses of its own weight" (p. 81). One way to ensure that a writer instills voice in their writing sample is by choosing, creating, or helping to create the writing topic. Not only does involvement in the topic creation help empower the student and give them a sense of ownership of their own learning, but, "Our data show that when a writer makes a good choice of subject,

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voice booms through. When voice is strong, writing improves, along with the skills that help to improve writing" (Graves, 1994, p. 81-82). Unfortunately, teachers are reluctant to allow students to choose their own topics or create their own topic because of high-stakes testing situations. Teachers often feel that they know best the types and formats of questions that will appear on standardized tests and they want to ensure that their students are prepared for those situations.

Unfortunately, the types of prompts that appear on standardized tests, and the prompts that teachers use to prepare their students for those tests, are often dry and lifeless. They do not inspire or motivate the student to engage in the assessment. Richard Stiggins (2002) argues that the best way to improve assessment results is by using assessments *for* learning instead of simply having assessments *of* learning and that, "assessment *for* learning must involve students in the process" (p. 761). Stiggins and Chappuis (2010) further developed this idea and state that, "In short, student-involved assessment helps learners see and understand our vision of their academic success" (p. 12).

Moreover, because students were involved in creating their own topic, and because they know they have had success with this in the past, this increased their motivation. Gallagher (2006) sees involving students in assessment as producing a chain reaction: "Choice generates a welcome chain reaction: it creates student buy-in, which in turn generates writing motivation, which in turn causes students to write better" (p. 91). Earl (2003) supports this idea by stating, "When assessment capitalizes on students' interests, enthusiasm, and talents and provides images of the world that lies ahead of

them, it is much more likely to engage and inspire them so that learning is itself a motivator" (p. 68).

This study examined student perception of motivation and achievement when responding to a topic of choice in writing compared to a teacher-generated prompt. Throughout this quantitative action research study data was collected using surveys that asked students to report their perceptions and comfort levels in the different types of writing assignments. The research question is: How do students perceive their own writing abilities when faced with standardized, teacher-generated prompts compared to writing prompts that they helped develop?

This chapter will first describe how the study was conducted, then present the findings of the study, and conclude with interpretations of the results of the study.

Data Collection Strategy

First, the teacher-researcher gained permission from both the district level and the school level to conduct this action research study in his Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class. After permission was obtained, the teacher-researcher sent out consent forms to both parents (Appendix B) and students (Appendix C) to complete if they were willing to be participants in this study. Eighteen students and their parents returned completed consent and assent forms granting permission to be included in this study. As Mertler (2012) states, "The basic idea of getting permission for conducting action research and collecting data on students is to protect the privacy of both students and their families" (p. 108). Then, the teacher-researcher developed the encoding system to maintain the student-participants' anonymity.

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Students in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class were assigned a writing topic based on the reading of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*--a work that had recently been studied in class. The prompt was teacher-generated and modeled closely after what appears on the College Board AP English Language and Composition exam. Students completed and submitted that writing assignment. The teacher-researcher assessed those assignments, but did not return them to the students.

Then, students worked collaboratively to create their own writing prompts for another assessment for *In Cold Blood*. The teacher-researcher modeled the thought process behind creating writing prompts so that students knew they must create challenging writing prompts that induce higher-level thinking skills. After the teacher-researcher modeling, students were responsible for the creation of their own prompts. The teacher-researcher assessed those writing samples as well, but did not return those to the students, either. The teacher-researcher did not want to students to see what their teacher thought of the two assignments before they provided their own feedback in the form of the survey.

The class session following the completion of the student-created writing sample, the students were asked to complete the Likert-type rating scale survey (Appendix A). A Likert-type scale is most appropriate in this study as, according to Mertler (2014), "this type of scale also exists on a continuum, but something other than extent of agreement is being measured" (p. 142). The teacher-researcher collected and analyzed the surveys. The teacher-researcher kept hard copies of the surveys in a binder in a locked cabinet in his

classroom as well as scanned the documents into PDF format to store on the teacher-researcher's personal computer.

Ongoing Analysis and Reflection

As the study progressed, the teacher-researcher observed the enthusiasm from the students when they began to develop their own writing prompts. Based on that enthusiasm, the teacher-researcher developed preconceived notions that they students would feel the quality of work was better on the assignment where they created the prompt. Further, the teacher-researcher believed that the students would want overwhelmingly want to continue to be involved in the process of creating their own writing prompts.

Reflective Stance

Finally, the teacher-researcher reflected on the gathering of the data. The findings of this study were shared with the other members of the English department. Mertler cites Johnson (2008) as claiming that "the most appreciative audience for presentations of action research results is often your own colleagues" (p. 43). As Mertler suggests, this sharing was in an informal manner and took place during an English department meeting. Besides colleagues in the English department, results were also shared with the Curriculum Coordinator and Principal of the school where research was conducted. The reflection was to consider changes to the English curriculum based on observations and data collected and an action plan developed with careful consideration from all parties involved based on the data collected during the study.

Data Analysis

Based on these results, the teacher-researcher can conclude that, overall, the students felt more challenged by the topic they created themselves. However, students were motivated to complete both assignments equally. This could be in part because these are Advanced Placement students with generally high levels of motivation anyway.

It is interesting is that even though the students felt more challenged by their own topics, they felt they did better work on the prompt created by the teacher. Further, when it came to the final question of "would you rather the teacher create the writing assignment, or would you rather be involved in the creating of the writing assignment," the results were incredibly close but ten students said they would rather the teacher create the assignment and only eight said they would prefer to be involved with the creation of the assignment.

Taking a closer look at individual students for points of interest, Student 3 reported feeling little challenge to the teacher-generated writing prompt and far more motivated by the writing prompt the student created for himself. However, Student 3 reported being more satisfied with his work on the teacher-generated prompt than on the one he created for himself. Further, Student 3 responded to the survey question 7 by stating that he would rather the teacher create the prompts in the future and wanted no involvement with the creation of the prompt.

Student 4 reported that she found both prompts challenging, but was slightly more challenged by the prompt she created for herself. She also felt that she was more motivated by the prompt that she had created for herself. However, Student 4 also reported that she felt she did better work on the prompt created by the teacher. Even

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though she felt she did better work on the teacher-generated prompt, she still indicated that she would like to be involved in the creating of future writing assignments.

Student 7 reported being significantly more challenged by the topic she created for herself, yet reported being significantly more motivated by the prompt created by the teacher. Student 7 reported being significantly happier with the quality of work from the teacher-created prompt and would not want to be involved in creating future writing assignments.

Student 13 reported feeling more challenged by the teacher-created writing prompt than by the one he created for himself. The student reported being equally motivated by the prompts and was more pleased with the quality of work for the response that he created for himself. However, Student 13 also would rather the teacher continue to develop the prompts for future writing assignments.

Finally, Student 16 reported being more challenged by the teacher-created writing response but more motivated to complete the assignment where she created the prompt. She reported being more satisfied with the quality of her work on the assignment where she created the prompt, and wants to be included in the development of future writing assignments.

As a group, 72% of the students felt that they did higher quality work on the writing assignments where the teacher created the writing prompt whereas only 28% felt they did better work on the writing assignment where they created the writing prompt. However, when asked about future writing assignments, 56% said they would rather the teacher create the writing prompt without any input from the students and 44% reported they would want input with creating future writing assignments.

Data Interpretation

   Results of survey. Figures 4.1-4.8 show the results of each student's response to

the Student Survey (Appendix A) for each question.
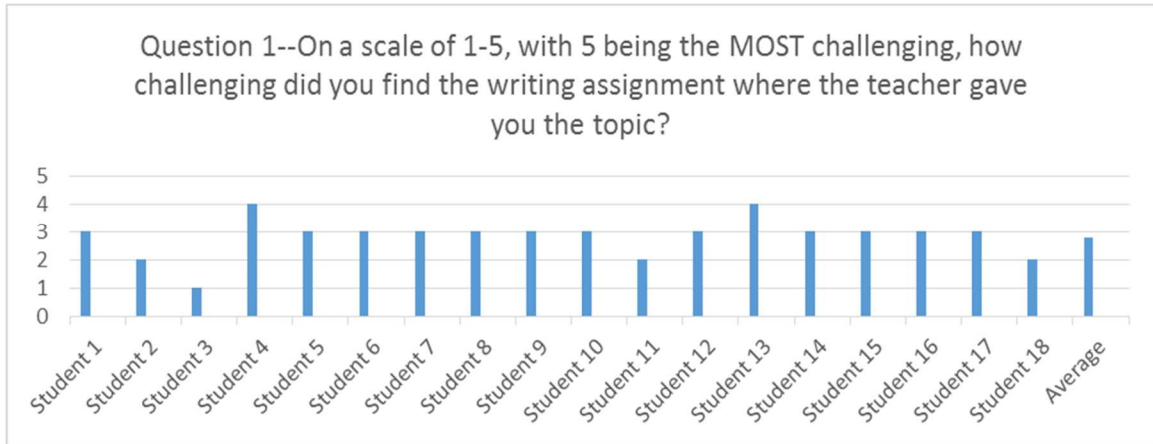

Figure 4.1. Results from Question 1 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 2.8 with the mode and median being 3. Most

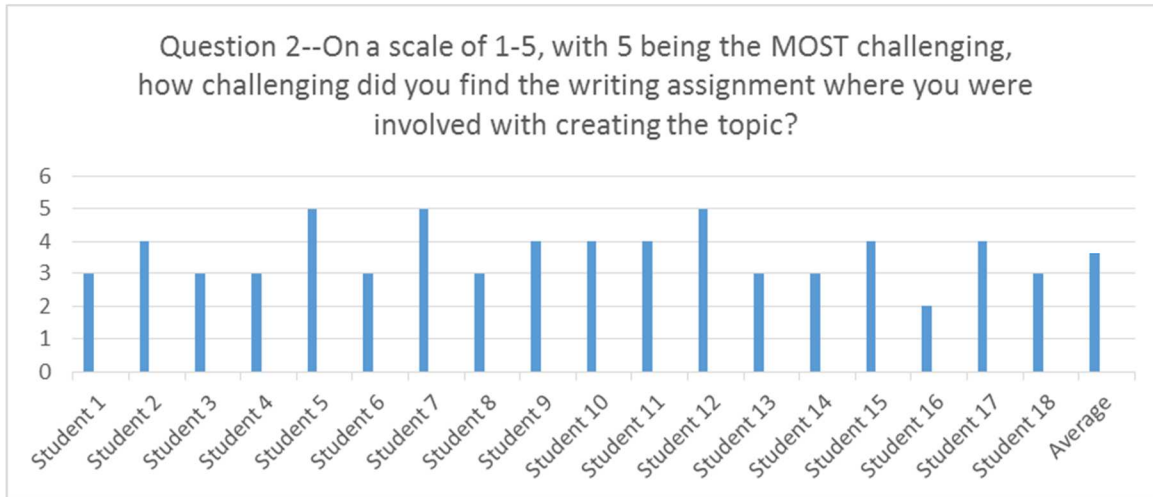students found the assignment where the teacher created the prompt to be moderately

challenging.

Figure 4.2. Results from Question 2 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 3.6 with the mode and median being 3. Most

students found the assignment where they were involved in creating the prompt to be

slightly higher than moderately challenging. Comparing the two assignments, more students found the assignment where they created the prompt to be more challenging than the one that the teacher created.
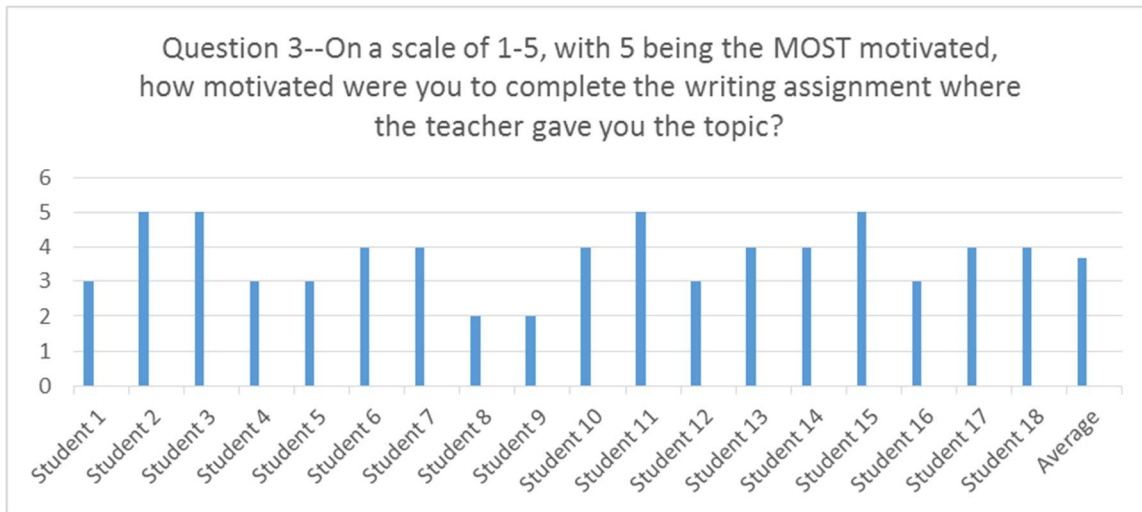

Figure 4.3. Results from Question 3 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 3.7 with the mode being 4 and median 3. A majority of students reported to be slightly more than moderately motivated to complete the assignment when the teacher provided the prompt.
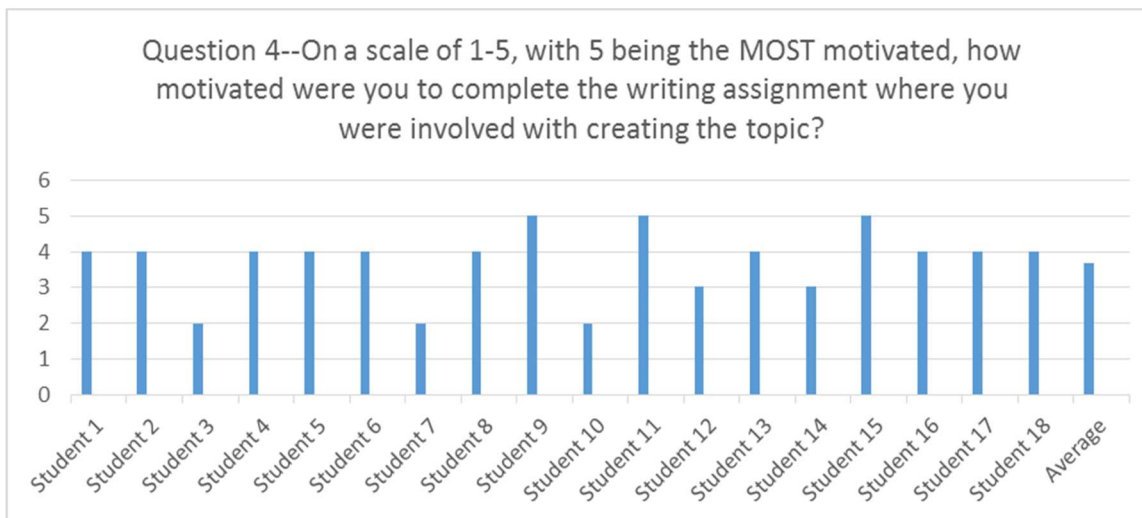

Figure 4.4. Results from Question 4 of Student Survey.

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The mean response to this question was 3.7 with the mode being 4 and median 3. Again, more students responded that they were more than moderately motivated to complete this assignment as well. Motivation levels appear to be almost the same, from a group perspective.

Figure 4.5. Results from Question 5 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 3.6 with the mode being 4 and median 3. Students reported that they were more than moderately pleased with their work on the teacher-generated writing prompt.
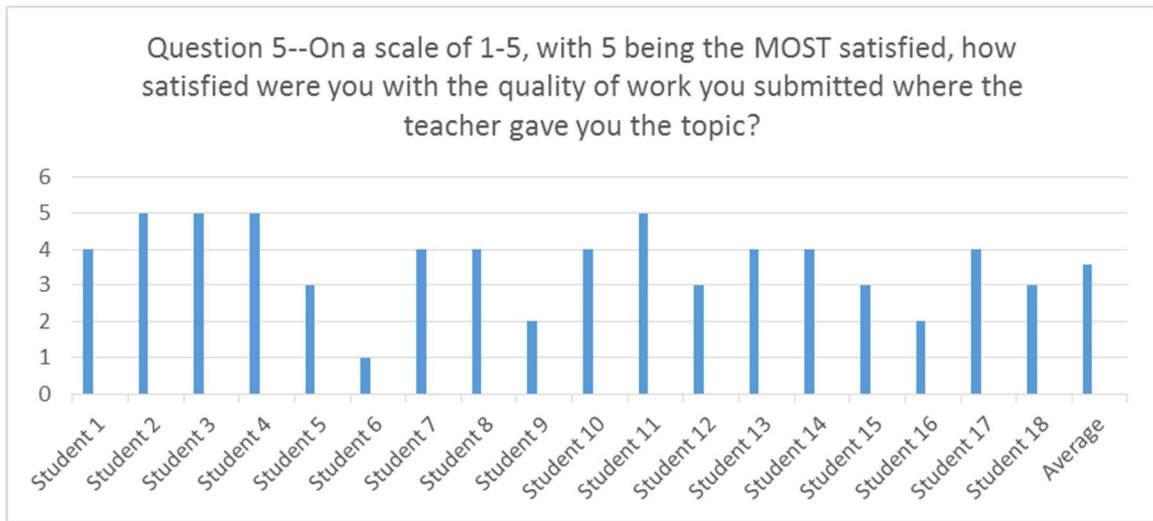
Figure 4.6. Results from Question 6 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 3.3 with the mode being 4 and median 3.

Students reported that they were just slightly more than moderately pleased with their

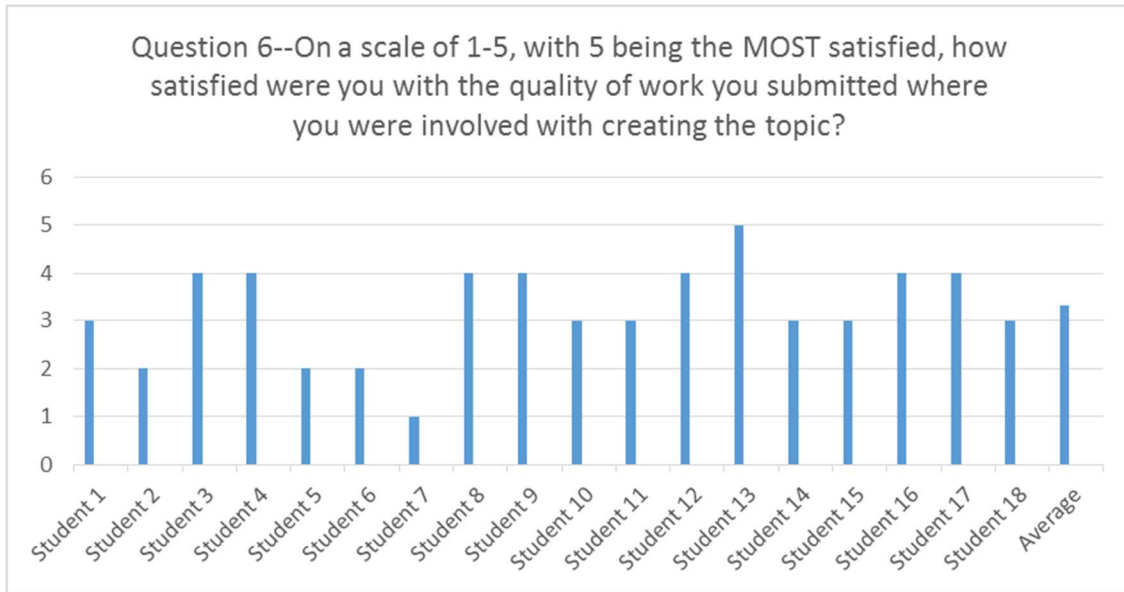work on the teacher-generated writing prompt. Students, as a whole, reported being more

satisfied with the work they did on the assignment where the teacher created the writing

prompt, but just slightly.

Figure 4.7. Results from Question 7 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 1.2 with the mode being 1. A larger portion of students feel that they did their best work on the assignment where the teacher created the writing prompt.

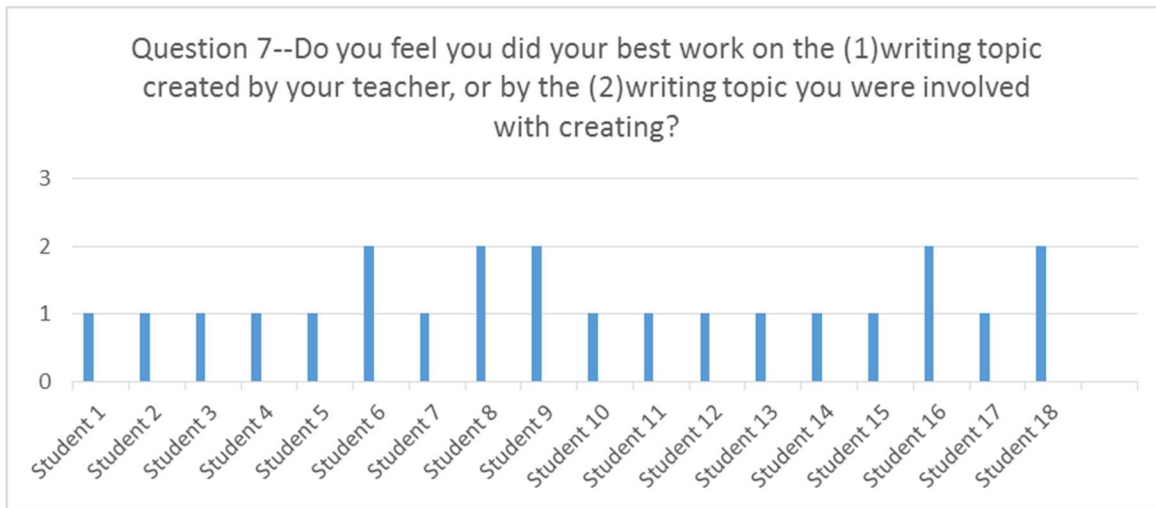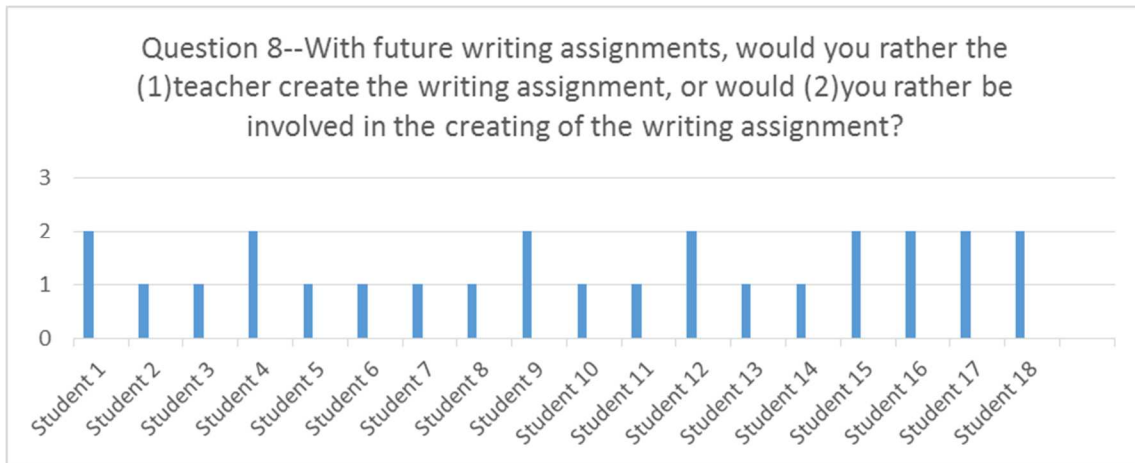*Figure 4.8.* Results from Question 8 of Student Survey.

The mean response to this question was 1.4 with the mode being 1. Slightly more students reported that they would rather be involved in creating the future writing prompts.
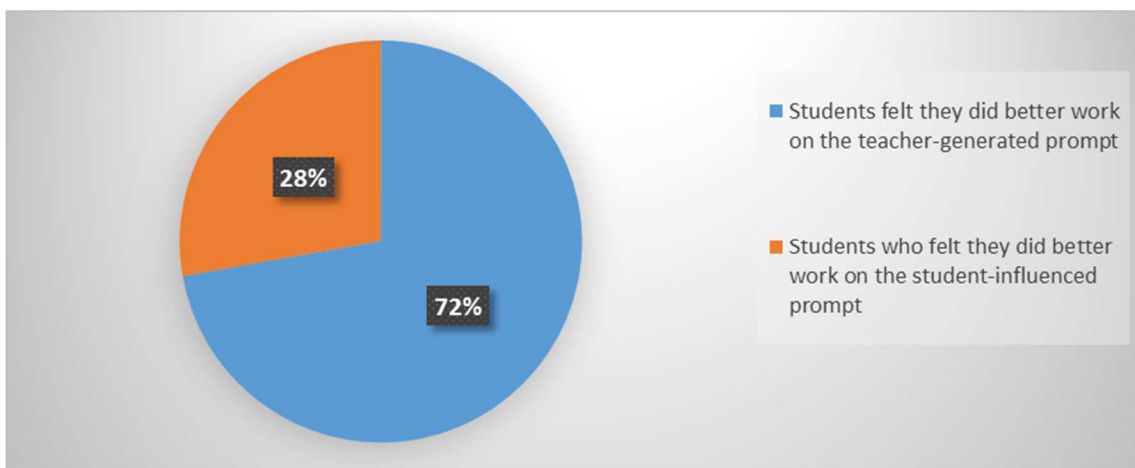

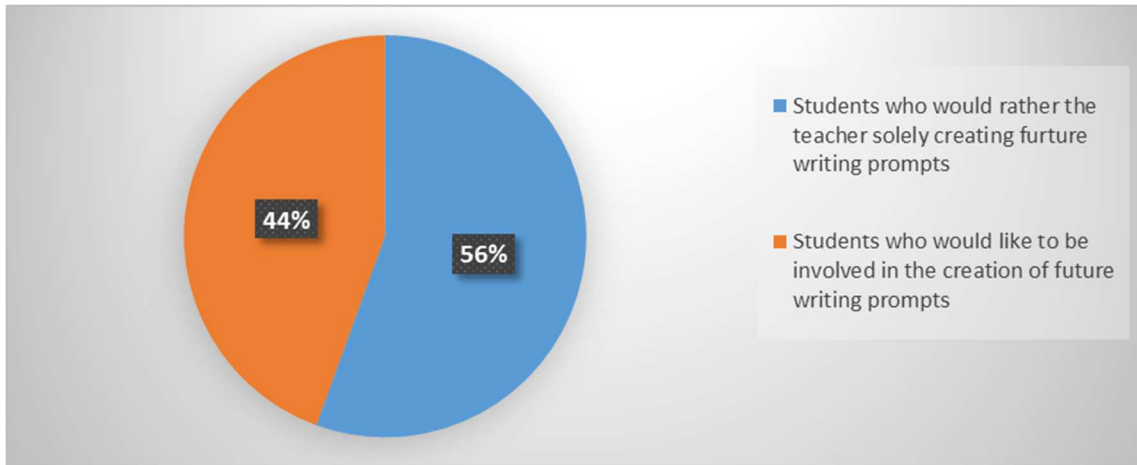*Figure 4.9.* Student perceptions of their work.

Figure 4.10. Student opinions about future writing assignments.

Answering the Research Question

The over-arching question for this study was *how do students perceive their own writing abilities when faced with standardized, teacher-generated prompts compared to writing prompts that they help to develop?* Based on the data collected, students believed that their writing assignments were of a higher quality when the teacher created the writing prompt. However, even though the students reporting feeling as if their work was not as strong when they created the writing prompt, a significant number of students still wished to be included in the process of creating future writing prompts.

Conclusion

The teacher-researcher concluded that no overwhelming preference exists for the class as a whole. Some students reported feeling more confident and more pleased with the quality of their work when they created their own writing prompt and some students reported the opposite—that they felt more confident and pleased with their work when the teacher created the prompt. The final question on the survey that addressed who should be responsible for future writing prompts, the teacher or the student, was almost split with only a slight edge (ten to eight) reporting they would prefer for the teacher to

create the writing prompt. The teacher-researcher and invested parties had to carefully

consider this divide when formulating the action plan.

Chapter 5: Summary and Discussion

Introduction

This action research study examined student perception of motivation and achievement when responding to a topic of choice in writing compared to a teacher-generated prompt. Throughout this quantitative action research study, data was collected using surveys that ask students to report their perceptions and comfort levels in the different types of writing assignments. The research question was: How do students perceive their own writing abilities when faced with standardized, teacher-generated prompts compared to writing prompts that they helped develop?

The problem of practice for the action research study involved a rural, southern Advanced Placement English Language and Composition classroom where students reported that while they enjoyed the assigned readings for the course and engaged in vigorous in-class discussions about the readings, they felt they would be able to produce better writing assignments if they had more input into the development of the writing prompts assigned to them. This feeling seems to be consistent with research conducted on student choice and writing. For example, James. H. McMillan (2001) argues that students learn more when they know they will have a writing assignment because they prepare more for that assignment. Further, Kelly Gallagher (2006) asserts that student choice in wiring assignments creates a chain reaction by creating buy-in, which generates motivation, which results in a higher quality product. These students also argued that when essays and writings are assigned to them that they are boring and lifeless and that

they do not reflect on the discussions that took place in my class or the students' writing ability. Bronwyn T. Williams (2005) claims that boring, lifeless prompts that teachers and test-manufacturers exist because they have no connection to the students' lives, communities, or interests. Lorna Earl (2003) agrees and insists that the assessment must be relevant to the student in order to achieve optimum results. She states that, "When assessment capitalizes on students' interests, enthusiasm, and talents and provides images of the world that lies ahead of them, it is much more likely to engage and inspire them so that the learning is itself the motivator" (p. 68). These students also reported that when asked about a particular text or text analysis problem, that they had so much to say about the reading, but that the teacher-made or text-book-made prompts did not inspire them.

The students in this study requested the opportunity to be able to write about topics of their choice and they argued that given the opportunity to do so that they will be enabled to write much better essays. Teachers may be reluctant to involve students in the creation of the writing assignment, thinking that they know best what students will face on standardized tests like the Advanced Placement exam. Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, and Konrad (2014) acknowledge this conflict and speak to the difficult postions teachers find themselves in with the balance of preparing students for the test, yet wanting to provide meaningful writing instruction. The problem of practice also involves the high-stakes testing that these students are required to excel on in the Advanced Placement course and the realization that they cannot always choose their own topic. Wayne Au (2012) argues that these high-stakes tests do not do what they were designed to do, but instead "undermines education because it narrows curriculum, limits the ability of teachers to meet the sociocultural needs of their students, and corrupts systems of

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educational measurement" (p. 236). The effects of this focus on high-stakes testing, at least in regards to writing curriculum, has led to formulaic, lifeless writing that has become too dependent on the standard five-paragraph essay and has led to, as George Hillocks (2015) reported, universities across the country implementing writing programs to address the issue. The students in this study seem to be on track with concerns reported in academic literature regarding writing instruction.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of writing to a prompt and then writing to a topic of choice. After the analysis of the writing, another aspect of analysis was to determine the effect these different types of writing have on student attitude and if that attitude affected student motivation. To clarify, the specific purpose of the study (the quantitative component) was to examine student perception of achievement for teacher-generated prompts compared to topics they choose themselves.

Action Researcher

The teacher-researcher first gained permission from both the district level and the school level to conduct this action research study in his Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class. After permission was obtained, the teacher-researcher sent out consent forms to both parents (Appendix B) and students (Appendix C) to complete if they were willing to be participants in this study. As Mertler (2012) states, "The basic idea of getting permission for conducting action research and collecting data on students is to protect the privacy of both students and their families" (p. 108). Then, the teacher-researcher developed the encoding system to maintain the student-participants' anonymity.

Students in the teacher-researcher's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class were assigned a writing topic that was generated by the teacher-researcher and modeled closely after what appears on the College Board Advanced Placement English Language and Composition exam. After students completed the assignments, the teacher-researcher assessed those assignments, but did not share the results with the students.

The teacher-researcher then modeled creating writing prompts for the students. The teacher-researcher assessed the writing assignments that were completed with the students creating their own prompt. Those graded assignments were not returned to the students, either. The teacher-researcher did not want the grades of the two assignments to affect how the students completed the survey.

The teacher-researcher created a Likert-type rating scale survey (Appendix A). A Likert-type scale is most appropriate in this study as, according to Mertler (2014), "this type of scale also exists on a continuum, but something other than extent of agreement is being measured" (p. 142). The teacher-researcher collected and analyzed the surveys. The teacher-researcher kept hard copies of the surveys in a binder in a locked cabinet in his classroom as well as scanned the documents into PDF format to store on the teacher-researcher's personal computer.

Finally, the teacher-researcher reflected on the gathering of the data and then the findings of this study were shared with the other members of the English department. As department chair, department members and administrators alike value the teacher-researcher's opinion and he is called on regularly to make decisions regarding the English Language Arts curriculum and the results of the study were received in an open manner.

Mertler cites Johnson (2008) as claiming that "the most appreciative audience for presentations of action research results is often your own colleagues" (p. 43). As Mertler suggests, this sharing was in an informal manner and took place during an English department meeting. Besides colleagues in the English department, results were also shared with the Curriculum Coordinator and Principal of the school where research was conducted.

Developing an Action Plan

When the teacher-researcher met with the English department, Curriculum Coordinator, and Principal to discuss the action research study, several individuals were concerned that the study provided no definitive, clear-cut answer. The teacher-researcher proposed that, as with many areas of education, there may not be one answer that would be best for all students. The creation of the writing prompt can be yet another area where differentiation needs to take place in order to meet the needs of all students. Experts in the field of writing already agree that choice is a key factor in obtaining the very best work from our students.

One of the most challenging aspects of the writing process to teach is voice—the personality of the writer shining through their words. When a writer develops, or helps to develop, their own topic, voice is easier to detect because the writer initiates this process from the beginning. Vicki Spandel and Donald Graves have both conducted research on topic choice and the development of voice in writing. Spandel (2005) states that "Writers who discover their own topics write with voice and commitment…When the voice is strong, the writing literally becomes an extension of self" (p. 18). Graves (1994) refers to voice as the "driving force" of the writing process (p. 81). He continues by saying that

voice is the "imprint of ourselves on our writing" and that it "underlies ever part of the process" (p. 81). Graves asserts that what happens when voice is absent results in dry, lifeless, mechanical writing—the type of writing all too often seen in standardized testing. He reinforces his point by stating, "Our data show that when a writer makes a good choice of subject, voice booms through. When voice is strong, writing improves, along with the skills that help to improve writing. Indeed, voice is the engine that sustains writers through the hard work of drafting and redrafting" (p. 82). Unfortunately, standardized tests and their time constraints prevent this drafting and redrafting that is also so very important in producing quality writing.

Action Plan

Since some students appreciated being involved in the creation of the writing prompts, they should be allowed to craft their own prompt (with guidance from the teacher) on some writing assignments. However, since some students did not feel confident in creating their own, and would rather the teacher create the prompt, teacher-generated prompts should always be made available for those students. Perhaps, in time, those students could become more comfortable in the creation of writing prompts.

The action plan, then, is to differentiate writing instruction to allow students to have a more active role in creating their writing assignments when, and if, they feel comfortable in doing so. The teacher-generated prompt is always the default, but students can feel that they have a greater stake in the assignment and in the classroom if they feel comfortable enough to create, and then respond to, their own prompt. This exercise develops metacognitive thinking skills and take learning to the next level for those students who are comfortable to do so.

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Buoncristiani and Buoncristiani (2012) discuss metacognition as "an essential skill for learning because it enables the learner to take control of the learning process by revealing his thought processes to himself, thereby enabling him to monitor his own understanding and refine his learning strategies" (p. 64). They claim that it is only through developing metacognition skills that students can become independent learners. They also make a very clear and close connection between metacognition and language development, especially concerning writing skills: "As our children develop greater facility with the written language, they have another essential tool of metacognition" (p. 64). The authors elaborate on this by adding, "By developing the ability to write our thoughts down, we increase both the breadth and the depth of metacognition because we are no longer limited by what we can actually recall" (p. 64). In other words, the ability to think about and reflect on what was learned, in order to appropriately develop a topic and respond to it, is one of the most powerful tools to develop metacognitive skills. When a student feels comfortable with planning their own writing assignment and then developing their response, they have participated in the learning process in a deeper, more meaningful way.

Following the meeting with the English department, the teacher-researcher has scheduled a meeting with the building-level assistant principal responsible for curriculum and instruction. This meeting will take place on April 2, 2017. We will discuss my research and plans for the teacher-researcher to conduct sessions at both the district-wide summer institute, held June 12-16, 2017, and at the building-level professional development day scheduled for August 11, 2017. The teacher-researcher will be available to teachers throughout the district via email for de-briefing the methods learned,

and teachers at the building-level will meet with the teacher-researcher at an after-school Professional Learning Community on October 9, 2017 to discuss their successes and challenges in implementing the strategies learned through the teacher-researchers research. The teacher-researcher will continue to meet with members of the English department on a monthly basis during the 2017-2018 school year to discuss the effects of implementing more student-choice in writing assignments and will be available to teachers in other content areas both at the building-level and across the district as well.

It is the teacher-researcher's goal to make the practice of increasing involvement in students writing assignments an opportunity for growth and development in both the school and district.

Facilitating Educational Change

The teacher-researcher plans to utilize this study as a way of improving the writing curriculum in his school and, hopefully, in his district. The teacher-researcher further has the goal of using this study and the coursework completed in this program, to become a better educator and facilitator for learning in whatever capacity that may be in the future.

Summary of Research Findings

The teacher-researcher concluded that no overwhelming preference exists for the class as a whole. Some students reported feeling more confident and more pleased with the quality of their work when they created their own writing prompt and some students reported the opposite—that they felt more confident and pleased with their work when the teacher created the prompt. The final question on the survey that addressed who should be responsible for future writing prompts, the teacher or the student, was almost

split with only a slight edge (ten to eight) reporting they would prefer for the teacher to create the writing prompt. The teacher-researcher and invested parties had to carefully consider this divide when formulating the action plan.

Summary of the Study

The teacher-researcher can conclude that, overall, the students felt more challenged by the topic they created themselves. This finding is consistent with Eisner's (2005) discussion of Dewey's belief that the importance of education is for the "child to obtain increasing, intelligent control in planning their own education" (p. 28). However, students were motivated to complete both assignments equally. This could be in part because these are Advanced Placement students with generally high levels of motivation anyway. What is interesting is that even though the students felt more challenged by their own topics, they felt they did better work on the prompt created by the teacher. Further, when it came to the final question of "would you rather the teacher create the writing assignment, or would you rather be involved in the creating of the writing assignment," the results were incredibly close but ten students said they would rather the teacher create the assignment and only eight said they would prefer to be involved with the creation of the assignment.

Taking a closer look at individual students for points of interest, Student 3 reported feeling little challenge to the teacher-generated writing prompt and far more motivated by the writing prompt the student created for himself. However, Student 3 reported being more satisfied with his work on the teacher-generated prompt than on the one he created for himself. Further, Student 3 responded to the survey question 7 by

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stating that he would rather the teacher create the prompts in the future and wanted no involvement with the creation of the prompt.

Student 4 reported that she found both prompts challenging, but was slightly more challenged by the prompt she created for herself. She also felt that she was more motivated by the prompt that she had created for herself. However, Student 4 also reported that she felt she did better work on the prompt created by the teacher. Even though she felt she did better work on the teacher-generated prompt, she still indicated that she would like to be involved in the creating of future writing assignments.

Student 7 reported being significantly more challenged by the topic she created for herself, yet reported being significantly more motivated by the prompt created by the teacher. Student 7 reported being significantly happier with the quality of work from the teacher-created prompt and would not want to be involved in creating future writing assignments. This is particularly interesting. The student felt more challenged by her own topic, but more satisfied with the work she did on the teacher-created response and does not want to be involved in creating future assignments.

Student 13 reported feeling more challenged by the teacher-created writing prompt than by the one he created for himself. The student reported being equally motivated by the prompts and was more pleased with the quality of work for the response that he created for himself. However, Student 13 also would rather the teacher continue to develop the prompts for future writing assignments.

Finally, Student 16 reported being more challenged by the teacher-created writing response but more motivated to complete the assignment where she created the prompt. She reported being more satisfied with the quality of her work on the assignment where

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she created the prompt, and wants to be included in the development of future writing assignments.

As a whole group, no clear preference concerning the creation of the writing prompt emerged. Overall, the students felt more challenged by the topic they created themselves, but seemed to be motivated to complete both assignments equally. Further, while ten students said they would rather the teacher create future writing assignments, eight reported that they would prefer to be involved with the creation of the prompt.

Discussion of Major Points of the Study

The teacher-researcher can conclude that no clear preference exists for the class as a whole. Some students reported feeling more confident and more pleased with the quality of their work when they created their own writing prompt and some students reported the opposite—that they felt more confident and pleased with their work when the teacher created the prompt. The final question on the survey that addressed who should be responsible for future writing prompts, the teacher or the student, was almost split with only a slight edge (ten to eight) reporting they would prefer for the teacher to create the writing prompt. Buoncristiani and Buoncristiani (2012) explain that a student taking control of their own learning is an essential skill. This could be a skill that is not fully developed in the eight students who reported that they would rather have the teacher create the writing assignment. Similarly, Spandel (2005) asserts that teachers and standardized tests have forced students to become too reliant on the teacher or other source material and find it easier to resort to formulaic writing in response to a formulaic prompt. The teacher-researcher and invested parties had to carefully consider this divide when formulating the action plan.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study adds to the literature about student choice in writing and development of confidence and achievement, the results must be interpreted in light of its limitations. The most prominent limitation is that of sample size. One of the advantages of an action research study is that it is specific and relevant to the teacher-researcher's specific classroom needs. However, this can also be a limitation as the sample size is relatively small. It would be worth exploring this research question in a broader avenue to examine the data to see if these data are found in other areas as well.

Another factor to keep in mind is that the teacher-researcher conducted this study in his Advanced Placement English Language and Composition class. It could be argued that students in an advanced placement class already have a significant amount of motivation and were not more or less motivated based on the different prompts. Further study in this area could be conducted outside of the advanced placement setting to see if other students' motivation levels were affected by involvement in the creation of the writing prompt.

Conclusion

The teacher-researcher has drawn several conclusions from this study. Based on the review of relevant literature and experiences in his own classroom, the teacher-researcher expected to find that a majority of students would want to be included in the development of their own writing prompt and then that they would be more satisfied with the quality of their work on the assignments where they were involved in the creation of the prompt. The data does not support this expectation and shows that student perceptions and motivation levels varied considerably.

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The teacher-researcher can conclude that no clear preference exists for the class as a whole. Some students reported feeling more confident and more pleased with the quality of their work when they created their own writing prompt and some students reported the opposite—that they felt more confident and pleased with their work when the teacher created the prompt. The final question on the survey that addressed who should be responsible for future writing prompts, the teacher or the student, was almost split with only a slight edge (ten to eight) reporting they would prefer for the teacher to create the writing prompt. The teacher-researcher and invested parties had to carefully consider this divide when formulating the action plan.

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Appendix A: Student Survey

1. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the MOST challenging, how challenging did you find the writing assignment where the teacher gave you the topic?

(Please circle)   1   2   3   4   5

2. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the MOST challenging, how challenging did you find the writing assignment where you were involved with creating the topic?

(please circle)   1   2   3   4   5

3. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the MOST motivated, how motivated were you to complete the writing assignment where the teacher gave you the topic?

(please circle)   1   2   3   4   5

4. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the MOST motivated, how motivated were you to complete the writing assignment where you were involved with creating the topic?

(please circle)   1   2   3   4   5

5. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the MOST satisfied, how satisfied were you with the quality of work you submitted where the teacher gave you the topic?

(please circle)   1   2   3   4   5

6. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the MOST satisfied, how satisfied were you with the quality of work you submitted where you were involved with creating the topic?

(please circle)   1   2   3   4   5

7. Do you feel like you did your best work on the writing topic created by your

   teacher, or by the writing topic you were involved with creating?

(please circle)   the one the teacher created   the one I was involved in creating

8. With future writing assignments, would you rather the teacher create the writing

   assignment, or would you rather be involved in the creating of the writing

   assignment?

(please circle)   I want the teacher to create the writing assignment

                    I want to help create the writing assignment

Thank you for your participation in this study and survey!

Consent for Classroom Research

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Henry Tindal. I am your child's Advanced Placement English Language and Composition teacher as well as a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction Program at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study to improve my instruction and your child's learning and as part of the requirements of the degree. I would like to invite your child to participate in a unit on student involvement in essay writing prompts.

If you decide to allow your student to participate, s/he will be asked to take a brief survey about his/her feelings about English essay writing prompts in my AP class. Some students will also be asked to be interviewed about their opinions and their experiences with the different types of essay writing prompts. Any interviews will be brief (less than 30 minutes) and will take place at the school in my classroom. Interviews will not interfere with instructional time. Please be advised that your child can stop the interview at any time without penalty. Anonymity will be strictly maintained and your child's identity will not be revealed. Each participant will be assigned a numerical identifier and the information will be kept in an encrypted electronic device by the researcher.

All participation is voluntary. The study is designed to improve instruction and enhance student learning by enabling children to have a voice in the decision-making involved in essay prompts for AP English.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 864.6723.7221 or htindal@email.sc.edu or my faculty advisor, Susan Schramm-Pate (803.777.3087, and sschramm@mailbox.sc.edu) if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your or your student's rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803.777.7095.

Thank you for your consideration. <u>If you give permission for your student to participate, please sign below and then have your child do the same if s/he agrees to participate.</u>

_____

Printed Name of Parent

_____   _____

Signature of Parent   Date

Dear student,

I am a researcher from the University of South Carolina. I am working on a study about the effects of student involvement in writing topic selection on achievement and motivation and I would like your help. Your parent/guardian has already said it is okay for you to be in the study, but it is up to you.

If you want to be in the study, you will be asked to do the following:

     • Submit writing samples and then respond to a survey about your writing. The survey should take less than ten minutes and will take place during your regular English class.

     • I may also ask that you meet with me individually and talk about your writing samples. The talk will take about ten minutes, and will take place in your English classroom.

Any information you share with me will be private. No one except me will know what your answers to the questions will be.

You do not have to help with this study. Being in the study is not related to your regular class work and will not help or hurt your grades. You can also drop out of the study at any time, for any reason, and you will not be in any trouble and no one will be mad at you.

Please ask any questions you would like.

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Signing your name below means you have read the information about the study, that any questions you may have had have been answered, and you have decided to be in the study. You can still stop being in the study any time you want to.

_____   _____

Printed Name of Minor   Age

_____   _____

Signature of Minor   Date

With kind regards,

Henry Tindal

864.723.7221

htindal@email.sc.edu