

2015

# Examining the Achievement Gap Between Fifth Grade Girls and Boys in Writing

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Phillip Williams

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Walden University  
2015

Abstract

Examining the Achievement Gap Between Fifth Grade Girls and Boys in Writing

by

Phillip Williams

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

September 2015

## Abstract

At the national, state, district, and building levels, girls outperform boys in writing. The purpose of this study was to examine the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The research questions explored the perceptions of 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and building administrators and examined the instructional strategies that were used to teach writing to 5<sup>th</sup> grade students. Attribution theory was used as the theoretical framework to address the achievement gap. Using a qualitative instrumental case study design, data were collected from a building administrator and a 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing teacher in the form of semi structured interviews, an observation of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing teacher, and the examination of writing instructional resources used to teach writing. Data from these sources were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to find emerging themes. The findings revealed that gender-specific instructional strategies and a progress monitoring assessment tool were needed to help close the achievement gap. Based on the findings, a white paper report was created and shared with the building administrator and 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing teacher. The white paper report included gender-specific instructional strategies and a progress monitoring assessment tool as recommendations to help close the achievement gap. Examining the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing could promote positive social change by encouraging administrators as instructional leaders to become leading learners and by providing 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers gender-specific instructional strategies to help students become proficient writers who are college and career ready.

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## Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to the Williams family for the continual support and encouragement throughout my doctoral journey.

I would also like to dedicate this doctoral study to my extended family members who came before me, who for whatever reason could not pursue a college degree.

Last but not least, I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to my wife Anne for her patience, understanding, and love.

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My doctoral journey was a massive academic undertaking and a spiritual one as well. My faith and patience were tried like never before. The completion of my doctoral journey could not have been possible without God's help.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **Introduction**

Writing is considered the neglected “R” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003; Newkirk & Richards, 2007; Sanders-Reio & Reio, 2012; Stokes, 2011). Of the three Rs, writing receives less attention. However, integrating writing across curriculum is necessary (Bickmore, Bickmore, & Dowell, 2012; Brashears, 2006) even though “efforts to improve writing [have been] virtually nonexistent in school reform efforts in the United States” (Kihara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009, p. 136). Students’ grades and their ability to demonstrate understanding or mastery of certain concepts are determined by their performance on written assessments (Graham, 2006). However, students’ letter grades on these assessments arbitrarily reflect their conceptual learning and may not accurately represent the student’s true ability (Peterson, 2007). Therefore, a greater emphasis should be placed on the use and development of writing assessments that provide a more accurate snapshot of how well students write (McCarthy & Ro, 2011). Among K-12 public school students, national writing scores have revealed that students usually perform worst in writing when compared to achievement scores in other content areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). National writing scores have also revealed that girls outperform boys in writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999, 2012, 2013). In this qualitative project study, I examined why there is an achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. In Section 1, I outline the problem, provide a rationale,

definitions, research questions, a literature review, and include implications for the project study.

### **Definition of the Problem**

An achievement gap exists between girls and boys in the language arts (Clark & Burke, 2012; Eliot, 2010). Girls tend to outperform boys in reading and writing (Beard & Burrell, 2010; Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). With regard to writing, the achievement gap between elementary girls and boys is a problem that should be addressed. High-stakes accountability has changed the way content is delivered in classrooms across the country. Furthermore, the adoption and implementation of standardized tests have not adequately addressed student performance as related to closing the achievement gap between girls and boys, specifically in the content area of writing. Writing data from National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) and The Colorado Department of Education (2014) have demonstrated that an achievement gap between elementary girls and boys in the content area of writing at the national, state, and district level is evident. At the national level, from 1998 through 2002, fourth graders in public and private schools were assessed by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in writing. During this time, elementary writing proficiency scores demonstrated slight gains. With the slight increases in writing scores, in 2002, 28% of fourth graders performed at or above the Proficient level in writing with girls performing better than boys (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). However, there was a 17-point differential score between girls and boys. Since 2002, only eighth and twelfth grade students have taken the NAEP writing assessment.

National writing scores for elementary students are more difficult to access. Fourth grade students are no longer required to take the assessment, and third and fifth grade students were never required to take the assessment. Thus, gathering disaggregated writing scores for elementary school students would have to be completed mostly at the state and local levels. The 2014 Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) scores revealed that there was an achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Not only are girls outperforming boys at the national and state levels, girls are also outperforming boys in Central School District, particularly at Sky Charter School. The achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing has been a persistent problem at Sky.

### **Rationale**

#### **Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level**

Located in the west region of Central School District is Sky Charter School (Pseudonyms are used for the district and school names). Sky serves students from fifth grade to high school. Students in fifth grade were required to take the TCAP state assessment. TCAP was Colorado's standards-based assessment designed to provide a snapshot to districts, schools, educators, and parents of student performance (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). In 2014, at the state level, fifth grade girls outperformed boys in writing on TCAP (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). In a 3-year average from 2012 to 2014, there was a 14% differential score between fifth grade girls and boys (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). Girls also outperformed boys in writing in Central School District (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). According to TCAP

scores, in a 3-year average from 2012 to 2014, there was a 17% differential score between fifth grade girls and boys (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). From 2012 to 2014, Sky's fifth grade writing scores revealed that there was a 10% differential score between fifth grade girls and boys (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). At the state, district, and local level, an achievement gap in writing persists.

The TCAP data as well as writing prompt data revealed that an achievement gap exists between girls and boys in the content area of writing at Sky Charter School. Bromley, Vadnerberg, and White (2007) asserted that "high-quality writing assessments can improve student learning by showing teachers what kind of instruction students need in order to become better writers" (p. 284).

The fifth grade teachers at Sky are concerned with the overall low writing scores and are aware that a gap exists between girls and boys (Building Administrator, personal communication, Dec. 15, 2014). However, it is unclear if teachers are aware of how substantial the differential gap actually is. It is also unclear how teachers use this writing data for instructional purposes. Hence, more research is needed that focuses on the achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing. Instead, much of the research has focused on the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students in the content areas of reading and math (Braun, Chapman, & Vezzu, 2010; Burchinal, et al., 2011). In this qualitative project study, I specifically examined why an achievement gap exists between fifth grade girls and boys at Sky Charter School.

### **Definitions**

The following terms and definitions are used throughout the study:

*Achievement gap:* One group of students outperforming another group with a statistically significant difference in average scores (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013).

*Common core state standards (CCSS):* A set of high-quality academic standards outlining what students should know by the end of each grade (CCSS Initiative, 2014).

*Gender grouping:* To educate students in homogenous settings of the same gender (Smyth, 2010).

*Home-based factors:* Variables that impact student achievement outside of a school's control (Williams, 2011).

*Outside-of-school factors (OSFs):* OSFs related to poverty that impact the achievement gaps among low income students (Berliner, 2009).

*School-based factors:* Variables that impact student achievement within a school's control (Williams, 2011).

*Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP):* Colorado's standards-based assessment designed to provide a picture of student performance (Colorado Department of Education, 2014).

### **Significance**

No one at Sky has examined the achievement gap in writing among elementary girls and boys (Building Administrator, personal communication, December 15, 2014). Examining the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing is necessary because it could provide insight into why a gap exists, and the results could potentially impact writing instruction and student achievement at Sky. In addition,



teachers might benefit from this doctoral project study because it could provide insight into the instructional best practices needed to help students develop the necessary skills to become proficient writers and potentially help close the gender achievement gap.

Moreover, building administrators might benefit from this study because they could gain more insight into why the gap exists and possibly use a formative coaching approach as a way to help teachers implement instructional best practices to increase student achievement in writing. Writing is an important skill that is necessary for the 21<sup>st</sup> century work force and CCSS require more writing across the curriculum (Bickmore, Bickmore, & Dowell, 2012; Coker & Lewis, 2008; National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003).

### **Guiding/Research Questions**

There is a need to examine the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. Data at the national, state, and district level indicate that this is a persistent problem. In order to investigate this disparity at the local level, there is a need to determine why the achievement gap exists and what could be done to help close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys. The following questions were used to guide the study at Sky Elementary School:

1. What are building administrator perceptions of the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
2. What are teacher perceptions of the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?

3. What strategies can fifth grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?

### **Review of the Literature**

In the literature review, I focused on defining the achievement gap, identifying the causes for the existing achievement gap, the theoretical framework that will be used in the project study, the achievement gap between white and minority students, gender and the achievement gap, writing instruction, closing the achievement gap, and administrators as instructional leaders. Search terms such as *achievement gap*, *achievement gap and writing*, *gender differences*, *writing process*, and *instructional leadership* were used to locate the journals articles, studies, and, books for the review of literature. The following databases were used to locate the resources identified for the review of literature: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Pro Quest, Science Direct, and SAGE.

### **Defining the Achievement Gap**

The achievement gap is a very popular, widely discussed issue in educational literature (Barton & Coley, 2009; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2009; Goodman & Burton, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006; McKinsey & Company, 2009; National Education Association, 2014). The achievement gap can be defined as one group of students outperforming another group with a statistically significant difference in average scores between the two groups (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013). Goodman and Burton (2012) defined the achievement gap as, “the disparity in performance on various educational measures between different groups” (p. 500). Unfortunately, achievement

gap disparities exist even though schools and teachers spend a substantial amount of time preparing students to meet grade level proficiency on high-stakes assessments (Kontovourki & Campis, 2010; Lai & Waltman, 2008). These disparities are reflected in students' grades and standardized test scores (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013). Milner (2012) claimed, "While achievement gap discourse in education usually focuses on students' scores on standardized tests, it may also concern student graduation rates or even patterns in gifted and advanced placement courses" (p. 5). Achievement gap disparities permeate far beyond the scope of assessment scores.

### **Achievement Gap Causes**

Some causes attributing to achievement gaps have been identified (Durham, 2012). Researchers have attributed these causes to a variety of reasons (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Ford, 2011; Williams, 2011). Ironically, these identified causes have led to finger pointing exhibitions, essentially placing blame on someone or something else (Ford, 2011). Home-based and school-based factors have been linked to achievement gap disparities (Becerra, 2012; NEA, 2014; Williams, 2011). Home-based factors are the variables outside of a schools control. School-based factors are the variables within the school's control. According to Olszewski-Kubilius (2006), causes for the achievement gap are wide. Some of the reasons include low socioeconomic status of students, lack of supplemental programs in schools, poor quality schools, and low parental involvement. Reardon (2011) and Blackford and Khojasteh (2013) have attributed achievement gap disparities to the socioeconomic status of families. Reardon used family income and parental attainment as two key measures of socioeconomic status to find correlations

between socioeconomic status and the achievement gap. Reardon also used 19 nationally representative studies that included math and literacy student assessment data. Family socioeconomic characteristics such as family income and parental education were also included as a part of the data. Reardon concluded that the income achievement gap has grown 40 to 50% within the last 25 years. Even though causes for achievement gap disparities have been identified, Williams (2011) contended that determining the cause for an achievement gap is difficult. Williams asserted, "One of the potential problems with trying to determine the cause of the achievement gap is that, even when discovered, there may be nothing that can be done to change the situation" (p. 66). Educators in many instances have no control over home-based variables. Madrid (2011) argued that the achievement gap is a very complex issue and there is not any one identifiable solution. Educational policies do not account for the OSFs that affect poor and minority students. As a result, many schools are not in the position nor have the resources to eliminate this gap (Berliner, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

While researchers have attributed the achievement gap to a variety of reasons, attribution theory attempts to address and interpret the causation of issues, events, and people's behaviors in their surrounding environment (Jones et al., 1971). Interpreting the causation of issues, events, and people's behaviors is important as researchers attempt to identify the causes of the persistent achievement gap (Durham, 2012; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Reardon, 2011; Williams, 2011). Many of the causes are seemingly linked to behaviors in school and home environments. Examining why there is an

achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing may reveal the root causes of the existing achievement gap at Sky.

Weiner's attribution theory (1974, 1979) places more emphasis on achievement. According to Weiner (1974), the four main determinates of achievement outcomes are attributed to effort, task difficulty, ability, and luck. Boys in many instances have a lack of enthusiasm (effort) for language arts and they also have trouble expressing their thoughts on paper (Senn, 2012).

Weiner (1979) claimed that attributions possessed motivational dimensions. To explain attribution theory, Weiner proposed a 3-dimensional classification of causality, which rests on three essential points: (a) locus of control, (b) stability, and (c) controllability. The locus of control helps to identify if the causes are within (internal) or outside (external) of the individual. Stability defines or distinguishes the changing and unchanging characteristics of the cause. The controlled factors that will eventually affect the outcome are referred to as controllability (Weiner, 1979).

### **Achievement Gap Between White and Minority Students**

Much of achievement gap research focuses on achievement gap disparities between white and minority students (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Braun, Chapman, & Vezzu, 2010; Burchinal, et al., 2011; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006; Rojas-LeBouef & Slate, 2012; Seaton, 2010; Simms, 2012; VerBruggen, 2011). Olszewski-Kubilius (2006) and Seaton (2010) claimed that the achievement gap between white and minority students is the most significant educational issue in the United States. Grades, standardized test

scores, and college attendance and completions rates all indicate that achievement gaps exist between minority and nonminority students (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2006).

Froschl and Sprung (2008) and Chudowsky and Chudowsky (2010) identified achievement gaps between girls and boys of both white and minority students. Ethnic minority boys in particular are at risk academically (Froschl & Sprung, 2008). Girls in both groups experience more overall academic success than boys (Taylor & Graham, 2007). Boys in both groups struggle, especially in the language arts (Froschl & Sprung, 2008). Moreover, the Black-White achievement gap has long since been recognized in our educational system (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013). According to Rothstein & Wozny, (2013), “ the precise magnitude of the gap varies across samples, tests and ages, it is nearly always above 0.5 standard deviations and gaps approaching one full standard deviation are not uncommon” (p. 509). The magnitude of this gap has economic, moral, and even political implications (Braun et al., 2010). Simms (2012) attributed the Black-White achievement gap to family background, peer pressure, and school effects.

Rumberger (2004) provided two reasons why these disparities occur between minority girls and boys and their White peers. These disparities are attributed to resource inequities of funding and external socio-cultural influences. Durham (2012) asserts that inequities of funding and external socio-cultural influences are due to the “lack of attention on solution focused discourse” (p.220). Both ideas can be conceptualized as two distinct perspectives, “mirrorists and “windowists” (Durham, 2012). Mirrorists suggest that interventions used to address the achievement gap reside within psycho-educational parameters or within the limitations of the school setting. Windowists on the other hand,

suggest that the point of interventions emerge from sociocultural parameters that are outside of school (Durham, 2012).

Ladson-Billings (2006), on the other hand, contended that there is not much of an achievement gap, just an education debt that ultimately effects student achievement. Accordingly, Collopy, Bowman, and Taylor (2012) viewed the achievement gap as a social justice issue. Furthermore, Chambers (2009) deconstructed the term achievement gap and contended that the term *receptment gap* more adequately characterizes the issue. The term *receptment gap* is more useful to adequately characterize the achievement gap because the focus is placed on the *inputs* of what students need versus the *outputs* that are associated and concerned with student performance and assessment results (Chambers, 2009).

### **Gender and the Achievement Gap in Writing**

Even though achievement gap disparities exist between race and the socioeconomic status of students, achievement gap disparities also exist between genders. Boys underperform relative to girls, and the achievement gap between girls and boys is an issue not limited to the United States. These disparities are evident in many developing countries (Bedard & Cho, 2010; Driessen & Van Langen, 2013; Legewie & DiPrete, 2012; Van Langen, Bosker, & Dekkers, 2006).

Achievement scores for boys continually lag behind girls, particularly in the language arts (Chudowsky & Chudowsky, 2010; Ma, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013) and has partly to do with how girls and boys learn (Gurian & Henley, 2001; Sax, 2005). According to Johnson and Gooliaff (2013), Gartrell (2006),

and Carrier (2009), boys need an active learning environment that includes high interest, boy-friendly content, and girls need time for self-reflection and the opportunity to verbalize thoughts. The manners in which girls and boys learn and the success they experience is contingent upon the instructional practices utilized and the learning environment where the instruction occurs (Carrier, 2009; Khalil, & Saar, 2009; King, Gurian, & Stevens, 2010; Logan, & Johnston, 2010). Girls generally perform better than boys with language tasks because girls have greater activation in the linguistic areas of the brain (Burman, Booth, & Bitan, 2008). As a result, girls have verbal and written language advantages throughout their schooling (Burman et al., 2008).

Eliot (2010) acknowledged that there are gender gaps in language arts, but the gaps are attributed to parents and teachers treating boys and girls differently because of gender bias and boys and girls pursuing separate interests. According to Cappon (2011), male and female overall differences should not be a concern to educators because both have more striking similarities. Accordingly, interventions and instructional practices should be placed on the individual needs of girls and boys instead of vaguely stating that boys struggle more than girls in writing. In the United States, the writing achievement gap between girls and boys is significant (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013; Newkirk, 2000) though much of the research has focused on the achievement gap between girls and boys in the content areas of math and reading.

### **Writing Instruction**

Writing is a necessary skill that is needed but not easily developed. It is the most complex cognitive domain of the English language (Bae & Lee, 2012). Of reading,



listening, speaking, and writing, writing is one of the most difficult domains to master in the English language (Bae & Lee, 2012). Speaking and writing are considered productive skills whereas reading and listening are considered receptive (Javed, Juan, & Nazli, 2013). Writing serves as a mode of learning because of its process and product nature (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Garcia & Fidalgo, 2008). Writing also plays an important part in the implementation of the new CCSS because more writing is required across the curriculum (Bickmore et al., 2012; Harris, Graham, Friedlander, & Laud, 2013). Writing instructional practices need to adapt to the rigor and demand of CCSS. The purpose of writing instruction is to teach students how to write for variety of purposes, for different audiences, and in a variety of genres (Graham & Perin, 2007b). Unfortunately, there is a lack of available data that provides insight into what writing instruction looks like in schools (Gilbert & Graham, 2010), making it more difficult to find an association between the purpose of writing and current writing instructional practices used in classrooms.

Writing instruction falls into two distinct categories, the traditional instructional model and the process approach (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Pollington, Wilcox, & Morrison, 2001). Traditional writing instruction targets a series of skills based on the use of textbooks and worksheets (McCarthy & Ro, 2011). Much of the direct instruction focuses on grammar and conventions; however, this approach limits student ownership and the primary audience is the instructor.

Unlike traditional writing instruction, the process approach to writing instruction is different. This instructional model involves the students as they follow a process of

completing a writing piece. It is one of the most popular methods to teach writing (Graham & Sandmel, 2011). Process writing may slightly impact student performance, but Graham and Sandmel (2011) found that the instructional practice alone may not be enough to close achievement gaps in at-risk students and between genders.

Developing proficient writing skills takes time; therefore, students need more instructional time and exposure to writing (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Researchers currently do not have a good sense of how much students write (Cutler & Graham, 2008). It was reported that seven out of 10 teachers teach the writing process, but a third of these same teachers spend 90 minutes or less per week teaching writing (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Current instructional writing times are not much different. The National Commission on Writing (2003) stressed the importance of direct writing instruction with an increase in instructional time. Graham, Harris, MacArthur, and Fink-Chorzempa (2003) suggested that teachers should spend at least 25 minutes a day on direct writing instruction. As with reading and math instruction, an increase in direct writing instruction would benefit and prepare students for the high-stakes writing assessments tied to student performance outcomes on state and national tests used for college placement (Coker & Lewis, 2008). Added instructional time with writing may consist of using an interdisciplinary approach by embedding writing instruction into other content areas (Coates, 2003), which could mean a use of integrative groups, cooperative learning, and movement throughout the classroom, thereby supporting the learning needs of both girls and boys (Musoleno & White, 2010).

## **Closing the Achievement Gap**

Achievement gap disparities between race, socioeconomic status, and gender of students have persisted over the years (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Reardon, 2011). Low socioeconomic status, poor quality schools, low parental involvement, and students' inability to access adequate technological tools have all been linked to these disparities (Blackford & Khojasteh, 2013; Reardon, 2011). All of these identified root causes are home-based or school-based in nature (Williams, 2011). While there have been many identified root causes leading to various achievement gaps, closing the achievement gap is essential (Ford, 2011). Closing the achievement gap is and has been a priority for educators and policymakers for more than two-decades (Bromberg & Theokas, 2013; Murphy, 2009). However, accomplishing this task has been difficult. The severity of the achievement gap led the global management consulting firm McKinsey and Company to examine what the social and economic impacts of addressing the achievement gap could have. McKinsey and Company (2009) linked achievement to earnings and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to find out what the economic impact of the racial achievement gap is. McKinsey and Company found that closing the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students could have a \$310 to \$525 billion dollar impact on the U.S. GDP. The inability to close the racial achievement gap is also detrimental as it could lead to a \$120 to \$160 billion loss in earning alone (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Students unable to close the gap will earn less, have poorer health, and will less likely engage in civic activities (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

Since addressing the achievement gap is imperative, educators are searching for ways to close these gaps. Increasing parental involvement is one way to address the achievement gap and increase student achievement (Crowe, 2013; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). Culturally responsive teaching is another method used to address the achievement gap (Chu, 2011; McKinley, 2010). In addition, increasing student motivation is way address the achievement gap (Coleman & McNeese, 2009; Guay et al., 2010; Kennedy, 2009/2010). Moreover, some schools are using innovative practices such as gender grouping students to help address the gender achievement gap (King, & Gurian, 2006). A school in Boulder, Colorado experimented with the concept and has experienced positive results. The school has seemingly reversed the typical trend of girls outperforming boys in reading and writing (King, & Gurian, 2006). Researchers from the Stetson University (Piechura-Couture, Tichenor, & Heins, 2013) have found that placing students in single-gender settings is beneficial for elementary students. While some have found success with the practice, more research is needed in this area.

### **Administrators as Instructional Leaders**

Administrators have become progressively more accountable and have been scrutinized with the passing of national and local educational policies (Townsend, Acker-Hocevar, & Ballenger, 2013). Greater accountability, with an increased focus on student achievement, has redefined the role of the administrator as an instructional leader. Current high-stakes accountability has forcibly nudged building administrators into instructional leadership roles that require substantial time and resources needed to increase student achievement and meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP). Increasing

student achievement and meeting AYP requires building administrators to be more than go-to people for curricular decision making and curricular implementation (Finkel, 2012). Instructional expectations for building administrators have evolved as a result of higher accountability and an increased focus on student achievement. Even with an increased focus on student achievement, building administrators are still expected to be educational visionaries who can offer a sense of direction and expertise for student growth and development (Hoerr, 2008). Instructional leadership of this type appears more hierarchical and managerial (Townsend et al., 2013). Building administrators have always been considered instructional leaders to some degree, even though some may consider themselves transformational leaders. In the current high-stakes accountability era, transformational leadership is not as effective as instructional leadership to support and have an impact on student achievement (Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, & Brown, 2014). Instructional leadership is a key component in helping students meet the demands of new accountability measures in order to improve student achievement (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012).

While instructional leadership is important, Jenkins and Pfeifer (2012) argued that instructional leadership may not be enough. According to DuFour and Marzano (2009), the traditional role and image of the instructional leader must change: “Schools do not need instructional leaders—they need *learning leaders* who focus on evidence of learning” (p. 63). The *learning leader* focuses on the important questions of what was learned instead of what was taught. Building administrators should possess a deeper understanding of CCSS and be able to lead their schools with the academic rigor

necessary to meet the demands of new accountability measures and learning outcomes tied to those standards. The content area of writing is an area that needs more attention.

Both district and building administrators are making concerted efforts to focus more on the content area of writing as a result of low student achievement, the adoption of the new CCSS, and implementation of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (Daddona, 2013). CCSS require more writing across content areas, and the traditional approaches to teaching writing may not be enough to meet the new demands (Smith, Wilhelm, & Fredricksen, 2013). Increasing student achievement in writing may require building administrators to use a formative coaching approach with their instructional leadership role. Formative coaching is built on deep analysis of teaching and learning and on the assumption that the ultimate purpose of improving instructional practice is to improve student achievement” (Nidus & Sadler, 2011, p. 31). The building administrator, who is an instructional leader, could build a collaborative and reflective work environment with formative coaching.

### **Implications**

A project study that uses a qualitative design to examine the achievement gap between fifth grade students in the content area of writing could possibly reveal why there is an achievement gap between girls and boys. Writing assessment data from the TCAP is currently used to determine the writing proficiency of the students at the elementary level; these scores are not revealed until the summer. Teachers need these scores in order to address the achievement gap for the following school year. The data analysis of the project study could also potentially provide teachers the instructional

strategies needed to help students develop the necessary skills to become proficient writers and potentially help close the achievement gap between girls and boys.

Examining the achievement gap could work for both genres of writing.

### **Summary**

In this section, the local problem was identified. There is an achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing at Sky Charter School. The purpose of this qualitative doctoral project study was to examine why the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing exists. Writing assessment data at the national, state, and district levels were used to clarify the depth of this local problem. Writing scores are low at the national, state, and district level with achievement gap disparities between girls and boys at each. The literature review revealed a variety of reasons why achievement gaps exist and some strategies to help close the achievement gap. In the next section, I address the qualitative methodology that was used to examine the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing.

## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Introduction**

TCAP scores revealed that an achievement gap exists between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing (Colorado Department of Education, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative doctoral study was to examine why this achievement gap exists. Section 2 includes the research method and the design that was used to complete the project study. The setting, participants, sample, sampling technique, data collection and analysis, assumptions, limitations, and protection of participants are also explained in detail. In order to address the research questions and investigate why there is an achievement gap between fifth grade boys and girls, a qualitative method was used.

### **Research Method and Design**

Qualitative research is an inductive process that emphasizes descriptive data collection in the natural settings of the participants (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Researchers who use qualitative methods also attempt to understand the participant's point of view or perception. A qualitative, instrumental case study design was employed to address the central phenomenon (the achievement gap in writing). Instrumental case study designs provide an in-depth exploration of an issue, using multiple sources of data collection (Merriam, 2009). To examine the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing, data were collected from three sources. Data from interviews, observations, and the examination of available writing instructional resources were gathered to provide insight into what resources were used to teach writing and how these resources were used for instruction.



Ethnographies and phenomenological studies are other qualitative approaches. These approaches were not ideal for this project as both designs differ from the instrumental case design that was implored in this study. Ethnographies are similar to case studies, but slightly differ. Both designs focus on the interactions of individuals or small groups using interviews, observations, and document analysis as data collection methods (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010). According to Lodico et al. (2010) “Ethnographic studies also require that the researcher gain the perspective of the participants, to some degree, by becoming part of the group being studied” (p. 15). Researchers who use a phenomenological approach attempt to capture the individual experience of each participant in the study (Lodico et al., 2010). Unlike the ethnographic and phenomenological designs, an instrumental case study design allows for the in-depth exploration of why an achievement gap exists between fifth grade girls and boys in writing.

### **Sample**

Purposeful sampling was used as the sampling approach. Purposeful sampling is used frequently in qualitative research (Lodico et al., 2010). Convenience sampling was the sampling technique used to complete the project study. Convenience sampling is a type of purposeful sampling. The availability of the participants and the location of the research site are reasons why convenience sampling was employed (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Convenience sampling was an effective sampling technique to use because the results of the project study were only generalized back to the school (Lodico et al., 2010). Sky Charter School was selected as the research site because it is a fifth

grade through high school charter school with an identified achievement gap between its fifth grade girls and boys.

Fifth grade elementary school teachers and administrators at Sky Charter School represented the population. To be selected, the participant must have been an administrator or a fifth grade school teacher who teaches writing. There is one principal at the fifth grade level. There is one fifth grade teacher who teaches writing at Sky, totaling two participants. According to Merriam (2012) “the size of the sample within the case is determined by a number of factors relevant to the study’s purpose” (p. 82). A limited number of participants were conveniently available to examine the achievement gap in this case study (Creswell, 2012). The administrator needed to have at least 3 years experience working at Sky in order to have knowledge of the writing instructional practices and longitudinal writing scores of Sky during this time. The fifth grade teacher needed to have experience teaching intermediate (fifth or sixth grade) writing. A teacher who has taught intermediate writing would have a greater understanding of fifth grade writing standards and be more familiar with student work habits in writing. The goal was to have participation from the building administrator and fifth grade teacher. Obtaining permission from the participants was necessary before data collection began. An informed consent letter was emailed to each participant formally asking for their permission to be part of the study (Appendix B and C). The informed consent letter included details explaining the purpose of the study, the amount of time required of the participants, how the data and results will be used, and the potential risks involved in the study (Creswell, 2012). My role in the study was data collector and reporter of the data

and findings. I did not have a working relationship with the staff. I have never worked in the school in any capacity.

### **Protection of Participants**

The protection of participants in the project study was essential. To gain access to the participants, Institutional Review Board approval was necessary (Creswell, 2012). The IRB ensured that participant rights were protected and ethical guidelines were followed. IRB verification along with informed consent clearly articulated that the participant's anonymity and privacy were protected and that they had a right to withdraw from the study (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Pseudonyms were used for the participant names as well as the district and school name. Participants were provided a detailed description of the project, potential risks, the voluntary nature of the study, and a confidentiality statement (Lodico et al., 2010).

### **Data Collection**

Three data collection methodologies were used for the completion of this qualitative project study. Data were gathered from observations, interviews, and available writing instructional resources. These data collection methodologies were in alignment with qualitative case studies (Creswell, 2012). Triangulating these three data sources helped confirm emerging themes. Triangulation is a qualitative strategy used as a validation procedure to check for accuracy and credibility of qualitative data that are collected (Creswell, 2012). Merriam (2009) described triangulation as “cross-checking” data collected through observations, interviews, and documents. Prior to the data collection, IRB approval was necessary. IRB approval was granted March 12, 2015

(IRB#03-12-15-0265569). Building level administrator approval from the school was also necessary before data collection began.

### **Observation**

A fifth grade writing teacher was observed during the writing block, which was 65 minutes long. The observation was conducted in the classroom. I observed the writing instructional strategies used to teach writing. I also observed how the current writing instructional resources were employed during instruction. Observing the instructional strategies used during instruction and how the instructional resources were used during instruction helped provide insight into why there was an achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The observation protocol can be found in Appendix D, and the observation narrative can be found in Appendix E. Field notes were used as a data gathering technique. Field notes should be highly descriptive including direct quotes from the teachers during instruction, the observer's thoughts and reflections, and in some cases, a diagram of the physical learning environment (Merriam, 2009).

### **Interview**

Interviews were conducted with the administrator and fifth grade writing teacher. The interviews were face-to-face and took place in the teacher's classroom. The building administrator's interview took place in the administrator's office. The interviews were also audio recorded to provide a more accurate account of the interview (Creswell, 2012). Each interview question was tied to a research question in the project study. The first research question was, what are building administrator perceptions of the achievement

gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? In order to address this research question the following interview questions were asked:

1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?

The second research question was, what are teacher perceptions of the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing? To address this research question the following interview questions were asked:

1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?

The third research question in the study was, what strategies can fifth grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? To address this research question the following interview questions were asked:

1. What strategies are you currently implementing to address the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Which of these strategies do you feel have been most successful?
3. What are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction?

Authors tied to the research questions and interview questions can be located in Appendix F. The fifth grade teacher interview was 17 minutes long. The building administrator's interview was 22 minutes long. Semi-structured interview questions were used with both the building administrator and the teacher (Appendix G and H). With semi-structured interview questions, the researcher had a protocol to follow, but was allowed to ask probing questions (Lodico et al., 2010). The probing questions were labeled as "Follow Up" questions on both interview protocols. Notes were taken during the interview ensuring that no information was lost. Member checks were employed to check for accuracy of the interviews after the interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded.

### **Instructional Resources Used to Teach Writing**

Sky does not have a school-wide writing program. Fifth grade instructional resources used for writing instruction at Sky were located and analyzed. The instructional resources consisted of teacher made materials, exit slips, rubrics, practice worksheets, packets, and *Write Source* materials. Locating and analyzing the instructional resources provided insight into what writing instructional resources were available and which were used during instruction. Analyzing instructional resources also helped confirm emerging themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was gathered from observations, interviews, and the examination of fifth grade writing instructional resources. The writing instructional resources consisted of "Write Source" materials (Sebranek, Kemper & Meyer, 2012), instructional books for

teachers, the High-Performance Writing program (Dodds, 2005), “Do Now” practice writing worksheets, and practice packets. Prior to the data analysis, four parent nodes (themes in the NVivo program) were developed. “The function of nodes is to store a place in NVivo for references to code text” (Hilal & Alabri, 2013, p. 184). According to QSR International (2015), “Nodes are containers for your themes, people, places, organizations or other areas of interest” (para 3). The nodes were established as a result creating four over-arching parent nodes that were tied to each research question. The four parent nodes were used to organize and identify emerging themes in each data set (Hatch, 2002). Instructional strategies, administrator perceptions, teacher perceptions, and instructional resources were the four developed parent nodes. After the analysis, the emerging themes were cross-checked between each data set.

### **Observation**

Data was collected from the observation of the fifth grade writing teacher. The observation was used to help answer the research question, what strategies can fifth grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? During the observation, I was able to document the instructional strategies and the resources used to teach writing. The observation took place in the morning during the writing block. The observation was 65 minutes long. During the observation both reflective and descriptive notes were taken (Appendix D). Reflective notes are often written to capture the researcher’s thoughts (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Descriptive notes are essential word-pictures of the setting, people’s actions, and conversations during the observation (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). The observation notes were typed in the

observation protocol and retyped into a narrative format to make it easier to read through. The narrative format was uploaded and analyzed with the aid of the NVivo program (Appendix E). Using the four developed parent nodes, the transcripts were coded to identify emerging themes. Direct instruction, whole group instruction, and peer collaboration were the identified emerging themes.

### **Interviews**

Data were also collected from the interviews of the fifth grade teacher and the building administrator. Each interview was audio recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews to capture a more accurate account of the interview. Interviews were later transcribed into a Word format and uploaded into the NVivo program for analysis and the identification of emerging themes using the four developed parent nodes. The interview with the building administrator occurred first because the interview data was the only data to be collected from the building administrator. In an attempt to answer the first research question, what are building administrator perceptions of the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? The following interview questions were asked:

1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?



The interview was also used to address the third research question, what strategies can fifth grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? The following interview questions were asked:

1. What strategies are teachers currently implementing to address the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
6. Which of these strategies do you feel have been most successful?
7. What are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction?

The interview with the fifth grade teacher occurred after the interview with the building administrator on a different day. The fifth grade teacher was also asked the same questions. In an attempt to answer the second research question, what are teacher perceptions of the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? The following interview questions were asked:

1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?

To address the third research question, “What strategies can fifth grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?” the following interview questions were asked:

1. What strategies are you currently implementing to address the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?

2. Which of these strategies do you feel have been most successful?
3. What are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction?

Both interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. A copy of each transcript was transcribed in a Word format to make it easier to read through. Transcripts were then uploaded and analyzed with the aid of the NVivo program. Using the four developed parent nodes, the transcripts were coded to identify emerging themes. The coding process was used to make sense of text data (Creswell, 2012). After the coding, themes emerged based on the interview questions that were asked and how the questions were answered by the participants. The identified themes were (a) instruction and gender differences, (b) ability grouping, and (c) writing assessment tools. After the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded, member checks were employed to check for accuracy and validity of the interviews. Creswell (2009) suggested that member checks be done with interpreted pieces including emerging themes and patterns. The verification of transcripts in many instances is the method used by some researchers to complete member checks (Carlson, 2010). Each participant was emailed their transcript with the identified themes to verify accuracy and validity and both participants responded that their transcript was accurate.

### **Instructional Resources Used to Teach Writing**

After the observation and interviews were conducted, available instructional resources used to teach writing were gathered and analyzed. Notes taken during the review of the instructional writing resources were transcribed in a Word document,

uploaded, coded, and analyzed with the NVivo program (Appendix I). The following six available instructional writing resources were identified as the primary resources used to teach writing to fifth grade students at Sky. These were the only writing resources the fifth grade writing teacher utilizes for instruction. The resources included (a) practice opportunities for students, (b) instructional strategies for teachers, and (c) assessment opportunities for teachers to check for student understanding.

### **Write Source**

Write Source materials are resources used to help students learn writing skills. These resources cover rules for language, grammar, and the writing process (Sebranek, Kemper & Meyer, 2012). Each unit also focuses on the different writing genres. Write Source materials provide work samples for students to see how the rules for language and grammar are applied in context. Daily Language Workout materials are also available for practice as well as assessment sheets that can be used to check for understanding. The teacher communicated that the Write Source materials are not used much except for the Daily Language Workout materials.

### **Write Like This**

*Write Like This* is a book written by Kelly Gallagher. Gallagher (2011) focuses on real-world writing purposes by emphasizing, relevant, real-world writing skills student's need for the 21st century. Gallagher walks teachers through specific discourse lessons that can help them develop an effective modeling approach to their classrooms. Modeling is an essential element in the learning process and Gallagher stressed that good writing skills develop by reading and emulating good writers. Gallagher also shares mentor text

(professional samples), student samples, and other assignments that have been used to improve student writing. The teacher uses this book as a reference for the modeling approach to writing. Some of the strategies in *Write Like This* are used for editing practice for polishing student work.

### **High-Performance Writing**

High-Performance Writing is a comprehensive writing program that provides instruction for the writing needs of all students using a direct instructional model (Dodds, 2005). High-Performance Writing provides instruction in grammar and language usage, strategies for writing, and processes to complete the writing process. Included in the program are scoring rubrics and writing activities to help students practice skills and the writing process. The teacher uses the High-Performance Writing practice sheets to create practice packets to check for understanding.

### **DO NOWS**

“DO NOWS” are practice writing worksheets and made up packets. These worksheets and packets are completed at the beginning of each writing lesson and they serve as a warm up or a review of the concepts students are currently working on during writing instruction. “DO NOWS” come from a variety of sources. Some “DO NOWS” come from Write Source practice materials. Daily Language Workouts are examples of some of the Write Source practice materials. Some “DO NOW” materials come from internet sources that are taken and rewritten in a format that is easier for the students to understand and work with. The teacher has also taken the time to create original “DO NOW” worksheets like the one that was used during the observation.

### **Practice Sheets and Packets**

Practice sheets and packets are created for students to complete. Sky believes that students should have ample opportunities to practice. The building administrator during the interview stated, “The real check for understanding would be in your independent practice and then in your homework.” These practice sheets and packets serve a variety of purposes for the teacher. With the use of practice sheets and packets, the teacher can check for understanding, students can practice the skills needs to help attain mastery, and they can be used for homework. The building administrator mentioned these in the interview. These practice sheets and packets come from a variety of sources. Some are teacher created. Some come from the internet, and others are from bits and pieces of writing resources the teacher uses to teach writing.

### **Exit Slips**

Exit slips are used to check for understanding at the end of a lesson and to provide formative feedback (Marzano, 2012). The building administrator stated during the interview, “We do exit slips at the end of most classes.” Exit slips are quick one or two question and answer pieces of paper that are handed to students at the end of a lesson. The teacher checks these, documents the progress, and uses them for instructional purposes based on how the students answer the questions. Exit slips can also be used as formative assessments (Marzano, 2012).

### **Findings**

After the analysis of the interviews, the observation, and the examination of writing instructional resources two reoccurring themes emerged. Instructional strategies

and gender differences was one theme. Writing assessment tools was another reoccurring theme that emerged from each data set. Each theme with supporting data is discussed in the following sections.

### **Instructional Strategies and Gender Differences**

During the observation, I observed the instructional strategies and the instructional resources used to teach writing. The writing class objectives for the day were to complete the “DO NOW” review worksheet and review and edit the rough draft of the persuasive paragraphs. The primary method of instruction was teacher-led, whole group. The teacher-led the students through both sections of the “DO NOW” worksheet. The teacher completed some of the questions with the students and the students completed the remaining questions on their own. Whole group instruction was mentioned in the interviews as the primary method of content delivery with students. Teacher-led, whole group instruction was also used during the editing tasks for the persuasive paragraphs. Students did have the chance to interact with a partner for some of the peer editing tasks. Students swapped papers with a partner to check to see if their partner’s topic sentence clearly gave an opinion and also give their partner a suggestion to make their writing better. Students were allowed 30 seconds to complete this task. In the interview, the teacher referred to quick interactions with a nearby partner as Turn and Talks.

The girls and boys responded differently to the whole group instruction and the editing tasks. During the second editing task, the students were required to check to make sure they had an original topic sentence. Twelve out of fourteen boys began the task, but

stopped working because they appeared to be lost with what to do or perhaps they felt like their work was already good and it did not need correction. Six out of thirteen girls completed the task. For the remainder of the editing tasks, boys were more distracted and appeared more off task than the girls.

During the interview, the building administrator was asked, what strategies are fifth teachers currently implementing to address the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing? The building administrator stated,

Between boys and girls particular to writing, I would say the only thing that they are doing is allowing them to choose content to write about. Pick your topic, write about super heroes, your biggest sports fan or whatever, is probably the approach.

Giving students a choice for writing topics was the only instructional strategy mentioned by the building administrator that is currently implemented in the classroom. The building administrator did have a lot to say about the achievement gap between fifth grade boys and girls in writing and how he thought that the gap was attributed to the way boys are taught at an early age. The administrator stated,

Where do we at an early age or how often boys are taught like, hey you should read poetry. You should write down your feelings and you should talk about them. I think we live in a culture where it is really hard for boys to talk about their feelings and express themselves and that of course I think definitely comes across in writing cause there isn't always a space for them to be able to do that.

In a response to the administrator's perception of how boys are taught at an early age, he also stated that instruction that promotes writing through personal expression and more

personal narrative writing for boys is a necessity. Students are given a choice for writing topics, but boys in particular need more space, time, and scaffolding according to the administrator. Gender grouping as a potential instructional strategy was also addressed in the interview. The building administrator stated, “So we’ve considered that we are uncertain of how that will be received in this city where we already have uniforms, a longer school day, longer school year, behavior expectations that are tougher than most schools.” A follow up question was asked, “Even though it would just be gender grouping in that one content area, nothing else?” The administrator responded, “We would want to do it school-wide. It’s a larger gap than just in writing. It would be interesting to pilot it and see what it looks like” The building administrator alluded to the current instructional practices of teachers delivering writing content and boys just being able to produce proficient writing pieces may not be the best approach. He added,

the way we kind of get taught to teach is you know, I’ve got my Pearson writing book. Here are the prompts, I know how to diagram a sentence and I know components of an expository essay. Here it is. I taught it to you. Go do it, do it in silence, and yet it is probably not the best model.

During the interview with the fifth grade writing teacher, the teacher was asked “What strategies are you currently implementing to address the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing?” The fifth grade teacher mentioned that scaffolding of a I DO, WE DO, YOU DO type system with Turn and Talks were some of the instructional strategies currently used in the writing class. “So scaffolding with the kids and a lot of peer interaction I think are my two big ones I try to get everyone moving along,” added



the fifth grade teacher. The Turn and Talks were consistent with what was observed during the observation. Modeling, free writing activities, choice for writing topics, peer collaboration, and re-teaching, were all mentioned in the interview as instructional strategies used for writing instruction. Giving students a choice for writing topics was the only common instructional strategy mentioned between the fifth grade teacher and administrator. Ability grouping was mentioned as an instructional strategy used to help lower achieving students. The lower achieving students were usually the boys. The fifth grade teacher was somewhat familiar with achievement gap between girls and boys. While in grad school he read about it, but was caught off guard when he was confronted with it in the classroom setting. He stated, “So it’s interesting coming in. I had read literature back in school on it but you don’t see it as much and you see higher scores coming with the girls so it was something that caught me off guard.” The fifth grade teacher also thought that maybe the gap was attributed to culture. There is a high Hispanic population in the class and the girls appear to be more submissive than the boys, which may lead to boys dominating the class. The interview question, what are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction? was asked.

Interestingly, the fifth grade teacher said,

I would tend to lean away from it because as I said, I think some of our highest academic students are girls and I’m so big on being able to bounce ideas and hear and learn from each other as a classroom that I wouldn’t want to separate the higher from the lower as much.

I followed up with the question, “Do you have higher functioning boys?” The teacher responded,

Absolutely. Some. Definitely. I see what you are saying in that they can definitely contribute to the higher boys helping the lower boys and higher girls helping the lower girls. But like I said the variety of ideas would be genderized and wouldn't have as large of a variety.

None of the instructional strategies observed during the observation were used to address gender differences in writing. None of the instructional strategies mentioned in the interview addressed the achievement gap between girls and boys in writing.

I learned that the current fifth grade teacher started working with this group of students at the beginning of second semester. The other fifth grade teacher assigned to this class took a different position in the school. The current fifth grade teacher is currently teaching a sixth grade class and the fifth grade writing class. When the teacher started working with the fifth grade class, he did not have a good sense of what standards were covered and the academic level of the students. This is the teacher's first year teaching, so he does not have many instructional resources to teach fifth grade writing either. The teacher created a lot of the instructional resources that were used each day.

The fifth grade teacher lesson plans did not have a specific format other than listing the objective and the resources that will be used for instruction. There is not a year or semester scope and sequence utilized at the moment. Units have a slight scope and sequence, but that is also being created at the moment. The teacher is meeting with middle school teachers to better align what is being taught. These meetings are also used

to discuss writing expectations. Everyone in the building is doing what they want when it comes to writing instruction. Budget is also an issue and purchasing a program that may or may not be used is not likely to occur. In speaking with the teacher about this, it was stated that changing the instructional model and instructional strategies may be more beneficial than the purchase of a new writing program. After careful review of the available fifth grade writing resources, none of the resources provided specific instructional insight into gender differences nor did they target specific instruction for each gender.

### **Writing Assessment Tool**

The lesson objective during the observation was to complete the “DO NOW” adverb worksheet and review and edit the rough draft of the students’ persuasive paragraphs. The “DO NOW” worksheets were completed the first 15 minutes of class. The remainder of class time was devoted to editing and the completion of the persuasive paragraphs. The fifth grade teacher went through each of the seven editing tasks with the students. While the students completed editing tasks for their persuasive paragraphs, they did not have a copy of the editing checklist of their own to use. The teacher used a digital copy that was shown on the smart board. A persuasive paragraph rubric was not shown to students during the lesson. There was no indication of how the students were to be assessed on their persuasive paragraphs. Exit slips were not used during the lesson.

During the interviews, the building administrator and fifth grade teacher addressed the ways students are assessed in writing at Sky. Growth and mastery standards are tracked by objective in the teacher’s grade book and according to the building

administrator, exit slips, independent practice, and homework are ways teachers check for understanding. There was no mention of a single efficient progress monitoring assessment tool being utilized at the moment. The fifth grade teacher mentioned that semi and biweekly quizzes along with strong rubrics are given to students to assess their writing. The school just purchased an online writing assessment program linked to Common Core that is more skills based. “So the system we have is good for tests as far as skills but overall pieces of writing, we do not have a system other than the rubric. Kind if strenuous, it takes me a while”, added the fifth grade teacher. There is no efficient writing assessment to progress monitor student growth in writing.

After analyzing the available fifth grade writing resources, the *Write Source Daily Language Workout* materials provided assessment sheets that could be used to check for understanding. Practice sheets, rubrics, and exit slips are created by the teacher to check for understanding and progress monitor student understanding through each unit.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations and delimitations are concerns regarding the internal validity (limitations) and the external validity (delimitations). Campbell and Stanley (1966) focused on eight factors that could influence internal validity (referred to as limitations) of a research study. The generalizability of the findings is one limitation to the project study. The project study involved one school with participation from one building administrator and one fifth grade writing teacher. The findings and project study is limited to one school. To increase the generalizability of the results, writing scores between girls and boys in different grades at different schools would have to be

examined. A bigger sample would also be necessary. Convenience sampling was the sampling technique used to complete the project study because of the availability of the participants and the location of the research site. Convenience sampling is the least credible sampling technique (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010; Merriam, 2009). The limited teaching experience of the fifth grade teacher was also a limitation. Beginning the school year as a sixth grade English teacher, the teacher was asked to work with the fifth grade group students at the beginning of second semester. The other fifth grade teacher was assigned a different position in the school.

### **Conclusion**

In this section, I explained the research method and design that was used to complete the project study. A qualitative, instrumental case study design was employed. Instrumental case study designs provide an in-depth exploration of an issue, utilizing multiple sources of data collection (Merriam, 2009). Data was collected and analyzed from interviews, observations, and available writing instructional documents. The findings revealed that gender specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress monitoring assessment tool for writing is needed to help close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys. These data were triangulated to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the study. Participants' rights were protected as IRB and building administration approval was necessary to collect data. Informed consent letters were emailed to the participants. Section three will address the project and implications including social change.

## Section 3: The Project

### **Introduction**

Based on the findings from the observation, interviews, and instructional resources used to teach writing, gender-specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress monitoring assessment tool is needed to help close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing. Gender-specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress monitoring assessment tool were recommendations offered to the building administrator and classroom teacher to address the achievement gap. In this section, a description, goal, and rationale of the project with the recommendations will be presented. A literature review supporting why the project was selected will also be explained. A plan for the project's implementation and evaluation will also be included.

### **Description and Goals**

The project was created as a result of the literature review and the data analysis from the interviews, the observation, and the examination of writing instructional resources was a white paper report (Appendix A). The goal of the white paper report was to provide an overview of the study, share the doctoral study results, and share the proposed recommendations with the building administrator and fifth grade teacher. The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to examine the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The recommendations addressed the achievement gap at Sky by providing the building administrator and fifth grade teacher researched-based pedagogical strategies and tools may potentially close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing.

## **Rationale**

White papers are persuasive, topical documents that identify specific problems and recommend possible solutions (Purdue, 2013; Stelzner, 2007). White papers can be informal or formal in nature and come in many formats and lengths. The idea of creating a white paper report came from a search of educational literature. The U.S. Department of Education has produced white papers on educational topics, and organizations in the state of Colorado have produced white papers on various topics. I have also worked in surrounding school districts in the region that have used white papers to present topics, report findings, and provide recommendations to address the topics. After conducting a search through the Walden project database, I found a project study (Egloff, 2013) that used a white paper as the project to present a local problem, research findings, and provide researched-based recommendations to address the local problem. At Sky, there is a significant achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The data analysis from the research study revealed that gender-specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress monitoring assessment tool for writing was needed. Implementing gender-specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress monitoring assessment tool for writing could address the achievement gap and possibly help close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in the content area of writing at Sky. Creating a white paper report that shares the doctoral study results and research-based recommendations is an efficient and effective way to impact writing instruction. Both participants in the interviews shared that they are aware of the

achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing and both participants were very interested in the outcomes of the doctoral study.

The white paper report includes an introduction, explanation of the local problem, a summary of the doctoral study and results, and suggested recommendations to help close the achievement gap. The recommendations in the white paper include gender-specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress monitor assessment tool for writing (Cable & Spradlin, 2008; Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007; King & Gurian, 2006).

### **Review of the Literature**

In this literature review, I focused on gender-specific instructional strategies and a writing assessment tool. The findings from the doctoral study revealed that gender-specific instructional strategies and an efficient progress writing assessment tool could potentially be used to close the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing. Search terms such as *instruction and gender*, *instructional strategies*, *single-sex education*, *gender grouping*, *writing*, and *writing assessment* were used to locate peer review journals, articles, studies, and books to support the recommendations (emergent themes) for the white paper. The following databases were used to locate the resources to support the emergent themes identified for the review of literature: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Pro Quest, Science Direct, SAGE, and Thoreau in the Walden University Library.

### **Gender-Specific Instructional Strategies**

**Gender grouping.** It is necessary to consider assessment data when considering an instructional practice that will impact staff and students. The use of disaggregated



assessment data by gender can reveal specific achievement gaps in certain content areas and grade levels (Protheroe, 2009). Disaggregated data from TCAP scores revealed that there was an achievement gap between girls and boys at Sky Charter School. Gender grouping is cost effective (Cable & Spradlin, 2008) and does not necessarily require the purchase of a new writing curriculum or program. Gender grouping can also address the problem because it would allow for instructional changes to be made that intentionally address the learning needs of both girls and boys (Gurian, Stevens, & Daniels, 2009). Students who are placed into single-sex settings experience greater social-emotional benefits, encounter more interesting and purposeful curricular content, and are more connected with learning and feel more at ease (Blakesley, 2013; Younger & Warrington, 2005).

*Single-sex* education and *gender grouping* are terms used interchangeably to describe the placement of students in single gender settings. The placement of students in single-sex settings has been an educational practice in schools and districts for many decades. Single–sex education can be defined as educating students in homogenous settings of the same gender (Bradley, 2010; Gurian et al., 2009; Meyer, 2008; Smyth, 2010). The National Association for Single Sex Public Education (NASSPE) is thoroughly active as well as supportive of single-sex education but fails to provide a single, concise definition of the term. However, Riordan et al. (2008) claimed the following definition: “Single-sex schooling refers to education at the elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level in which males and females attend school exclusively with members of their own sex” (p. 1). The lack of a single, concise definition of the

term provides a loosely, insinuated notion that single-sex education is the practice of separating girls and boys in school. The term single-sex is used to indicate gender specificity of boys and girls in certain capacities. The words following single-sex determine the how and why implications of gender separation in the learning environment when single-sex education or single-sex setting is used. The U.S. Department of Education (2008) uses single-sex schooling in its definition to imply that certain schools are designed and operated for specific genders. Others (Greig, 2011; Tully & Jacobs 2011; Yates, 2011) use the term single-sex education to describe Coed schools that offer single-sex classrooms learning environments. To prevent confusion and for the purposes of this project study, gender grouping will be the term used to describe the placement of boys and girls into separate classes for writing instruction. The literature will often use the term single-sex education due to historical references.

Single-sex education was practiced and has been a part of our nation's educational fabric since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Anfara & Mertens, 2008). Many of these schools were private parochial in nature (Cable & Spradlin, 2008). Over the years, coeducation schools evolved as a result of changing societal roles of men and women (Riordan et al., 2008). In the last 15 years, single-sex education experienced resurgence in popularity (McCreary, 2011). The passing of No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) ushered in more aggressive reform measures. The rewriting of Title IX made it "easier for schools to adopt single-sex classrooms" (Meyer, 2008, p. 301). The rewriting of Title IX also received support from the NCLB legislation, revealing that single-sex classrooms are not a threat to the current educational system (Meyer, 2008). The idea of single-sex education

was revisited and according to Hughes (2006-2007): “Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) and Hillary Rodham-Clinton (D-NY) sponsored a provision for the purpose of providing direction to schools that wish to establish, under NCLB, single-sex classes or schools” (p. 6). Currently, the constitutionality of the practice is still questioned (Cantalupo, 2012) even though the practice is gaining more traction. The U.S. Department of Education has not and does not keep track of the number of single-sex schools or classrooms in public coeducation settings (Bigler & Signorella, 2011). According NASSPE (n.d.), as of the 2011-2012 academic year, there were 506 public schools in the U.S offering single-sex opportunities. About 390 of these schools were coed offering single-sex classrooms. The remaining schools were considered single-sex. Groups like The Feminist Majority Foundation (2014) identified at least 700 K-12 public schools that deliberately promote gender grouping students.

Proponents of single-sex education assert that placing girls and boys in single-sex learning environments is beneficial (Bonomo, 2010; Gurian et al., 2009; NASSPE, n.d.; Sampson et al., 2014; Sax, 2005). Placing students into same gender settings minimizes behavioral issues (Johnson, C. & Gooliaff, 2013). Students in these settings are less distracted and are more engaged in learning (Riordan et al., 2008). Some of the behavioral issues, especially among boys, are attributed to early gender bias experienced in the beginning of their formal education (Eliot, 2010; Piechura-Coutre, Heins, & Tichenor, 2013). In a study conducted by Benenson, Quinn, and Stella (2012), boys were more willing to work and affiliate with random same-sex peers than girls. Placing boys in single-sex settings would motivate and provide them a different learning opportunity

(Price, 2011). In addition, girls thrive in noncompetitive settings and are more eager to participate and ask questions when boys are not present (Hughes, 2006-2007; Riordan et al., 2008). In many instances, boys dominate discussions, the hands-on activities, and assume more teacher vigilance due to behavioral issues.

Proponents of gender grouping also claim that the practice can close the achievement gap (King & Gurian, 2006; Laster, 2004; Stotsky, 2012). “In single-sex classes, advocates contend that teaching can be tailored to fit the different needs of male or female students and can help both sexes to attain higher levels of achievement” (Cable & Spradlin, 2008, p. 4). It is important to understand that the mere practice of gender grouping alone simply will not close the achievement gap. Teachers need to understand the differences of how girls and boys learn and how they respond to different instructional models that distinctly address their learning styles (Sax, 2006). Gender grouping is an innovative practice that allows teachers and administrators the opportunity to create educational programs that are unique to the girls and boys learning needs (Caplice, 1994; Hughes, 2006-2007; Meyer, 2008).

Placing students into single-sex learning environments will not be enough to close the achievement gap between girls and boys in writing. It is necessary to consider certain writing gender-specific instructional practices that are designed to meet the learning styles of both girls and boys because of their unique ways of learning (Sax, 2005; Spielhagen, 2011). How girls and boys learn and the success they experience is contingent upon the instructional practices utilized in the learning environment where the

instruction occurs (Carrier, 2009; King, Gurian, & Stevens, 2010; Khalil & Saar, 2009; Logan & Johnston, 2010).

Boys need an active learning environment that includes high interest, boy-friendly content (Carrier, 2009; Gartrell, 2006; Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013). Lessons in this type of learning environment should be structured so that the pacing is quick and content delivery is in small chunks (Chadwell, 2010). According to Goldberg and Roswell (2002), “Boys preference for directness and brevity, focus on action, and indifference to elaboration characterizes not only their expressive, but also their informative and persuasive writing” (p. 91). Boys are more kinesthetic and need more movement and hands-on learning opportunities (Hughes, 2006-2007; King et al., 2010). Creating boy-friendly learning environments in which boys are given learning opportunities that include movement, visual spatial assignments and the choice to choose topics that are interesting, motivate and change boys’ attitudes about school (Bruner, 2010; Franco & Unrath, 2015; Sax, 2009).

Girls should have access to learning environments that provide safe, non-competitive learning opportunities that promote cooperative group work where they can interface and dialogue about ideas (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; NASSPE, n.d.; Riordan et al., 2008). According to Johnson and Gooliaff (2013), Gartrell (2006), and Carrier (2009), girls need time for self-reflection and the opportunity to verbalize thoughts in a learning environment. Allowing girls to share their writing with others fosters the safe learning environment needed for the creation of the cooperative dialogue girls can benefit

from. Partner sharing and peer critiquing activates help to build confidence in their abilities.

**Boy and girl specific work groups.** Gurian and Stevens (2010) of The Gurian Institute trained teachers in more than 2,000 schools and districts developing the “Teaching Boys Effectively Logic Model.” These schools used the Teaching Boys Effectively Logic Model to help close the gender achievement gap. The use of gender-specific work groups was an effective strategy schools used to help close the achievement gap. Teachers used boy and girl-only work groups in coed classrooms and found that students are less distracted and flourish in a new gender grouping alternative.

**Self sponsored writing.** Self-sponsored writing activities can occur in or outside the classroom. Self-sponsored writing activities are student-centered and student-initiated (Brandt, 2001; Sternglass, 1989). Self-sponsored writing allows students the opportunity to choose topics to write about while providing students more opportunities to write. Self-sponsored writing can be an effective writing strategy for students as well as an instructional practice for teachers. Similar to self-sponsored writing, Elbow (1989; 1998) uses “free writing” to describe the process that allows students the opportunity to choose high interest topics while giving them autonomy over the format and the purpose. Free writing is also a practice best used for making the quickest improvements to how students write (Elbow, 1998). Self-sponsored writing is a practice that can be used to help establish ownership with students’ written work as well as promote writing fluency and increase writing speed (Abdel Latif, 2013; Ferrier et al. 2013; Sternglass, 1989). A student’s written fluency level demonstrates their ability to effectively communicate in

writing. In many instances, students struggle with writing proficiency because they have difficulty generating ideas and getting words on paper. To communicate effectively, students must be able to fluently produce words on the page (Parker et al. 2011).

### **Progress Monitoring Tool for Writing**

**Curriculum based measurements.** CBM's are used to "...help teachers plan instruction and monitor it to see if it is working" (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007, p. 5). The results from a writing CBM can reveal the students' writing fluency, as this provides insight into how well the students is able to generate ideas (Abdel Latif, 2013). Writing CBM's are nationally normed and track three areas: Total Words Written (TWW), Correct Word Sequences (CWS), and Words Spelled Correctly (WSC). The use of the CBM is both reliable and valid (Deno, Marston, & Mirkin, 1982). According to Deno et al. (2001), "CBM also relies on a traditional psychometric framework by incorporating conventional notions of reliability and validity so that the standardized test administration and scoring methods have been designed to yield accurate and meaningful information" (p. 508). Curriculum Based Measurements are reliable and valid measures used for progress monitoring written fluency. Curriculum Based Measurements requires less time to implement and score. Curriculum Based Measurements can also provide insight into a student's grammatical skills, language usage, and their overall command of language.

### **Implementation**

Writing and delivering a white paper to the Sky administration and the fifth grade teacher is the implementation of the project. When the doctoral study is approved by

Walden, both the administrator and the 5th grade teacher will receive a copy of the white paper.

### **Resources, Existing Supports, and Barriers**

The data collection, analysis, access to the research site and participants were some of the resources needed to complete the white paper. Support from my Walden committee chair was another resource. The interests of the participants' and their willingness to help with data collection were all supportive. A potential barrier to the implementation of the project would be the building administrator or 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher not wanting to accept or read the white paper. The building administrator and 5<sup>th</sup> grade may also disagree with the analysis and recommendations proposed in the white paper.

### **Proposal for Implementation and Timetable**

Prior to the completion of the white paper, my Walden committee chair will receive a preliminary copy for the purposes of providing feedback. When Walden University approves and accepts my doctoral study, the building administrator and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher will receive a final copy of the white paper.

### **Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others**

My role and responsibility is to present the findings from the doctoral study in the form of a white paper and offer recommendations based on the doctoral study findings.

### **Project Evaluation**

A formative evaluation will be used to evaluate the white paper. The evaluation process is used to determine the effectiveness of programs and projects (Hur & Suh, 2010). My committee will provide ongoing feedback during the development and the



implementation of the white paper. The Sky building administrator and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher will provide feedback once the white paper is delivered to them. The building administrator and fifth grade teacher will have an opportunity to email me indicating whether implementing any of the proposed strategies will be considered.

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

Developing strong writing skills is a necessity (Bae & Lee, 2012). An increase use of technology should not hinder a student's ability to develop the writing skills necessary for college and career readiness. The implementation of the recommendations offered in the white paper will provide different researched-based pedagogical strategies that can potentially address the learning needs of both girls and boys in the content area of writing and help close the achievement gap. The offered recommendations may potentially create a sense of excitement about writing and motivate the students to write more. The recommendations posed in the white paper could potentially make a positive impact on the writing scores between both genders.

#### **Far-Reaching**

At the national and state levels, writing achievement scores are among some of the lowest when compare to other content areas (Colorado Department of Education, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Even though national writing scores are on the rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), scores are not increasing rapidly enough. The new Common Core 21<sup>st</sup> century standards require students to develop college and work ready skills for a 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy.

Examining the achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing is a topic not readily researched. The project study would add to a needed body of research and literature. The hope is that this project study could provide ideas and options for addressing gender-specific learning needs in writing.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of the data analysis from the interviews, observations, and instructional resources used to teach writing, a white paper report was created to address the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The white paper shares the doctoral study results and recommendations with the building administrator and 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. A white paper was an efficient and effective way to impact writing instruction at Sky. Section 4 includes reflections and conclusions drawn from the doctoral study.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

This section contains my personal reflections and conclusions of the project study upon its completion. The projects strengths, recommendations for remediation of limitations, scholarship, project development, and leadership and change will be discussed. A personal analysis of myself as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer will also be discussed. Implications, applications, and directions for future research will conclude this section.

### **Project Strengths**

A white paper that offers gender specific recommendations and a progress monitoring assessment tool for writing are the project's greatest strengths. The idea of a white paper for the project was appropriate. I noticed that white papers are used for a variety of reasons in academia. When I searched through the Walden Library for project studies and journal articles, I noticed that some had white papers or at least presented research in the form of a white paper. After completing the study, both participants expressed interest in learning what the findings revealed. I realized that both participants were more likely to read a document that includes the findings and proposed recommendations rather than schedule specific times during the school day for professional development. Creating and providing professional development sessions for one teacher did not seem feasible since the research site has one fifth grade writing teacher who also teaches sixth grade writing. The school day ends at four o'clock, making it a long day for teachers. In addition, I am not an employee of the school, and I

have to travel all over the state for the work that I currently do, which also creates scheduling conflicts. It was also very challenging gaining access to the participants just to complete the data collection. Therefore, creating curriculum to address this problem did not seem feasible. Purchasing, adopting, or implementing curriculum requires board approval, which can take up to a year. The proposed recommendations allow for instructional adaptation based on student needs and they address the achievement gap between fifth grade girls and boys in writing.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

Even though the project has strengths, there are also limitations. One major limitation to the project is its limitation to one grade level and one location. More research would have to be conducted if other grade levels and schools are interested in implementing the recommendations. The administration at Sky may not agree with the proposed recommendations in the white paper and may not want to implement them because of the amount of planning and willingness from the classroom teacher to participate. The teacher may only want to implement one recommendation opposed to two or three. Instead of implementing the suggested recommendations noted in the white paper for an entire school year, the teacher could pilot the recommendations for one quarter during the school year to see how students respond. Another alternative solution to addressing this problem could be sending staff to conferences offered by The Gurian Institute. The Gurian Institute specializes in gender education and brain-based learning. The purchase of CBM materials for the teacher to use for progress monitoring writing could also be used. While both these suggestions may be alternatives to address the

problem, they both could impact the school budget. There is a cost to attend the Gurian Summer Institute as well as the purchase of the CBM materials.

### **Scholarship**

Working on this degree has taught me a lot about the rigors of scholarship and conducting research. The ability to take a problem or an issue and be able to find current, relevant data to substantiate theories and current practices is essential to the perpetuation of scholarship and growth as a scholar-practitioner. I also learned that conducting research is by no means an easy task. Research is more than selecting a broad topic and finding a few unreliable sources to make a claim or draw a conclusion about how to address the problem or issue. The research process is rigorous and should be approached as such. Through this process, I learned how to identify a local problem and determine the most appropriate methodology to address the problem. Gaining access to participants in a school setting and learning the importance of protecting the participants' rights was more rigorous than I initially thought. It was a challenge keeping track of and organizing all of the qualitative data that were collected from each data source. Collecting, organizing, and analyzing qualitative data is much different than the data collection methods associated with quantitative data. I also learned the need for and the significance of scholarly writing. Completing the research process gave me a sense of ownership that I would not have ever experienced otherwise.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

I learned that project development is a process. Through this process, research is gathered and analyzed. The findings or results are then used to guide the development of

a project that will address a particular educational issue. The finished project should be the result of reflective data analysis and careful consideration of the beneficiaries on the receiving end. Research-based methods and practices should also be considered when developing a project to address an educational issue. I initially thought of creating professional development sessions that would address the achievement gap between girls and boys in writing. The study had only two participants. Creating and providing professional development sessions for one teacher did not seem feasible since the research site had one fifth grade writing teacher. Furthermore, creating curriculum to address this problem did not seem feasible. Purchasing, adopting, or implementing curriculum requires board approval, which is a long process. Instead, I wanted to create something both participants could use that was research-based and user friendly.

Realizing this, I searched for other project possibilities. When I examined various educational websites, I noticed links to white papers would appear. I would open up some of the white papers and read them. They would present information in a variety of formats and would almost always focus on an issue of some sort and pose a possible solution. I then searched through the Walden Library and came across some project studies that used a white paper. I also noticed that the term “white paper” appeared in the project study template. I like the idea of a white paper because I could share the results with the building administrator and teacher. The evaluation of the white paper was ongoing with my committee. Both participants can provide feedback after receiving and reading through the white paper.

## **Leadership and Change**

Effective leadership is essential to the success of any organization (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The current high-stakes accountability that blankets the educational system makes educational leadership very complex. Educational leaders are bombarded with the complexities of establishing visions, communicating them, and eventually putting together strategic plans to execute them in clear succinct fashions. Effective leadership is more than a figurehead assuming the operational responsibilities of a building (Fowler & Blanchard, 2010). Through this Walden journey, I have learned that educational leadership is synonymous with change. As the socioeconomic and sociopolitical landscapes continue to evolve as a result of changing demographics and the reliance on technology, educational leaders must be flexible enough to embrace change, meet the demands of policies thrust upon them, and ultimately do what is best for students. Constant change has led me to reflect on my own leadership as a classroom teacher, building assessment leader, a district assessment leader, and a doctoral student. Each of these experiences has helped with my leadership development. With these experiences, I will adopt an instructional leadership style and a situational leadership style. Instructional leadership is the most popular and is most commonly recognized compared to other leadership styles. Instruction leadership is rooted in our educational infrastructure. Instructional practices evolve at rapid rates, and leaders must have an understanding of current curriculum, instruction, and assessment trends to continue to be change agents in their schools and districts. Situational leadership is rooted in change and supports the idea that every situation is unique (Sims, Faraj, & Yun, 2009). Both

leadership styles can help me become that 21<sup>st</sup> century leader who will be able to address critical issues and successfully bring about effective school and district improvement processes while doing what is best for students.

### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

Before I began this journey, as a classroom teacher, I used research to substantiate minor educational projects I needed done. I never realized the complexities and the amount of time that is necessary to complete scholarly research. As a developing scholar, I learned that when conducting research, identifying a problem that is too broad and not specific enough could potentially yield less than desirable results. Utilizing credible data and locating timely, relevant primary sources is essential. Though I have a better understanding of the research process and the intricacies of conducting research, I will continue to research and strive to be a lifelong learner and enhance my skills to promote social change. I have always been interested in the achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing because of my teaching experience at the elementary level. I spent twelve years in the classroom teaching writing. Every year I noticed that girls outperformed boys. I would address the issue in my own classroom and in many instances experience positive results. Administrators and various staff members would ask about the methods and strategies I used. Even though I could name the strategies and explain instructional techniques that were used, I had difficulty communicating what I did in a scholarly manner because I did not have an understanding of research methods and I did not have an understanding of what it meant to be a scholar-practitioner.



### **Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

I intend to continual professional development to foster a deeper understanding of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) research and practices. My current goal is to grow professionally and take my newfound knowledge of research-based CIA best practices and share them with colleagues. As a District Assessment Coordinator for multi-district blended online schools, a deeper understanding of CIA best practices will be very useful. Having a deeper understanding of locating resources and conducting scholarly research will be important as I will be able to make important CIA decisions that could affect students as well as staff at each school.

### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

When I first began my journey I did not have a thorough understanding of what the end result could be. I was under the impression that I could write a dissertation or conduct a study of some sort. I learned that I didn't have the option of writing a dissertation, instead, completing a doctoral project study. After doing some research, I found that a white paper could be an effective method of reporting results and making recommendations.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

Currently, in K-12 public education, it is very difficult to separate instruction from assessment. Assessment has become a means of accountability and the lens in which the general public judges how well students and schools are doing based on the handful of high-stakes assessments that students take a couple times of year. Assessment for learning and of learning (Earl & Katz, 2006) is necessary and the process should be

ongoing and not disrupt the learning ebb and flow of a classroom or building. There is a substantial achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing. The achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing does not receive the same amount of attention as the achievement gaps found in other content areas.

It is perplexing to see that the greatest achievement gap occurs in writing, but no one on the local level aggressively addressed this phenomenon, yet complain that students do not know how to demonstrate their understanding in writing. The project's potential could impact how teachers and building administrators plan and implement instructional techniques that take into account gender and how boys and girls learn (Burman, Booth, & Bitan, 2008; King, Gurian, & Stevens, 2010). Educational trends are moving more in the direction of providing individualized learning opportunities for students. Part of the individualized learning experience comes from an understanding that students have different interests and are motivated in different ways. Implementing gender-specific instructional strategies for writing could be a step in that direction.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

Direct writing instruction receives little focus when compared to reading and math instruction. Research revealed that there is an achievement gap between girls and boys in writing. Addressing this gap will not only add to the body of knowledge in writing instruction, but could have lasting impact on student performance in other content areas. Common Core 21<sup>st</sup> standards require writing across content areas. The purpose of the doctoral study was to examine the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing and possibly answer why there is an achievement gap.

From the data analysis, I discovered that both participants knew that the achievement gap existed but never addressed the gap specifically in writing. Both participants can benefit from the doctoral study because it could encourage building administrators as instructional leaders to become leading learners and provide 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers with gender specific instructional strategies that could help students become proficient writers that are college and career ready.

The achievement gap between girls and boys in writing is not readily researched. Much of the literature focuses on the achievement gap in the content areas of reading and math. Examining the achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing creates many possibilities for future research. The project study was limited to one school and had only two participants. Duplicating a qualitative study in different schools with more participants will increase the generalizability of the results. A future direction for examining the achievement gap between girls and boys in writing could extend to online schools and how writing is taught on an online platform.

### **Conclusion**

Section 4 included reflections and conclusions drawn from the doctoral study. It included my reflections on scholarship, project development, and included reflection of myself as a scholar-practitioner. I was also able to reflect on the project's strengths and limitations. The implications, applications, and directions for future research were also provided. The project study was developed as a result of an identified achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. At the national, state, and local levels, girls outperform boys. Examining the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade

girls and boys in the content area of writing was necessary because it allowed me the opportunity to collect qualitative data, analyze it, and provide recommendations that could potentially impact writing instruction and student achievement at Sky. Writing is considered the neglected “R” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003; Stokes, 2011) and more attention should be placed on direct writing instruction. The journey has taught me how to conduct research and the importance of using research as a scholar-practitioner to promote positive social change.

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Appendix A: White Paper Report

**Gender Specific Instructional Strategies and Progress Monitoring for Writing**

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## **Gender-Specific Instructional Strategies and Progress Monitoring for Writing**

### **Introduction**

Writing is considered the neglected “R” (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003; Newkirk & Richards, 2007; Sanders-Reio & Reio, 2012; Stokes, 2011). Among K-12 public school students, national writing scores reveal that students usually perform worst in writing when compared to achievement scores in other content areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Writing data from National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) and The Colorado Department of Education (2014) demonstrate that an achievement gap also exists particularly between elementary girls and boys in the content area of writing.

### **Local Problem**

An achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing is evident. In a three year average from 2012-2014, 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing scores revealed that there was a 10% differential score between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys (Colorado Department of Education, 2014).

### **Summary of the Doctoral Study**

The achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing is a persistent problem. Writing data from National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) and The Colorado Department of Education (2014) demonstrated that an achievement gap between elementary girls and boys in the content area of writing at the national, state, and school level. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to specifically examine why this achievement gap exists. Examining the achievement gap

between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing is necessary because it could provide insight into why a gap exists and could potentially impact writing instruction and student learning. Teachers and administrators might benefit from this qualitative case study because it could provide insight into the instructional best practices needed to help students develop the necessary skills to become proficient writers and potentially help close the gender achievement gap.

In order to investigate this disparity at the local level, there was a need to determine why the achievement gap exists and what could be done to help close the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys. The following questions were used to guide the study:

- 1. What are building administrator perceptions of the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?*
- 2. What are teacher perceptions of the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?*
- 3. What strategies can 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?*

A fifth grade teacher and a building administrator represented the sample population.

To address the research questions, data was collected from three sources. Data collected from interviews, observations, and the examination of available writing instructional resources was collected to provide insight into the instructional strategies used to teach writing and how the available writing resources were used for instruction. Interviews

were conducted with the building administrator and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom teacher. The interviews were face-to-face and took place at the research site (the school). The interviews were audio recorded, providing a more accurate account of the interview (Creswell, 2012). Each interview took between 20-30 minutes. An observation was conducted with the 5<sup>th</sup> teacher in the classroom. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher was observed once during writing instructional block. The observation was 65 minutes long. During the observation, the writing instructional strategies and some of the current instructional resources used for writing instruction were documented. Other instructional resources that are used by 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher for writing instruction was also documented and analyzed. Analyzing data from the interviews, observations, and instructional resources helped confirm emerging themes that lead to the recommendations provided in the report. The data analysis revealed that gender specific instructional strategies and an effective progress monitoring assessment tool could be ways to address the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing.

### **Instructional Recommendations**

#### **Gender Grouping**

It is necessary to consider assessment data when considering an instructional practice that will impact staff and students. The use of disaggregated assessment data by gender can reveal specific achievement gaps in certain content areas and grade levels (Protheroe, 2009). Disaggregated data from Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) scores revealed that there was an achievement gap between girls and boys at Sky Charter School. Gender grouping is cost effective (Cable & Spradlin, 2008) and does not



necessarily require the purchase of a new writing curriculum or program. Gender grouping can also address the problem because it would allow for instructional changes to be made that intentionally address the learning needs of both girls and boys (Gurian, Stevens, & Daniels, 2009). Students who are placed into single-sex settings experience greater social-emotional benefits, encounter more interesting and purposeful curricular content, and are more connected with learning and feel more at ease (Blakesley, 2013; Younger & Warrington, 2005). Single-sex education was practiced and has been a part of our nation's educational fabric since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Anfara & Mertens, 2008). Many of these schools were private parochial in nature (Cable & Spradlin, 2008). Over the years, coeducation schools evolved as a result of changing societal roles of men and women (Riordan, et al., 2008). In the last 15 years, single-sex education experienced resurgence in popularity (McCreary, 2011). The passing of No Child Left Behind Legislation (NCLB) ushered in more aggressive reform measures. The rewriting of Title IX made it "easier for schools to adopt single-sex classrooms" (Meyer, 2008, p. 301). According to NASSPE (n.d.), as of the 2011-2012 academic year, there were 506 public schools in the U.S. offering single-sex opportunities. About 390 of these schools were coed offering single-sex classrooms. The remaining schools were considered single-sex. Groups like The Feminist Majority Foundation (2014) identified at least 700 K-12 public schools that deliberately promote gender grouping students.

Proponents of single-sex education assert that placing girls and boys in single-sex learning environments is beneficial (Bonomo, 2010; Gurian, Stevens & Daniels, 2009; NASSPE, n.d.; Sampson, et al., 2014; Sax, 2005). Placing students into same gender

settings minimizes behavioral issues. Students in these settings are less distracted and are more engaged in learning (Riordan, et al., 2008). Some of the behavioral issues especially among boys are attributed to early gender bias experienced in the beginning of their formal education (Eliot, 2010; Piechura-Coutre, Heins & Tichenor, 2013). In a study conducted by Benenson, Quinn, and Stella, (2012), boys were more willing to work and affiliate with random same-sex peers than girls. Placing boys in single-sex settings would motivate and provide them a different learning opportunity (Price, 2011). Girls thrive in non-competitive settings and are more eager to participate and ask questions when boys are not present (Hughes, 2006-2007; Riordan et al., 2008). In many instances, boys dominate discussions, the hands-on activities, and assume more teacher vigilance due to behavioral issues.

Proponents of gender-grouping also claim that the practice can close the achievement gap (King & Gurian, 2006; Laster, 2004; Stotsky, 2012). “In single-sex classes, advocates contend that teaching can be tailored to fit the different needs of male or female students and can help both sexes to attain higher levels of achievement” (Cable & Spradlin, 2008, p. 4). It is important to understand that the mere practice of gender grouping alone simply will not close the achievement gap. Teachers need to understand the differences of how girls and boys learn and how they respond to different instructional models that distinctly address their learning styles (Sax, 2006). Gender grouping is an innovative practice that allows teachers and administrators the opportunity to create educational programs that are unique to the girls and boys learning needs (Caplice, 1994; Hughes, 2006-2007; Meyer, 2008).

Placing students into single-sex learning environments will not be enough to close the achievement gap between girls and boys in writing. It is necessary to consider certain writing gender specific instructional practices that are designed to meet the learning styles of both girls and boys because of their unique ways of learning (Sax, 2005; Spielhagen, 2011). How girls and boys learn and the success they experience is contingent upon the instructional practices utilized in the learning environment where the instruction occurs (Carrier, 2009; King, Gurian, & Stevens, 2010; Khalil & Saar, 2009; Logan & Johnston, 2010).

Boys need an active learning environment that includes high interest, boy-friendly content (Carrier, 2009; Gartrell, 2006; Johnson & Gooliaff, 2013). Lessons in this type of learning environment should be structured so that the pacing is quick and content is delivered in small, chunks (Chadwell, 2010). Boys are more kinesthetic and need more movement and hands-on learning opportunities (Hughes, 2006-2007; King, Gurian, & Stevens, 2010). Creating boy-friendly learning environments in which boys are given learning opportunities that include movement, visual spatial assignments and the choice to choose topics that are interesting, motivate and change boys' attitudes about school (Bruner, 2010; Franco & Unrath, 2015; Sax, 2009).

Girls should have access to learning environments that provide safe, non-competitive learning opportunities that promote cooperative group work where they can interface and dialogue about ideas (Gurian & Ballew, 2003; NASSPE, n.d.; Riordan, et al., 2008). According to Johnson and Gooliaff (2013), Gartrell (2006), and Carrier (2009), girls need time for self-reflection and the opportunity to verbalize thoughts in a

learning environment. Allowing girls to share their writing with others fosters the safe learning environment needed for the creation of the cooperative dialogue girls can benefit from. Partner sharing and peer critiquing activates help to build confidence in their abilities.

### **Boy and Girl Specific Work Groups**

Gurian and Stevens (2010) of The Gurian Institute trained teachers in more than 2,000 schools and districts developing the “Teaching Boys Effectively Logic Model.” These schools used the Teaching Boys Effectively Logic Model to help close the gender achievement gap. The use of gender specific work groups was an effective strategy schools used to help close the achievement gap. Teachers used boy and girl-only work groups in coed classrooms and found that students are less distracted and flourish in a new gender grouping alternative.

### **Self-Sponsored Writing**

Self-sponsored writing activities can occur in or outside the classroom. Self-sponsored writing activities are student-centered and student-initiated (Brandt, 2001; Sternglass, 1989). Self-sponsored writing allows students the opportunity to choose topics to write about while providing students more opportunities to write. Self-sponsored writing can be an effective writing strategy for students as well as an instructional practice for teachers. Similar to self-sponsored writing, Elbow (1989; 1998) uses “free writing” to describe the process that allows students the opportunity to choose high interest topics while giving them autonomy over the format and the purpose. Free writing is also a practice best used for making the quickest improvements to how students write

(Elbow, 1998). Self-sponsored writing is a practice that can be used to help establish ownership with students' written work as well as promote writing fluency and increase writing speed (Abdel Latif, 2013; Ferrier et al. 2013; Sternglass, 1989). A student's written fluency level demonstrates their ability to effectively communicate in writing. In many instances, students struggle with writing proficiency because they have difficulty generating ideas and getting words on paper. To communicate effectively, students must be able to fluently produce words on the page (Parker et al. 2011).

### **Progress Monitoring Tool for Writing**

#### **Curriculum Based Measurements**

Curriculum Based Measurements (CBM) are used to "...help teachers plan instruction and monitor it to see if it is working" (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2007, p. 5). The results from a writing CBM can reveal the students' writing fluency, as this provides insight into how well the students is able to generate ideas (Abdel Latif, 2013). Writing CBM's are nationally normed and track three areas: Total Words Written (TWW), Correct Word Sequences (CWS), and Words Spelled Correctly (WSC). The use of the CBM is both reliable and valid (Deno, Marston, & Mirkin, 1982). According to Deno et al. (2001), "CBM also relies on a traditional psychometric framework by incorporating conventional notions of reliability and validity so that the standardized test administration and scoring methods have been designed to yield accurate and meaningful information" (p. 508). Curriculum Based Measurements are reliable and valid measures used for progress monitoring written fluency. Curriculum Based Measurements requires less time

to implement and score. Curriculum Based Measurements can also provide insight into a student's grammatical skills, language usage, and their overall command of language.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the doctoral study was to examine the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. This white paper report summarized the data collection and analysis from the doctoral study. Data was collected from three sources: interviews, an observation, and the analysis of instructional writing resources. The results of the white paper revealed that gender-specific instructional strategies and a progress monitoring assessment tool is needed to help close the achievement gap. Gender-specific instructional strategies and the use of Curriculum Base Measurement are suggested recommendations presented in the white paper.

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## Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter

You are invited to take part in a research study of the examination of the achievement gap between 5th grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The researcher is inviting a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher participate in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named *Phillip Williams* who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may know him as the District Assessment Coordinator in a different District. His role as the researcher is separate from his role as District Assessment Coordinator.

### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine why there is an achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. At the national, state, and district levels there is a substantial achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in one interview that will last between 20-30min.
- Review the interview transcript to verify accuracy.
- Allow the researcher to observe your classroom during writing instruction for 45-60min.

Here are some sample questions:

1. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
2. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at Walden University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves minor risks of the small discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as frustration. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

The school might benefit from this doctoral project study because it could provide insight into the best instructional practices needed to help students develop the necessary skills to become proficient writers and potentially help close the achievement gap between girls and boys.

### **Payment:**

For being a part of the study, you will receive a \$5 gift card to a local coffee house. You will receive the gift card once all of the data has been collected and analyzed from the interviews and observations.

### **Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. All data will be kept at the researcher's home on a personal password protected computer. Hand written field notes and interview recordings will be kept at the researcher's home in a locked desk. The researcher will be the only person to have access to the data. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via XXX or XXX. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension **3121210**. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-12-15-0265569 and it expires on **March 11, 2016**. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to the email with the words 'I Consent' I am agreeing to participate in the study to the terms described above.

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Letter

You are invited to take part in a research study of the examination of the achievement gap between 5th grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. The researcher is inviting a **building administrator** to participate in the study. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named *Phillip Williams* who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may know him as the District Assessment Coordinator in a different District. His role as the researcher is separate from his role as District Assessment Coordinator.

### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine why there is an achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in the content area of writing. At the national, state, and district levels there is a substantial achievement gap between girls and boys in the content area of writing.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in one interview that will last between 20-30min.
- Complete a member check of the interview data to validate emerging findings. Participant will read over the emerging findings from the interview and offer feedback to the researcher. Time required 20-30min.

Here are some sample questions:

1. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
2. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at Walden University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves minor risks of the small discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as frustration. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

The school might benefit from this doctoral project study because it could provide insight into the best instructional practices needed to help students develop the necessary skills to become proficient writers and potentially help close the achievement gap between girls and boys.

### **Payment:**

For being a part of the study, you will receive a \$5 gift card to a local coffee house. You will receive the gift card once all of the data has been collected and analyzed from the interviews and observations.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. All data will be kept at the researcher's home on a personal password protected computer. Hand written field notes and interview recordings will be kept at the researcher's home in a locked desk. The researcher will be the only person to have access to the data. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via XXX or XXX. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 1-800-925-3368, extension **3121210**. Walden University's approval number for this study is 03-12-15-0265569 and it expires on **March 11, 2016**. The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to the email with the words 'I Consent' I am agreeing to participate in the study to the terms described above.



## Appendix D: Observation Protocol

**Date:** 4/2/15

**Time:** 10:55-12:00

**Location:** Sky Classroom

**Observations:**

1. 10:58- Class begins with a “DO NOW” (warm up activity) reviewing adverbs.
2. Before students begin work on the Do Now worksheet, the teacher asks the class “What is an adverb”? Students answer by raising their hands and the teacher calling on them. The students share their answers by giving examples.
3. 11:05- The teacher asks the students to refer to the Do Now worksheet and begin working on the first section (List 5 verbs) by filling in examples on the worksheet. This section is divided into 3 parts, requiring the students to show a progression.
4. The students begin work on the next section on the bottom of the page. This section requires students to take a row of adverbs from the top section and write a sentence for each progression. Again, this practice section is teacher directed. The students write a sentence and the teacher calls on a student to share what they have written. Both girls and boys appear to be engaged and are able to complete the section with little difficulty.
  
- 11:15-** Transition into persuasive paragraph.  
Students have been working on persuasive paragraphs. A rough draft paragraph was completed yesterday. The teacher mentions that the students who did not finish their paragraph in class needed to finish the paragraph for homework.
5. The teacher asked the students “What is the goal of a persuasive paragraph”? Students respond by raising their hands and are called on to share their answers.
6. The teacher also asks the students “How many pieces of evidence is needed in the paragraph”? A student raises their hand and answers “6.”
7. The teacher now states that persuasive rough draft paragraphs were completed yesterday. “Today, we are going to edit our paragraphs.” Students are to edit their own paragraphs and also complete peer editing.
8. The editing process is teacher directed and the teacher goes through each editing task with the students.
9. The first editing task begins with the student looking at their topic sentences. “Does your topic sentence clearly give an opinion”?
10. Students are given 30 sec. to check their work.
11. Students swap papers with a partner (peer editing). They need to check their partners work for the same. 30 seconds was allowed for the same. Students are required to give their partner a suggestion to make their writing better.
12. While students were doing this, the teacher walks around and interacts with a group of students in the front center of the room. Some students appear to be more on task than others.
13. Students receive their own paragraphs back and are given 2min to make changes.

- 14.** While the students work on this, the teacher walks around and interacts with a group of students in the middle section of the room towards the back.
- 15.** 2 min. are up and the teacher states, “Thumbs up if you think your statement is clearer.” A majority of thumbs go up.
- 16.** The teacher directs the students to the second editing task that states, “Is the topic sentence original?” It can’t be an “I think” statement.... The students check their topic sentences. At this point, 12 out of 14 boys begin the task but appeared to be lost with what to do or they think their work was already good so no work was completed during this time. 6 out of 13 girls complete this task. The students, who did not, appeared as if their work was already good.
- 17.** The teacher directs the student to complete the third editing task which states, “Does your topic sentence contain a piece of evidence. The students have 30 sec. to complete this task. Many students, girls and boys do not check. Some sit there and talk to their neighbors. Three of the boys balance pencils on their fingers.
- 18.** Fourth editing task, students need to check if their paragraph has 6 pieces of evidence. Most boys at this point balance pencils on the fingers.
- 19.** The fifth editing task requires students to check for transitions in their writing. “Does your writing have transitions”? 12/14 boys check for transitions in their writing. 11/13 girls checked for transitions in their writing.
- 20.** The teacher then directs the students to complete the 6<sup>th</sup> editing task which asked the students to verify if the evidence they’ve included in their writing is related to the topic they are writing about. Most of the students in the class indicate with a head nod that it does.
- 21.** Students were directed to swap papers with a partner and select one sentence and offer a suggestion. Students are given 2 min. to complete this task. Once the 2 min were up, students exchanged papers.
- 22.** For the 7<sup>th</sup> editing task, students checked to see if their paragraphs had a concluding sentence. 12/14 boys checked. 3 boys appear to be writing something down.
- 23.** For the final editing task, students check to see if their topic sentence is not a cut and paste topic sentence.
- 11:45-** The teacher passes out green lined sheet of paper to students to complete the final draft of their persuasive paragraphs. Students are given only 15 min. to complete the final draft. While students are working, lights were turned off and house music is playing in the background. With music in the back ground, and everyone appears to be working. Girls and boys were nodding their heads to the beat of the music while they work. 13 min later the teacher states, “Whatever is not done must be done for homework.

***Researcher Thoughts and Reflections:***

- 3.** This worksheet is a good practice sheet show for practicing adverbs in their different forms. It would have been helpful if the first section was divided into three part to help student organize their work. The page originally wasn’t divided into three parts. The sections were drawn in on the top.

**4.** There doesn't appear to be any teacher verification of work completion other than the students saying that they completed the section correctly. I did not see the teacher actively check to make sure the students work was correct.

**10.** If the student didn't have the correct information written down, they should have more time to make the appropriate corrections. The teacher did not briefly check student work to see if they wrote the correct information down.

**12.** There was no way to verify if the students gave their partner a valid suggestion to make their work better.

**15.** Teacher is verifying that the students' statement is clear by a thumbs up. There needs to be another way for the teacher to confirm.

**18.** The class seemed to become more restless at this point with students not really checking their work or at least not interested in make their writing better.

**11:45-** The editing task is a bit lengthy. There should be fewer steps to complete the editing tasks. The editing tasks were teacher driven and there wasn't any accountability, verifying if any of the students actually completed any of the tasks to demonstrate their understanding.

While the students were writing their final drafts the room was a little too dark. The blinds should have been opened to let more light in. Even though students were working while the music was playing, the type of music playing could potentially be a distraction as students were nodding their heads up and down to the beat of the music.

15min may not be enough time for students to complete the final draft. Completing the writing task for homework if it is not completed in class may not yield the best final product from these students especially if some struggle with completing homework on time.

Student sat in their seats the entire time. Incorporating more movement may engage students more.

## Appendix E: Observation Narrative

**Date: 4/2/15**

**Time: 10:55-12:00**

**Location: Sky Classroom**

At 10:55, students began walking through the classroom door from the computer lab across the hall. As the students trickled in, the teacher directed them to come in quietly and take a seat so that they could begin the day's writing lesson. While the students were getting settled and taking out their writing materials, the teacher stated, "Today's objectives are to complete the "Do Now" and review and edit the rough draft of our persuasive paragraphs." The students have been struggling with adverbs, of knowing how and when to use them appropriately in their writing. At 10:58, students took out their "Do Now" worksheet to review adverbs. Before the students began any work on the Do Now worksheet, the teacher asked the students, "What is an adverb"? The students answered by raising their hands. When a student was called on, he or she would share their answer by giving specific examples.

At 11:15, the teacher asked the students to refer to the Do Now work sheet and begin working on the first section. The first section of the Do Now worksheet wanted students to list 5 adverbs and write how they change as their meaning grows. This section was divided into three parts, requiring the students to show progression in the adverb. This section was more teacher-directed. The students would complete an example and the teacher would call on students to share their answers. When students completed the first section, they were asked to begin work on the bottom section of the Do Now worksheet. This section required students to take a row of adverbs from the top of the page and write

a sentence for each progression. This section was also teacher-directed, giving the students very little time to complete it independently. The students wrote a sentence and the teacher would call on them to share their answers. Both girls and boys appeared engaged and appeared to complete the section with little difficulty. This worksheet was a good practice sheet for practicing adverbs in their different forms. It would have been helpful if the first section was divided into three parts to help student organize their work. The page wasn't originally divided into three parts. The sections were drawn in on the top.

At 11:15, the class transitioned from the Do Now review activity to their persuasive paragraphs. The teacher said, "O.K. class, go ahead and put away your Do Now worksheet and take out your persuasive paragraphs." The student had been working on persuasive paragraphs and a rough draft paragraph was completed the day before. The teacher mentioned that the students who did not finish up their paragraphs the day before needed to have finished their paragraphs for homework. Everyone in the class appeared to be prepared with the exception of one student, a boy, who interrupted the teacher's directions because of rustling sound his paper made as he sifted through his white, overly stuff three ring binder. The teacher quickly addressed the student about the noise by walking over to his desk asking if he needed assistance. The student responded by saying he was O.K. and just forgot where he placed his paper. Eventually he found it. With attention redirected back to the class, the teacher asked, "What is the goal of a persuasive paragraph?" Both girls and boys raised their hands. Students were called on and shared a variety of answers. The teacher posed another question, "How many pieces of evidence is

needed in a paragraph”? A boy raises his hand and answers six. The teachers now mentioned that persuasive paragraphs should have been completed yesterday and states, “Today, we are going to edit our paragraphs.” Students were going to edit their own paragraphs and also complete peer editing.

The editing process began with the teacher going through each step with the students. The first editing task addressed topic sentences. The tasks asked students “Does your topic sentence clearly give an opinion”? The students were given 30 seconds to check their work. All students pensively check their work. When the 30 seconds were up, students were asked to swap papers with a partner for peer editing. They needed to check their partners work for the same. 30 second was also allowed. After the 30 seconds, the students were required to give their partner a suggestion to make their writing better. While the students were completing this task, the teacher walked around and interacted with a group of students in the front of the room. Some students appeared to be more on task than others as this particular task was less structured. There was no way of verifying if the suggestions students gave each other were informative and easy to understand. At this point the teacher walked to the back, middle part of the class to address a question one of the students had. Some students were reading their returned paragraphs. Others were engaged in side conversations. When the 2 minutes were up, the teacher said, “Thumbs up if you think your statement is clear? A majority of thumbs went up.

The teacher directed the students to the second editing task asked if the students had an original topic sentence. It can’t be an “I think” statement. The students checked their topic sentences. At this point, twelve out of fourteen boys began the task but

stopped working because they appeared to be lost with what to do or perhaps they felt like their work was already good. For these students, no work was completed during this time. Six out of thirteen girls completed this task. The students, who did not, appeared as if their work was already good. The teacher directed the students to complete the third editing task which required the students to verify if their topic sentence contains a piece of evidence. The students had 30 seconds to complete this task. Many students, girls and boys do not check. Some sit there engaged in side conversations their neighbors. Three of the boys balance pencils on their fingers. The next editing task required students to verify if their paragraph had 6 pieces of evidence. Most boys at this point began balancing pencils on their fingers. The class seemed to become more restless. Students appeared to not thoroughly check their work or at least not be interested in making their writing better. The fifth editing task required students to check for transitions in their writing. “Does your writing have transitions?” asked the teacher. Twelve out of fourteen boys checked for transitions in their writing. Eleven out of thirteen girls checked for transitions in their writing. Those who did not, added them in. The teacher then directed the students to complete the 6<sup>th</sup> editing task which asked the students to verify if the evidence they’ve included in their paragraph is related to the topic they are writing about. Most of the students in the class indicate with a head nod that it did. For the 7<sup>th</sup> editing task, students checked to see if their paragraphs had a concluding sentence. Twelve out of fourteen boys checked. Three boys appear to be writing something down. For the final editing task, students checked to see if their topic sentences were not cut and paste topic sentences, those that sound like any other topic sentence.

At 11:45, the teacher passed out a green lined sheet of paper and asked the students to complete the final draft of their persuasive paragraphs on that sheet. Students were given only 15 minutes to complete the final draft. My initial thought was, “15 minutes won’t be enough time.” Once the O.K. was given to start the final draft of the persuasive paragraph, the teacher walked over to the light switch and turned the lights off, creating a more focused atmosphere for writing. Surprisingly, background music was turned on. This was not the typical soft, relaxing, classical music you would normally hear. The sound emanating from the speakers was house music playing on Pandora. Despite the music and very little light, all the students appeared to be working. Opening the blinds a little more may have helped draw in more light without totally changing the writing environment. Girls and boys were nodding their heads to the beat of the music while they worked. Thirteen minutes later, the teacher added, “Whatever is not done must be done for homework.” For the students who didn’t want to complete homework later that night, the teacher’s words provided a slight jolt of enthusiasm to get finished. Other students saw that as a stopping point and began to talking their neighbors while they put their things away. Class was dismissed at 12:00 noon.



## Appendix F: Question Connections to Literature

Authors Connected to Research Questions	Research Questions	Interview Questions Tied to Research Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beard &amp; Burrell (2010)</li> <li>• Eliot (2010)</li> <li>• Nidus &amp; Sadler (2011)</li> <li>• Sebastian &amp; Allensworth (2012)</li> <li>• Shatzer, Caldarella, Hallam, &amp; Brown (2014)</li> <li>• Van Langen, Bosker, &amp; Dekkers (2006)</li> </ul>	<b><i>What are building administrator perceptions of the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?</i></b>	1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between 5 <sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burman, Booth, &amp; Bitan (2008)</li> <li>• Chudowsky &amp; Chudowsky (2010)</li> <li>• Driessen &amp; Van Langen (2013)</li> <li>• National Center for Education Statistics (2013)</li> </ul>		2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applebee &amp; Langer (2006)</li> <li>• Cutler &amp; Graham (2008)</li> </ul>		3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coleman &amp; McNeese (2009)</li> <li>• Crowe (2013)</li> <li>• LaRocque, Kleiman, &amp; Darling (2011)</li> </ul>		4. How involved are parents in helping their 5 <sup>th</sup> grade student with writing outside of school?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beard &amp; Burrell (2010)</li> <li>• Brashears (2006)</li> <li>• Van Langen, Bosker, &amp; Dekkers (2006)</li> </ul>	<b><i>What are teacher perceptions of the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?</i></b>	1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between 5 <sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burman, Booth, &amp; Bitan (2008)</li> <li>• Chudowsky &amp; Chudowsky (2010)</li> <li>• Driessen &amp; Van Langen (2013)</li> <li>• National Center for Education Statistics (2013)</li> </ul>		2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applebee &amp; Langer (2006)</li> <li>• Cutler &amp; Graham (2008)</li> </ul>		3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coleman &amp; McNeese (2009)</li> <li>• Crowe (2013)</li> <li>• LaRocque, Kleiman, &amp; Darling (2011)</li> </ul>		4. How involved are parents in helping their 5 <sup>th</sup> grade student with writing outside of school?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graham &amp; Sandmel (2011)</li> <li>• Harris, Graham, Friedlander, &amp; Laud (2013)</li> <li>• McCarthey &amp; Ro (2011)</li> <li>• Peterson (2007)</li> </ul>	<b><i>What strategies can 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers implement to close the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?</i></b>	5. What strategies are you currently implementing to address the achievement gap between 5 <sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?

	6. Which of these strategies do you feel have been most successful?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• King, Gurian, &amp; Stevens (2010)</li><li>• Piechura-Couture, Tichenor, &amp; Heins (2007)</li></ul>	7. What are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction?

## Appendix G: Interview Questions

(Building Administrator)

1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?
4. How involved are parents in helping their 5<sup>th</sup> grade student with writing outside of school?
5. What strategies do teachers currently implement to address the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?
6. Which of these strategies do you feel have been most successful?
  7. What are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction?

Appendix H: Interview Questions  
(5<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher)

1. What are your thoughts regarding the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?
2. Why do girls outperform boys in writing?
3. How much writing is required of students outside of the classroom?
4. How involved are parents in helping their 5<sup>th</sup> grade student with writing outside of school?
5. What strategies do you currently implement to address the achievement gap between 5<sup>th</sup> grade girls and boys in writing?
6. Which of these strategies do you feel have been most successful?
7. What are your thoughts about separating girls and boys during writing instruction?

## Appendix I: Resources Used to Teach Writing

It was learned that the current 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher started working with this group of students at the beginning of second semester. The other 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher assigned to this class took a different position in the school. The current 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher is currently teaching a 6th grade class and the 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing class. When the teacher started working with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, he didn't have a good sense of what standards were covered and the academic level of the students. This is the teacher's first year teaching, so he doesn't have many instructional resources to teach 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing either. At this point, the teacher creates a lot of the instructional resources that are used each day. Practice sheets, rubrics, and exit slips are created by the teacher to check for understanding and progress monitor student progress through each unit. Lesson plans are created in the same fashion. An outline of what will be taught is created and saved on the teacher's computer. Depending on where the students are within the unit, the teacher will make a more detailed lesson plan the day before the lesson is taught. The lesson plans don't have a specific format other than listing the objective and the resources that will be used for instruction. There is not a year or semester scope and sequence being utilized at the moment. Units have a slight scope and sequence, but that is also being created at the moment. The teacher is meeting with middle school teachers to better align what is being taught. These meetings are also used to discuss writing expectations. Everyone in the building is pretty much doing what they what when it comes to writing instruction. Budget is also an issue and purchasing a program that may or may not be used is not likely to occur. In speaking with the teacher about this, it was stated that changing the instruction model and instructional strategies may be more beneficial (Personal Communication, April, 2015).

### **Resources currently used for writing instruction.**

#### **Write Source**

The Write Source materials are resources used to help students learn writing skills. These resources cover rules for language, grammar, and the writing process. Each unit also focuses on the different genres on writing. Write Source materials provide work samples for students to see how the rules for language and grammar are applied in context. Daily Language Workouts materials are also available for practice as well as assessment sheets that can be used as check for understanding. The teacher communicated that the Write Source materials are not used very often other than the Daily Language Workouts.

Sebranek, P., Kemper, D., & Meyer, V. (2012). Write source: Writing and Grammar. Houghton Mifflin/Harcourt. USA.

#### **DO NOWS**

DO NOWS are practice writing worksheets and made up packets. These worksheets and packets are completed at the beginning of each writing lesson. They serve as a warm up or a review of the concepts students are currently working on in writing. DO NOWS

come from a variety of sources and formats. Some DO NOWS come from Write Source practice materials. These practice materials such as the Daily Language Workouts. Some Do Now materials come from internet sources that are taken and rewritten in a format that is easier for the students to understand and work with. The teacher has also taken the time to create original Do Now worksheets like the one that was used during the observation.

### **Write Like This**

Write Like This is a book written by Kelly Gallagher. In the book, Gallagher focuses on real-world writing purposes by emphasizing, relevant, real-world writing skills students need for the 21st century. Gallagher walks teachers through specific discourse lessons that can help them develop an effective modeling approach to their classrooms. Modeling is an essential element in the learning process and Gallagher stresses that good writing skills are developed by reading and emulating good writers. Gallagher also shares mentor text (professional samples), student samples, and other assignments that have been used to improve student writing. The teacher uses this book as a reference for the modeling approach to writing. Some of the strategies in Write Like This are used for editing practice to polishing student work.

Gallagher, K. (2011). *Write like this: Teaching real world writing through modeling and mentor texts*. Stenhouse Publishers. USA.

### **Practice Sheets and Packets**

Practice sheets and packets are created for students to complete. Sky believes that students should have ample opportunities to practice. These practice sheets and packets serve a variety of purpose for teacher. With the use of practice sheets and packets, teachers can check for understanding, students can practice the skills needs to help attain mastery, and they can be used for homework. These practice sheets and packets come from a variety of sources. Some are teacher created. Some come from internet, and other are from bits and pieces of writing resources the teacher uses to teach writing.

### **High-Performance Writing**

High-Performance Writing is a comprehensive writing program that provides instruction for the writing needs of all students using a direct instructional model. High-Performance Writing provides instruction in grammar and language usage, strategies for writing, and processes to complete the writing process. Included in the program are scoring rubrics and writing activities to help students practice skills and the writing process. The teacher uses the High-Performance Writing practice sheets to create practice packets to check for understanding.

T. Dodds. (2005). *High Performance Writing: A Structured Approach*. SRA/McGraw-Hill. USA.

**Exit Slips**

Exit slips are used primarily to check for understanding at the end of a lesson. These slips are quick one or two question and answer pieces of paper that are handed to students at the end of a lesson. The teacher checks these, documents of the progress, and uses them for instructional purposes based on how the students answered the questions.

After careful review of the available 5<sup>th</sup> grade writing resources, none provided specific instructional insight into gender differences nor did they target specific instruction for each gender.