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The Effects Of Peer-Revision On Student Writing Performance In A Middle School Ela Classroom

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THE EFFECTS OF PEER-REVISION ON STUDENT WRITING PERFORMANCE IN A MIDDLE
SCHOOL ELA CLASSROOM

by

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Abstract

This dissertation in practice outlines an action research project that attempted to answer the research question: *what impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?* This question is predicated on the idea that writing instruction in middle school English-Language Arts (ELA) classrooms is not always adequate. Writing often suffers due to many reasons, and out of all aspects of writing, it is often the instruction and practice of revision that suffers the most. This research project followed Mertler's (2014) four-phase action research process, with phases being broken down further into nine steps: *identifying the topic, gathering information, reviewing the related literature, developing a research plan, implementing the plan, analyzing the data, developing an action plan, sharing and communicating the results, and reflecting on the process.* Students in a middle school ELA classroom were given two writing prompts. For the first prompt, students edited their own papers. For the second prompt, students worked with partners. The results showed significant improvement in writing performance when students worked together, and adds to the body of research that suggests that students can benefit from cooperative learning techniques such as peer revision.

Keywords: revision, peer-revision, cooperative learning, action research, writer's workshop, post-writing

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Writing is a task with which many students struggle. Across the country, a majority of students are unable to master fully the rigorous writing criteria as laid down by the Common Core or their own state's individual standards. The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), authorized in part by the U.S. Department of Education, determined that almost three quarters of 8th and 12th grade students were unable to write at a proficient level (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). At the same time, in a nationwide survey, most teachers (64%) reported that they felt unprepared, or even unable, to teach writing as effectively as they would like in their classrooms due to a number of factors, including lack of training (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2013).

Meanwhile, even though writing is a difficult and complex task for most, research shows that writing demands placed on students during their course of schooling actually decreased following the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* in the first few years of the 21st Century. This decrease was due, in part, to a change of instructional focus based on testing demands, as English/Language Arts (ELA) testing tended to emphasize reading skills over writing or other general literacy skills (Applebee & Langer, 2009). While this emphasis changed somewhat yet again with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) movement to include skills like Text-Dependent Analysis, which does involve writing, the teaching of writing still seems to be considered by many to be largely forgotten, or given secondary importance (Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, & Olinghouse, 2014). Even

when students do write, all too often it takes the shape of short-answer writing or fill-in-the-blank, with very little longer writing exercises or opportunities for students actually to compose, rather than write (Applebee & Langer, 2011).

Once considered mainly the purview of the ELA class, writing is more and more being seen as something that can and should be applied to all areas of study. The use of writing assignments has been shown to be an effective means of instruction, review, and assessment in all subjects of study including science (Grymonpre, Cohn, & Solomon, 2012; Wood, Jones, Stover, & Polly, 2011), history (Monte-Sano & Harris, 2012; Wissinger & De La Paz, 2016) and math (Johanning, 2000; Wagner, Bright, & Hubbard, 2015; Wood et al., 2011). In fact, the state of South Carolina recently passed *its Read to Succeed* initiative in 2015, which requires teachers of all grade levels and subject areas to take continuing education courses to prepare them in the areas of both reading and writing instruction (“South Carolina State Reading Plan,” 2015). This is due in part to the fact that reading and writing have both been identified as areas where South Carolina students struggle. Recent state testing data supports this. In 2016, for example, more than half -- 55.3% -- of all 8th grade students did not meet the minimum ELA standards in South Carolina. In writing, the number of students not meeting the minimum standard was similar, at 47.3% (“2016 South Carolina,” 2017).

Writing is an essential part of this literacy initiative, and teachers are expected to implement writing activities in their various subject areas, as “writing activities are essential learning experiences and should be part of every teacher’s routine instructional practice” (“South Carolina State Reading Plan,” 2015, p. 6). Similar programs, either

state-, county-, or district-run, have been put in place all across the nation, as concerns about literacy have only deepened in recent years (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Because of this, it is now more important than ever that research be conducted into how most effectively to teach writing and writing-related skills. Unfortunately, educators do not always agree on how to do this. The teaching of writing has undergone significant changes over the course of the last century. For many educators at the beginning of the 20th Century, it was thought that teaching students penmanship, such as learning how to form the letters correctly and neatly, was adequate, as writing was thought by most educators to be no more than “the transcription of spoken thought onto the page” (Hawkins & Razali, 2012, p. 306). In an environment such as that, there was no need for actual writing instruction, as the simple act of copying a writing passage from one paper to another would educate the student in the ways of writing. While educators gradually shifted their views, it took decades before it was recognized that writing was, itself, a complex process that required practice and strategies to master (Hawkins & Razali, 2012). Although this more modern view of writing as a *process* was proposed and began to gain acceptance over a half century ago (Murray, 1972/2003), the evolution of thought on this subject and how best to teach it is nowhere near complete.

Indeed, there have been a lot of changes in the instruction of writing over the course of the last few decades (Applebee & Langer, 2009), leaving many educators unsure about the best ways to teach this important, yet complex, skill. One area of study that has shown promise is the implementation of cooperative learning models, such as *peer revision*. Peer revision can be defined as a situation in which students work together to edit and revise each other’s writings under the careful guidance and supervision of a

teacher (Yang, 2011). As reported by Gillies (2014), multiple studies have been conducted that show that a cooperative learning strategy such as this can have a significant impact in the overall proficiency of a student's writing.

Keeping this in mind, this action research project was begun with the intent of determining how the participant-researcher can more effectively enable his students to become more proficient writers using peer revision strategies during the writing process. It is hoped that, by the proper instruction of revision strategies, as well as the added benefit that can be gained by implementing a peer revision approach in the classroom, that students will see significant and encouraging growth in their writing abilities.

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice (PoP) for this study concerns the inadequate writing skills of 8th grade middle school students at a typical suburban school in the South Carolina Lowcountry. As stated earlier, writing is an important skill that is needed in all areas of schooling, but because of many factors it is often taught inadequately, or not at all (Kolling, 2002). As demands have increased over the years, teachers find themselves struggling to cover all of the required standards and goals that are prescribed in state and national guidelines. In ELA, for example, the 2015 South Carolina College- and Career-Ready Standards (SCCCR) for 8th grade list more than 100 individual indicators of items that are expected to be covered during the course of a normal school year ("Standards and Learning," 2015). This is significantly more than any other core area of study—the standards for 8th grade Math have the next highest amount of individual items, coming in at just over a much more manageable 80—and in some cases is even more than double

the length of standards of other disciplines. These indicators cover a broad variety of skills, of which writing is only one section.

The same holds true on a national level, as well. While the latest edition of the Common Core State Standards Initiative lists only 28 standards for 8th grade math, an 8th grade ELA is expected to cover no less than 42 different standards in the course of a single year (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2017). Just like the SC standards, many of these standards are then broken down into smaller indicators as well, each one expected to be addressed during the course of instruction (2017). Even though some of these items are small and easy to master, this still serves to show just how much is expected of a typical middle school ELA teacher in one year of instruction.

While this issue of time has led to many concerns, it is in the teaching of writing where the lack of real, high-quality instruction is most often notable (McQuitty, 2014). The 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress noted that a majority of American 8th grade students cannot write at a proficient level. To add to that, in 2007, the last time the NAEP writing assessment was used as a tool to compare and measure individual states, South Carolina was found to be well below the national average in overall writing proficiency, with only 23% of students scoring proficient or above, compared to the national average of 31% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

Because writing is such a broad area, and because action research works best when dealing with specific, focused, manageable goals (Mertler, 2014), this research project specifically focused on the area of revision. Revision, also known as *post-writing*, is a stage of the writing process that takes place after a student's initial writing of a

composition. It is the time when a writer takes what has already been written and attempts to improve it by finding and correcting mechanical errors, rearranging ideas to improve clarity and cohesion, or adding, subtracting, or rewriting ideas for better tone, style, and understanding. It is generally viewed as a very complex and difficult aspect of writing (Myhill & Jones, 2007), and yet it is often given less than adequate attention when it comes time for classroom instruction and practices (Applebee & Langer, 2011). It is, therefore, an oft-neglected aspect of an already neglected area of instruction. However, revision is a very necessary skill for any writer (Beltran & Decker, 2014). It is an integral part of the writing process; for many accomplished and skilled writers, revising is second only to pre-writing in both importance as well as time spent on task (Murray, 1972/2003), but in many classrooms it is treated almost as an afterthought due to lack of time, resources, or knowledge of how to teach it (Stemper, 2002).

A recent study by Applebee & Langer (2011) confirms this. In this study, conducted in schools across the country that were “selected for their emphasis on writing instruction” (2011, p. 16), students were observed doing very little writing during an average school day. Even in these environments that were known to focus on writing, the typical student was only being expected to produce around three total pages of writing content per week for all classes combined—not just in English-related classes. In addition, most of the writing observed took place in the form of smaller assignments, such as “fill in the blank and short answer exercises, and copying of information directly from the teacher’s presentation” (2011, p. 15). In fact, it was found that only 19% of the total writing-based assignments given to the student were ones that required the students to write even a single paragraph of original content. Longer writing assignments (defined

as assignments of three or more pages) were rare indeed, with most students in the survey only having one of these assignments during a typical nine-week grading period (2011). As far as actual instruction time spent writing, only 7.7% of the class time observed in this study involved students actually working on writing assignments of a paragraph or more. This means that, in the course of a normal day, students are spending very little time in the writing process.

Similar findings have been described in other studies, such as Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy (2013), who reported that teachers were observed assigning their students more lengthy assignments such as reports or persuasive papers on average only once or twice in a whole year of instruction. Findings like this only serve to highlight the need for more research to see how students' needs in the area of writing can best be met more efficiently and effectively.

Not that time set aside for instruction is the only concern. As noted elsewhere, many teachers are inadequately trained to teach writing in the classroom training (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2013). For some, this lack of preparation is especially significant and can manifest itself in different ways when it comes to revision (Kolling, 2002). While there really is no recognized *best* way to teach the skills needed for revision, research has shown that students benefit most from the specific instruction and modeling of various revision-based strategies (Beltran & Decker, 2014). Many teachers, however, fail to instruct their students in these strategies, instead opting for quicker and easier approaches (Stemper, 2002). Some teachers have students work on their own or with a partner but give very little instruction or guidelines. Some simply hand out rubric-related checklists, but fail to teach the students how to effectively use

those rubrics to guide their revisions (Beltran & Decker, 2014). This can lead to a situation where students know what is wrong in a piece, but do not know why or how to correct it. Some teachers do either too much or too little, or only focus on surface corrections instead of helping students look at deeper problems with their writing (Witte, 2013).

Many, if not most, have erred in all these ways over the years, and have found it difficult to achieve the right balance of helping students while also allowing them to practice and master the skills on their own. However, these inadequate practices most often end up harming the students, rather than helping them. Since revision, like other areas of writing, is a concept that needs to be explicitly taught (Kolling, 2002), failing to do so is just setting students up for failure when they reach this critical stage of the process.

Another problem teachers must face when it comes to teaching revision is that of student apathy. In general, students lack motivation when it comes to writing assignments (Barb & Leanne, 2013). Whether it be because they do not want to do the work, or because they do not see the point of seemingly random writings with topics that bear no connection to their own lives, students find it difficult to care about their writing (Barb & Leanne, 2013). Add to that already existing apathy the even more extreme indifference many students feel toward revision (Conner & Moulton, 2000), and the result is often a situation where students are not working to their fullest. Most teachers can attest to the fact that, in any given classroom, in any given year, student apathy towards assignments and their grades is a constant impediment to success (Walsh, 2006).

The problem addressed by this action research project, then, is simple: due to a number of factors, including inadequate teacher preparation, a lack of quality writing instruction, and a general apathy on the part of students, most students nationally, as well as locally, are not successful at using revision skills to help create and improve their own writing or the writing of others.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to better understand how revision strategies can be taught and implemented in a middle school ELA classroom using a cooperative learning approach (sometimes called *peer revising* or *peer editing*). Because of the difficulties of both teaching and practicing revision, and because of the benefits that have been shown to be gained from cooperative learning in many areas (including writing), I hoped to develop and implement peer-revising practices that would help students write more effectively and of a higher quality than they would otherwise.

Research Question

Keeping all this in mind, this research focused on the effect of using cooperative learning strategies during the revision stage of the writing process. By developing and practicing peer-revision techniques, providing students with effective strategies for revision, and by monitoring the progress students make as they write and revise, this study was established to answer the following research question: *What impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?*

To answer this question, a quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test post-test approach was implemented, using a teacher-created rubric to measure the performance of students multiple times over the course of the study in the hopes of noting any significant

changes in their overall writing. With the use of effectively taught peer revision practices in place, I expected to see promising growth in all aspects of their performance.

Rationale for the Study

Being able to revise effectively is crucial. It is not, however, an easy skill to develop. It is one that makes heavy demands on a writer's cognitive processes (Myhill & Jones, 2007). Because of these demands, it is a skill that is difficult to master, especially for novice writers. Due to inadequate teacher preparation, a lack of specific classroom instruction, and student apathy, this mastery of post-writing skills is not taking place in today's ELA classrooms. For this reason, it is important and necessary to explore further avenues of successful revision instruction in the classroom.

Furthermore, as the benefits of cooperative learning have been widely studied, and are well known (Gillies, 2014), and as teachers have shown great success in implementing aspects of cooperative learning in a writer's workshop approach (Dix & Cawkwell, 2011), it only makes sense to apply the benefits of cooperative learning to this important skill. By combining the ideas of cooperative learning with the practical application of revision, it was hoped that real improvements would be seen in students' overall writing performance.

Theoretical Basis for the Study

The theoretical basis supporting my research is predicated on the idea propounded by Dewey (1938), which is that students learn best through experience. Students need to practice skills for themselves in order to become proficient. The nature of these experiences, however, plays a role in their significance. Positive experiences, full of meaningful and enjoyable activities, lead to positive results. By providing students with

necessary strategies, but having them put these strategies into practice in a relaxed, nurturing, and enjoyable setting, students are more likely to be engaged and learning, and ultimately master the skill.

Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

Over the past few decades, much research has been done on the positive effects of cooperative learning techniques in the classroom. A summary of much of this work was compiled by Gillies (2014), who concluded that the sheer volume of information in favor of it “supports structuring cooperative learning experiences” (p. 129) in the classroom. Vygotsky’s (1986) idea of a *zone of proximal development* states that learners are able to achieve more when working with others to help bridge gaps in their knowledge. Roseth, Johnson and Johnson’s (2008) theory of *positive social interdependence* asserts that students who work together to achieve a common goal are more likely and able to succeed than students who work alone, or in competition with others. Due in part to these ideas, cooperative learning has been shown to increase student achievement and motivation across the disciplines (2008). Because of this, when considering the difficulties that teachers and students face with revision, and knowing how a cooperative approach has benefited others, it seemed only natural to study how using a peer-revision technique in my own classroom could be of benefit. To keep the study manageable, this study focused solely on cooperative learning only as it pertains to revision, rather than the entirety of the writing process.

The Writer’s Workshop

In writing, cooperative learning has been used for years by teachers to help students enhance their writing. Often, this cooperative approach takes the form of what is

known as a *writer's workshop*. The concept of the writer's workshop has developed since the mid-20th Century until it has become one of the dominant forms of writing instruction at most levels of schooling (Leung & Hicks, 2014). This work can take many forms, but at its heart it is a group-based effort where students work together in every phase of the writing process, from initial planning to final product. Students may share ideas, offer suggestions, read their writing to each to give and receive feedback, and support one another's efforts. This collaborative approach has been shown to encourage success in the form of student motivation, enjoyment, and writing quality (Xu, 2015).

Revision

While the writer's workshop is a technique used to help writers in all areas of their writing, there is also reason to believe that cooperative learning can be of use when dealing with specific parts of the writing process, including the post-writing phase (Moran & Greenberg, 2008). While different strategies can be employed, the research that has been done, discussed in greater detail in chapter 2, offers greater insight into the benefits for both students and teachers when it comes to using cooperative techniques for revision.

Methodology – Action Research

The term *action research* refers to a process whereby educators or other interested parties take on the role of researcher. Rather than study a nameless group of faces found in a lab or some “other” place, action research usually involves the researcher's own class (Castro Garces & Granada, 2016), and takes place using the researcher's own students. Because of this, the focus of action research is on finding practical, immediate answers that help give the researcher insight into his/her own practices (Tormey & Henchy,

2008). A more detailed discussion of my research method and design can be found in chapter 3.

Participant Selection and Research Site

As this study falls under the category of action research, the research subjects were all students from my own classroom. I am currently an 8th grade teacher at a large middle school in the Lowcountry region of South Carolina, where I teach several classes of ELA a day. My classes are typically between 25 – 30 students of mixed abilities per class. Because of this wide range of student aptitude, I thought it beneficial for me to see how a peer-revision approach affects many types of students. Language Arts typically includes both reading and writing instruction, as well as instruction on communication and inquiry skills (such as asking questions and conducting research). The South Carolina standards, as well as the guidelines laid down by my own district, state that writing is an important part of the instruction during the course of the year (“Standards and Learning,” 2015). These writing assignments come in the form of multiple styles, including narrative, informative, and argumentative, and feature both mechanical aspects of writing (grammar and capitalization, for instance) as well as the quality of the writing itself (organization, vocabulary, and use of writing techniques such as imagery).

Sources of Data Collection

The sole source of data was through scoring student writing. As this research attempted to determine how cooperative learning can have a positive effect on student writing achievement, this was by far the most important to collect. This took place in the form of a teacher-created rubric (Appendix A). This rubric was similar to various rubrics that I have used in my own class for many years, so it was of a style and nature that I was

already familiar with. This rubric was designed to score students' abilities in six broad areas of writing: direction and focus, organization, use of support, clarity of ideas, language usage and style, and mechanics. It was used four times over the course of the project, both scoring rough and final drafts, in an attempt to gain insight into how the differing revision circumstances affected the quality of the student work.

Potential Weaknesses of the Study

Throughout a normal day I teach five classes, but they are not all the same content. I have three 8th grade ELA classes, one English I Honors class (comprised of 8th grade students but who do 9th grade Honors-level work), and a Yearbook class. This study used students drawn only from my three regular, grade-level ELA classes. This delimitation reduced the number of students who participated in the study to a relatively smaller number than the actual number of students I teach. All in all, 66 students took part in this study.

In addition, this study was based on the assumption that the students in my class were more or less on grade level. As an 8th grade teacher, I am expected to teach on 8th grade standards; therefore, the concepts, standards, and strategies discussed in my class were always intended to be on grade level. The stark reality, though, is that a number of my students are not on grade level. Since a significant percentage of students in South Carolina are not grade-level literate ("South Carolina State Reading Plan," 2015) there were potentially many students facing those challenges. While it is every teacher's job to teach the students that are actually in the classroom, rather than the ones he or she wants, it was understood that this lack of grade-level ability could also impact this study.

Whether a low-performing student was paired with an equally low student, or with a

student performing on, or even above, grade level could have a tremendous impact on which students are able to benefit from peer interaction, and by how much (Ammer, 1998). In addition, since this study used standards-based grade-level strategies and rubrics, students below grade-level do not always reap the benefits that could be gained by more ability-specific methods that could be implemented in a wider and longer-lasting study (Sencibaugh & Sencibaugh, 2016).

Significance of the Study

Throughout this study, I hoped to gain knowledge and insight which would be useful, not only in this one situation or classroom, but to the education community as a whole. Since “an investment in knowledge always pays the best interest” (Franklin, 1758), it is safe to say that knowledge is worth gaining for its own sake. Often times we study and gain knowledge simply because it is right to do so.

However, if this study is also able to contribute to the growing body of knowledge that seeks to understand how best to teach the next generation of leaders and thinkers, then that too will make this study worthwhile. While an action research project is not undertaken with the intent of translating the findings to the educational community as a whole (Mertler, 2014), that does not mean the findings here are not useful and of interest to others. As indicated before, writing is a task that can seem daunting to even the best student, and intimidating even to the best and most dedicated teacher. By expanding my own understanding and knowledge with this study, I hope to further my own professional practices in the future by providing first-hand confirmation of what I have long believed—that cooperative learning can be an effective instructional strategy in my own classroom. At the same time, by reporting these findings to my fellow teachers, the

school and the educational community at large, others may find useful tools and information that could help them more effectively teacher their own classes. For those educators who have not tried a cooperative approach because it was different or intimidating to change how their classrooms are designed, growth in writing in a study like this might show others that it is worth it to try something new in their own teaching practices.

Finally, this study is significant because of what it might mean for social change. More than just a teaching strategy, cooperative learning can be a tool for fostering democratic thought and social justice (Nikolakaki, 2012). Because it takes the reins of a classroom out of the hands of a single teacher and places them squarely in the hands of the students, cooperative learning gives students the chance not only to speak their own thoughts, but also listen to the thoughts and ideas of others. Through cooperative learning methods, students are exposed to new concepts and points of view—sometimes, for the first time in their lives (Nikolakaki, 2012).

Furthermore, by interacting with each other to meet common goals, students often build a sense of community within their groups. This feeling of belonging to a community can have a significant impact on a student’s opinion of others, school, and his/herself. Long-term cooperative learning projects often result in new friendships and alliances being formed, across racial boundaries (Hansell & Slavin, 1981), gender divides (Styslenger, 2008), and students with differing ability levels (Ammer, 1998). In addition, being seen as part of a group has been shown to increase students’ perceptions of their own success and social standing in school, which can result in a boost to a student’s self-

esteem (Hendrix, 1996), which can be important in not only that student's social success, but their academic success as well.

Glossary of Key Terms

Cooperative learning: Johnson, Johnson, and Roseth (2010) define cooperative learning as “any activity in which students work together to increase their knowledge or complete an assignment” (p. 1). Cooperative learning is a method of classroom management that can take many forms. Students can work in groups, pairs, or other formations to accomplish different tasks such as learning a concept, creating a project, completing an assessment, sharing knowledge, or teaching each other.

Peer-revision: A process where students revise and respond to each other's writings, with directions and coaching provided by the teacher (Karegianes, Pascarella, & Pflaum, 1980). This can take place in several different formats, including pair work, groups of three, four (or any number) or a class-wide round-robin approach (Keeley, 2014).

Positive social interdependence: A theory posited in part by Roseth, Johnson and Johnson (2008) to support the concept of cooperative learning. The theory states that positive social interdependence happens “when individuals perceive that they can reach their goals if and only if the other individuals with whom they are cooperatively linked also reach their goals” (p. 225). Positive Social Interdependence asserts that students will work more effectively when they believe everyone must achieve the goal of success. Cooperative goal structures such as this have been found to be more effective than competitive structures, where students try to “beat” each other, or individualistic goal structures, where students work on their own (2008).

Revision: Typically, one of the final stages of the writing process. In a linear, step-by-step model, revision is a part of the post-writing stage, where students are revisiting their already-written rough draft in order to improve what is there (Murray 1972/2003). Revision itself is often broken down into two separate categories of focus: *revising*, which looks to improve writing by adding, deleting, clarifying ideas, or changing how something has been said, and *editing*, which focuses more on error correction. Many writers and writing teachers approach revision in a more recursive fashion rather than linear, where revision is an on-going process that takes place continuously throughout the (1972/2003).

Writing process: A method of writing instruction developed in the latter half of the 20th Century that focuses less on the product of writing, and more on the *how to* of writing. The writing process is generally divided into three main areas: pre-writing, which includes planning and outlining ideas; writing, which includes writing a first, or rough, draft; and post-writing, which includes editing and revising the rough draft, and writing a more improved draft (Rohman, 1965). This post-writing can be repeated as many times as required before there is a finished version (1972/2003).

Writer's workshop: Writer's workshop (also called a writing workshop) is a method of writing instruction that generally incorporates both the ideas of cooperative learning and the writing process. Although writer's workshop models can vary, typically, students work together during most if not all stages of the writing process. During the workshop, students are sharing ideas, collaborating, and helping each other by providing knowledge, feedback, and a sense of audience. During this time, the teacher may provide

mini-lessons if needed, conference with specific individuals, or move around to each group, offering assistance where needed (Leung & Hicks, 2014).

Zone of proximal development (ZPD): One of the theoretical foundations of cooperative learning, the ZPD, developed by Soviet-era psychologist Lev Vygotsky, is “the gap between what a learner has already mastered, his actual level of development, and what he can achieve when provided with educational support, called potential development” (Rezaee & Azizi, 2012, p. 51). This gap, according to Vygotsky, shows the difference between what a student can accomplish individually, and what can be accomplished with support from teachers, peers, parents, or other individuals.

Summary and Conclusion

The problem of practice in this study centers on the poor writing performance of 8th grade students at a Lowcountry South Carolina school. This is due to many factors, including poor writing instruction, lack of time in the classroom, and students’ inability to edit and revise their writing. Since cooperative learning in general, and peer revision specifically, has been shown to be an effective strategy for enhancing student writing performance, this research hopes to better understand whether cooperative activities can be combined with effective revision strategies to help students become better writer and revisers.

Overview of Dissertation in Practice

Chapter 1 of this dissertation in practice discussed the difficulties students have in producing high quality writing, as well as the increasing importance of writing skills in ELA classrooms and the classrooms of other academic disciplines, ending with a discussion of why a study like this is significant and necessary. Chapter 2 presents a more

detailed theoretical framework for this study. As theories behind both writing instruction and cooperative learning were studied, the two ideas were bridged in many classrooms into what eventually became known as the writer's workshop. This effective cooperative approach is discussed in detail, with special attention given to the act of revision. Chapter 3 presents the design for this study, framed within the context of an action research project. Chapter 4 presents the overall findings of the study, and chapter 5 talks about the implications of these findings, including suggestions for future research opportunities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses the theoretical and historical development of cooperative learning methods and strategies in the classroom, particularly as they relate to the practice of post-writing activities such as revising and editing. The practice of utilizing cooperative learning methods – whether they are peers, small groups, or some other configuration – has been used for some time, but only recently has it been seriously studied in the realm of writing instruction. The development of teaching writing as a process, rather than a product, in the second half of the 20th Century coincided with the use of various peer methods such as the use of writer’s workshops, which turned the teaching of writing into a potential group activity. These peer methods have brought success when correctly implemented in a writing or ELA classroom.

The first part of this review discusses the concept and benefits of cooperative learning, which is based in part on Vygotsky’s (1986) theory of the *zone of proximal development*, which is concerned with what students are able to achieve when working with others who can provide support, knowledge, and skills. Many studies have been conducted that show that cooperative learning is a very effective classroom instructional technique. Following this, the literature review will discuss cooperative learning as it relates more specifically to writing instruction. In most cases, cooperative writing takes the form of a writer’s workshop, although that model is not the only possibility. A brief history of writing instruction is also discussed, tracing it over the last century as

educators began to recognize writing as an ongoing process, rather than just an end product, and adjusted their instructional techniques accordingly. Finally, the review also discusses research that has been done in the very field of peer revision in the classroom.

The Development of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning can be defined as “any activity in which students work together to increase their knowledge or complete an assignment” (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010, p. 1). Cooperative learning can involve many sorts of activities including group work, pair work, team-based activities, and peer tutoring. This idea – that students can learn and benefit from working with each other, rather than just in a top-down, teacher-centric environment – is one that has long since been seen as offering numerous advantages to today’s students (Gillies, 2014).

While the concept of cooperative learning has been around for a long time, it only really began to be studied extensively as an effective instructional strategy during the 20th Century (Smith, Sheppard, Johnson, & Johnson, 2005). In his book *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) wrote about the importance of real, meaningful experiences to a child’s development. Experience, he said, can take many forms, both good and bad, but when experience is given in a context that allows the child to examine and explore his/her own potential interests and abilities, true and meaningful learning can occur. Vygotsky’s (1986) ideas of a “zone of proximal development” states that a gap exists between a student’s actual achievement and that student’s potential achievement. He further asserts that a student is able to achieve independently and what that student can achieve with assistance or guidance from another entity (Vygotsky, 1986). Put together, these ideas of real, meaningful experiences and social interaction help to form the basis of cooperative

learning as used in today's classrooms. The use of these various techniques and methods in a classroom setting has been shown to have many benefits to the students, both academically and socially.

The Benefits of Cooperative Learning

It did not take long for the benefits of cooperative learning to be noticed and studied. Early in the cooperative learning movement, a wide-ranging meta-analysis concluded that cooperative learning was found to be more effective than individual or competitive-based learning activities, regardless of student age or subject matter (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981). This meta-analysis looked at the result of 122 separate studies that had been conducted prior, and which encompassed research participants from a variety of ages, education levels, and socio-economic backgrounds. Based on their findings, Johnson et al. concluded that cooperation was superior "in promoting achievement and productivity" (1981, p. 56) when compared to both competitive as well as individual learning environments. Further research since then has only served to strengthen these conclusions, as research has shown that having students work together provides benefits across a multitude of skills, ages, and class subjects (Gillies, 2014).

Academic Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Academically, cooperative learning has been shown to lead to an increase in students' performance in a number of studies. Another far-ranging meta-analysis, this one conducted by Roseth, Johnson, and Johnson (2008), studied over eight decades' worth of research, comprising data on over 17,000 adolescents from all over the globe.

Overwhelmingly, it was found that a cooperative atmosphere leads to higher academic

achievement as well as positive peer interaction. This increase in achievement happens in part because of the idea of *positive social interdependence*, which Roseth, Johnson and Johnson (2008) state happens “when individuals perceive that they can reach their goals *if and only if* the other individuals with whom they are cooperatively linked also reach their goals (emphasis added)” (p. 225). This sense of interdependence has been shown to be much more effective than those students who work individually or even in competition with one another (Johnson & Johnson, 2017).

While there is much more to cooperative learning than just grouping students together and telling them to “sit together and get to work,” Slavin (2014) argues that, when done properly and with teacher-given guidance, students who work together to achieve a goal or complete a task learn more and feel more successful and confident in their knowledge than they would have if they had simply worked on their own. The use of cooperative techniques in the classroom has been shown to lead to an increase in student achievement in a number of disciplines, including social studies (Gillies, 2002), science (Chatila & Al Hussein, 2017), math (Buchs, Wiederkehr, Filippou, Sommet & Darmon, 2015), and even physical education (Casey, 2013).

These academic benefits not only help the students in their current situation, but often last for years, creating higher chances for long-term academic progress. In a study of 52 fifth grade Social Studies students of varying ability levels who had been trained in cooperative learning techniques and behaviors previously, Gillies (2002) found that students who had been trained in cooperative learning techniques were able to work together with other students more efficiently as much as two years later, thereby reaping more long-term academic success. This success was attributed to many factors, including

the students' increased ability to work together to achieve academic goals, their willingness to communicate ideas and share resources, and their desire to help others in the group succeed, rather than only focusing on themselves and their own gains (2002). A further noticed benefit was the use of "higher level language strategies, such as generalizing information to draw a conclusion or develop a principle, and evaluating information from multiple sources." (2002, p. 19). These students showed a marked difference in their attitude and approach to group learning than did their peers who had not undergone such training.

In a study drawing on Gillies' (2002) findings, Casey (2013) examined the residual effects of cooperative learning techniques among early teenagers in a physical education class, and reported similar findings, that even over the course of more than a year, the students who had been trained in cooperative learning strategies were more willing to work together to achieve success, and more equipped to do so socially. Casey reported that "the students . . . felt that they had a part to play in the development of their own and others' learning" (2013, p. 158).

On the subject of literacy, there is also evidence that suggests cooperative learning can be effective in teaching students how to read and understand text. In a meta-study that examined 33 separate research studies, Slavin, Cheung, Groff and Lake (2008) compared the results of four different approaches designed to alter (and hopefully improve) the practices used when it comes to teaching reading and literacy in middle and high school. These four approaches included the implementation of different reading curricula, the introduction of mixed-method models in the classroom (including small groups), computer-based instructional strategies, and increased professional development

designed to give teachers a boost in their overall content and strategic knowledge.

Overwhelmingly, Slavin et al. (2008) found that, while many different approaches were successful, the approaches that focused more on changing teaching practices, rather than worrying about curriculum or technology, had a greater impact, with the biggest gains being seen in classrooms that attempted some form of cooperative learning.

Overall, cooperative learning has been found to increase academic achievement in students by a significant amount – so significant that many researchers and experts recommend that teachers looking to help their students “should structure learning situations cooperatively” (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010, p. 5).

Social Benefits of Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning has also been found to have social benefits. As students interact with each other, it is necessary for them to develop systems of communication and negotiations in order to accomplish their collective tasks. Students must learn to navigate the implicit (and sometimes explicit) power structures that define student relationships with each other (Burwell & Stone, 2012). Working together to achieve a common goal is one way that students can overcome these power discrepancies, and instead have meaningful, positive interactions with their peers (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010).

Not only do students see social benefits from working together, but these skills are ones which students can learn through specific training interventions. In researching the effects of a collaborative program called SPRinG (Social Pedagogic Research into Grouping), Blatchford, Baines, Rubie-Davies, Bassett, & Chowne (2006) reported that collaborative and cooperative learning techniques could be taught to students, and

students were able to see both short- and long-term benefits from this training. While studying the participation of more than 500 8- to 10- year old students in suburban London, children schooled in effective dialog and group work techniques saw an improved ability to work and communicate with those around them. These social gains of collaborative interaction were not only seen with student-to-student interaction, but student-to-teacher as well.

Working with over 500 adolescents 9-12 years in age from both rural and urban schools, Tolmie et al. (2010) set out to build on Blatchford et al's. (2006) work with the SPRinG program. Throughout the course of their study, they reported that students who were given training in how to work with their peers were able to engage in cooperative and collaborative activities in the classroom, and were likely to develop more positive relations with their peers, in both work and play situations. These gains were seen in both the initial phases of their study, when students were actively taught how to work in groups and participate in collaborative dialog, and added to throughout the rest of the school year, as students worked together in class. Even though these studies both utilized a similar program, the results clearly suggest that being trained in cooperative learning techniques, and having the opportunity to practice them gives students the knowledge of how to work well with others in a variety of situations to achieve a variety of ends (Gillies, 2014).

In addition, cooperative learning can be an excellent way to ensure that all voices and viewpoints in a classroom are given a chance to be heard. As students work together, it is vital for them to listen to each other. This exposure to ideas other than their own forces students to think critically and engage with multiple ideas (Nikolakaki, 2012). This

can result in a number of benefits which stem from a comfortableness and willingness to work with and listen to the experiences of students who come from other social groups other than their own, including students of other races (Hendrix, 1996; Hansell & Slavin, 1981), gender (Styslinger, 2008) and socioeconomic classes (Schillinger, 2011).

Teaching Cooperative Learning Techniques

One other important aspect to understand about cooperative learning and working together is that it is a social skill that can be taught, and the benefits gained from teaching this skill are considerable. In a study of over 150 junior high students in Australia, Gillies (2004) found that those students who had been taught cooperative learning techniques in a meaningful, structured setting not only listened to each other and helped each other more than students who had not, they also “developed a stronger perception of group cohesion and social responsibility for each other’s learning than their peers in the unstructured groups” (p. 327). For this study, Gillies spent extensive time monitoring and comparing the interactions of students from schools where cooperative learning was emphasized and encouraged, and therefore relatively structured, with students from schools where cooperative learning techniques were used, but in a less structured environment. Students were videotaped working together in groups to solve science-based classification tasks of various difficulties. As they worked, Gillies (2004) paid attention not only to the level of work the various group were able to achieve, but also their behavior and verbal interactions during the process.

She reported that “the children in the structured groups made more evaluative statements that demonstrated the use of critical and reflective analysis of different issues” (2004, p. 342). She also found that students in the more structured settings also were able

to solve their problems with a higher level of complexity and thought processes than those in the unstructured groups. These two factors combined led to groups that were more willing and able to work together, and in turn each member of the groups felt a concern “for each other and responsibility for each other’s achievements” (p. 343).

In other words, by taking the time to teach beforehand how to work together to achieve a common goal, students are more able to more effectively help each other and be able to rely on each other to reach a common success. This instilled within these students the idea that they were responsible for each other’s well-being, and took active steps in order to create an environment where everyone succeeded. This is a clear demonstration of the social aspects of positive social interdependence (Roseth, Johnson and Johnson 2008).

The middle school years are often seen as a tough and trying time for students (Burwell & Stone, 2012). While students are trying to learn more complex subject material, they are at the same time attempting to navigate new and more complex social situations every day, while at the same time coming to terms with their own “emerging identity, the complexities of friendship, and ever fluctuating social standing” (2012, p. 73). To add to this, most middle schools are structured in such a way that the classroom offers less opportunity for social interaction among students, rather than more (Johnson, Johnson, & Roseth, 2010). In contrast to this, the unique – and often terrifying – social conditions of the typical middle school student are exactly the reasons for teachers to make cooperative learning a priority in their classrooms. Middle school is such a strange and fluid period in a students’ lives, where the students get both the opportunity to reinvent themselves among a new group of peers, while also developing the skills

necessary to succeed in high school and beyond (2010). Cooperative learning can help students progress in both areas, as students who work together develop a better social standing within their peer groups and also take a stronger interest in their own academic progress (Hentges, 2016). For this reason, more studies that focus on middle school students need to be conducted, to see how to help them best navigate this confusing time in their lives. It is for this reason, among others, that I am conducting such a study with my own 8th grade classes.

Potential Problems Associated with Cooperative Learning

While the research in favor of cooperative learning is substantial, it is not without its concerns. In most cases, it is not a question of research showing that cooperative learning is harmful, or even ineffective. Rather, it is more a series of cautionary guidelines which serve to show that, if not done right, cooperative learning in a classroom can fail to live up to its promises. Johnson, Johnson and Roseth (2008) have laid out a series of five guidelines that they stress must be in place for cooperative learning to be effective -- a sense of “positive interdependence” (p. 8), which gives students a feeling of being connected together; an individual sense of accountability, so that each student will do his or her part; opportunities to help each other; knowledge of interpersonal skills; and an ability to work together as a group. Without the individual and group accountability, it is too easy for certain group members to relax and not do their share of the work. In this situation, those students who care about the final grade will be forced to compensate. This leads to academic problems as well as social conflict (Johnson, Johnson and Roseth, 2008).

Even more importantly, there is research to suggest that cooperative learning might not always be beneficial for some students of lower abilities. When observing the interactions of two different mixed-ability fifth-grade reading groups, Poole (2008) noticed that, when placed into these heterogeneous groups, the struggling lowest students in each of the groups faced a higher risk of being marginalized, interrupted, corrected, or otherwise not allowed to contribute fully to the work being done. Many of the stigma that struggling students face in whole-class situations, such as being perceived as different and less able by their peers, were just as prevalent when placed in small groups. These students found themselves interrupted and corrected more by their group-mates, who grew increasingly impatient with these lower-performing students (Poole, 2008). While this study was conducted on a very small scale, with only ten students split into two groups, it does suggest that teachers need to monitor the interactions of mixed-ability groupings to make sure all students are allowed to participate and do their part.

In another study focusing on differently-abled students, Kuester and Zentall (2012) found that students who suffer from behavioral disorders, such as ADHD, can also run the risk of being rejected in their group if safeguards are not put in place to protect these students. These safeguards include the teaching and implementing of rules that reinforced the basics of such things as taking turns and speaking one at a time. While both of these studies indicate that cooperative learning does not always work for every student in every situation, in both of these studies, the suggestion is not to cease the practice of cooperative learning, but for the teacher instead to anticipate and prevent these problems by implementing specific rules and guidelines (both for the student in question

as well as the rest of the group) that ensure these students still had a valuable place in the group (Kuester & Zentall, 2012).

Cooperative Learning and the Writer's Workshop

In writing, the concept of cooperative learning has most often been expressed through the implementation of what has come to be known as the *writer's workshop*. This instructional method developed in part with the shift from product to process that writing instruction saw in general during the 1970s and 1980s (Leung & Hicks, 2014). The workshop approach fosters collaboration between peers in all phases of the writing process. Students pre-write together, sharing ideas and helping each other plan their writing. In most cases, students are given the chance to choose their own topic to write about, rather than a pre-selected one. During the writing phase, students are there to help one another, encourage each other, and answer questions. Finally, in the post-writing phase, students work together by trading and reading papers, finding and pointing out errors, and offering suggestions. During all of this, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator and mentor, but not a judge or critic (Xu, 2015). A majority of the work ideas are student-generated, with only minimal input on the part of the teacher. This emphasis on the student's central role in the writing process, and its subsequent effect of teacher de-emphasis, gives the students the power and opportunity to put together all of the ideas they have been learning in class, while at the same time "building their own understandings through self-discovery" (Dowse & van Rensburg, 2015, p. 2).

Academic Benefits of the Writer's Workshop

The advantages of this approach have been studied for years, and are widely acknowledged. In short, the writer's workshop allows students to become better writers.

Among other things, the writer's workshop gives students the chance to take control of their own writing, while being open to the ideas and experiences of others (Laman, 2011). When allowed to choose their own topics and work together, students often create better writing while at the same time choosing to write about topics of more significance personally and socially.

Flint and Laman (2012) studied the effects of using the writer's workshop while teaching socially-themed poetry to students at two elementary schools in the South. Throughout the unit of study, students conferenced with each other and with their teachers to help create poetry that spoke to their lives and their unique situations. Many of these students were new to the area and – in some cases – new to the country. These students used their poetry to express their feelings in a way that, for many of them, had been impossible before (Flint & Laman, 2012). Even more relevant is that the teachers reported that the students' writing after the use of the workshop approach was vastly different to the work that had been turned in previously, in part because students were able to “explore important issues within their classroom communities and to create a generative critical curriculum.” (2012, p, 18).

The collaboration and discussions require students to not only decide what they are going to write, but it also requires them to think about (and often express to each other) *why* they are making those choices. This metadiscussion gives students the chance to “explain their writing moves, reflect on their evolving processes, and share their growing understandings of writing” (Laman, 2011, p. 134).

Social Benefits of the Writer's Workshop

There are several social benefits to the writer's workshop method as well. In addition to the simple joy of being able to communicate with their peers, students often report that this approach helps the classroom transform from a simple room into a learning community, where all students, not just the teacher, play a vital role in each other's development as students and writers. Leung & Hicks (2014) detail the autobiographical exploration of a student who credits her elementary-level experiences in a writer's workshop as the reason she has continued to foster and develop a love of writing over the years. Through this introspection, we learn how this student was profoundly encouraged by her time in a writing workshop to see herself as a "writer within a community of writers" (p. 591). While some of this community was teacher-centric and teacher-inspired, this student also reflected on the fact that the interaction of her peers in this workshop heavily influenced her own writing and the writing of the other students in the class. As their year together went on, each student in the class began to see him or herself as a writer, in part because that is how they saw each other (2014). This need to be validated by peers only increases as students approach the middle school years (Burwell & Stone, 2012).

Much like cooperative learning in general, a writer's workshop gives students a chance to express their own points of view to a captive audience, and listen to other points of view in return. By being given the opportunity to create and write together, students are tasked to actually speak their thoughts to an audience, which is something that many of them have never really had an opportunity to do before (Flint & Laman, 2012). By using writing tasks that allow students a chance to express themselves to each

other, as well as listening in return, they are creating a situation in which they have the power to connect, share, and transform their ideas and the world around them (Kissel & Miller, 2015).

As noted with cooperative learning earlier, a writer's workshop is not without its own inherent difficulties. If a teacher does not establish firm guidelines as to each person's responsibility, it is possible that students will be paired or grouped with others who do not wish to participate, thereby putting those students' grades and writing at risk (Kolling, 2002). Furthermore, without a clear set of class-wide expectations in place, as well as ample time given to teaching the class how to workshop effectively, many students will not use their time effectively, preferring to rush through it as quickly as possible (Stemper, 2002). None of these problems are reasons to abandon the writer's workshop model, but they are important reminders that this method is not, in itself, fool-proof, and it must be planned and taught accordingly in order for the students to reap the benefits of the workshop.

The Writing Process

If someone were to walk into a typical English classroom on a day when the students were practicing writing, there is a good chance that the phrase *writing process* would be heard time and time again as the students made their way through one assignment or another. This is because the teaching of writing as a process is about as commonplace nowadays as breathing, and is generally accepted by a majority of educators to be the standard way in which writing should be viewed and taught, even if they do not always agree on the specifics of the process and all that goes into it (Whitney et al., 2008). This was not always the case, however.

This section presents a brief overview of the development of writing process before moving in closer to examine revision, one of the final – and most important – stages of the process. The importance of revision to the process overall, as well as the benefits of using peer-revision, will also be discussed.

Development of the Writing Process as an Idea

While the teaching of the “writing process” is a practice that is almost ubiquitous in much of today’s modern school system, the term and the ideas behind it are fairly new. Until the latter half of the 20th Century, most writing instruction focused on the product itself – what students turned in. The belief was that writing could not be *taught*, it could only be *learned* through exposure to better writing (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1970s, a radical shift in the idea of writing instruction occurred. This shift occurred for many reasons, spurred on by a wave of research that began to examine the instruction of writing in the classroom more closely than ever before (Hawkins & Razali, 2012). As early as 1965, educators were beginning to focus more and more on students’ development of their writing, and less on the finished product. Gordon Rohman (1965) described writing as “a process, something which shows continuous change in time like growth in organic nature” (p. 106). Rohman also broke up this process into three distinct phases of writing, any of which should sound familiar to the writing instructor today: pre-writing (which involves any activity that encourages writers to gather, develop, and organize their ideas), writing (which typically involves the creation of a rough draft that is not intended to be perfect or correct but represent a first attempt at a finished product), and post-writing (which refers to

everything after the first draft, including revising the paper, editing for mistakes, and publishing a final draft).

Donald Murray's seminal paper from 1972, entitled "Teach Writing as a Process Not Product," is another important example of the work that characterizes the beginning of the modern idea of the writing process. In this paper, Murray lays out the idea behind the importance of teaching writing not as a finished product, ready to be marked and graded, but as a process, still unfinished (1972/2003). "Instead of teaching finished writing," Murray stated, "we should teach unfinished writing, and glory in its unfinishedness" (p. 4). It is through this process, Murray argued, that students learn to evaluate and communicate all that they know about the world (1972/2003).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this concept of writing as a process was developed and altered to fit new research and educational theories. The idea of the writing process as being a linear entity consisting of separate, compartmentalized stages was called into question by many who observed that writers are constantly jumping back and forth between planning, writing, and rewriting, rather than dealing with one stage at a time. This more recursive idea of writing, rather than being a strict step-by-step approach, was espoused by many in the field at the time (Flowers & Hayes, 1981; Sommers, 1980; Lipson, Mosenthal, Daniels, & Woodside-Jiron, 2000).

Regardless of the truth behind this, much of the current writing instruction in schools today still separates writing into a process that consists of distinct, linear phases (Witte, 2013). While there are many models, most have at their core the same three basic ideas: pre-writing, which is "everything that takes place before the first draft" (Murray, 1972/2003, p. 4), writing, which is the creation of a rough, unfinished first draft, and

finally post-writing, where students correct or alter their writing in order to produce a fixed, final draft (Hawkins & Razali, 2012).

Whether it is approached linearly or in a more recursive fashion, the benefits of this view of writing instruction – focusing on the process instead of the finished product – are well-established in the literature (Whitney et al., 2008; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2005; Goldstein & Carr, 1996). Studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of a process-based instruction date all the way back to the beginnings of the process-based movement, with Emig (1971), who interviewed several 12th-grade students to find out how they drafted their own compositions. Emig determined students wrote differently depending on whether or not they were asked to write for the purpose of conveying a message, or if they were asked to write to share their feelings. These differences illustrated that writing takes place through a series of steps that students need to navigate through in order to create a final product.

Goldstein & Carr (1996) of the Center for Education Statistics analyzed data taken from the 1992 administration of the 1992 NAEP (National Assessment of Education Progress). In looking at the data collected from the almost 30,000 4th, 8th, and 12th grade who took this assessment in over 1,500 schools across the nation, they concluded that the writing process was indeed an effective form of instruction, and furthermore, “students whose teachers implement writing process techniques ‘almost every day’ consistently obtain the highest average writing scores” (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2005, p. 278). Through research like this, the instruction of writing as a process, and not just an end product, has come to be seen as a sweeping new era that educators hoped would radically change writing in the classroom, for the teachers as well as the students (Peterson, Main,

& McClay, 2010). Whether or not writing is seen in a more linear or recursive fashion, though, the area of the writing process that seems to be overlooked the most is that of post-writing (Stemper, 2002).

The Importance of Revision to the Writing Process. The term *post-writing* is a broad term, designed to contain any and all aspects of the writing process that takes place after the student has created his or her initial first piece of writing. Depending on the classroom setting, post-writing may be called other terms like “editing” or “revision.” In some cases, these words are used interchangeably, although many educators do make a distinction between the two. Simply put, editing is most often defined as error correction (including things like grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and other mechanical issues) while revision involves transforming the existing piece of writing into something different by adding, deleting, or rewording text (Myhill & Jones, 2007).

It is this stage of the writing process that is most often ignored by teachers, and disregarded by students (Witte, 2013). Because revision involves looking over a text to find “big picture” problems such as organization and clarity, it is necessary for teachers to instruct classes on how to read and look for these sorts of problems (Beltran & Decker, 2014). In many classes, though, the overwhelming majority of writing instruction is much more superficial. In a study in which 88 teachers from ten different English schools were surveyed, Dockrell, Marshall, and Wyse (2016) found that in these classrooms, most writing instruction and activities only took place at the word level—with items such as spelling lists and vocabulary exercises—while whole-text related activities, such as reviewing and revising student work, occurred much more infrequently—as little as once a month in some cases, if not less. This lack of time given to writing in the classroom is

not always a result of simply running out of time during the course of instruction, either. In fact, in many cases this lack of writing time seems to be an almost deliberate choice, made by educators despite what the growing body of research suggests should take place in a classroom. In interviewing and examining the time allocation practices of over 100 K-5 general and special educators in two states in the Northeast, for example, Spear-Swerling & Zibulsky (2014) found that, for the educators in their study, this lack of writing instruction began in the very earliest stages of lesson development, with only one responding teacher in their study even including time for revision strategies and instruction in their planning. Both a lack of time in the classroom, as well as inadequate knowledge about the latest research findings concerning effective literacy instruction, were cited as factors as why teachers did not plan enough time in their classrooms to address their students basic literacy needs (2014).

That this stage is often not given proper consideration is a detriment to the students and the quality of their writing, however. While writing that initial first draft is a necessary and fundamental stage in the process, it is through revision that writers take what was initially written and improve it, not just fixing errors but also evaluating their own ideas, the effectiveness with which those ideas were transmitted, and helping to ensure that the words and ideas are clear and understandable to the reader (Chanquoy, 2001). Unfortunately, teachers are often unwilling to spend the necessary amount of time on revision in the classroom, or the time they do have is filled with poor instruction (Kolling, 2002), leaving students unsure of how to approach this daunting task. This results in only the most superficial of corrections taking place, rather than the deep, meaningful changes that need to happen (Myhill & Jones, 2007). Kolling (2002) reports

that this lack of knowledge also leaves students able or willing only to make surface corrections, or instead to simply focus on making their paper look neater, rather than actually working to improve the content.

The Benefits of Peer Revision

With revision being such a necessary, and yet overlooked, part of the writing process, the advantages of applying cooperative learning techniques to this area are clear and noticeable, and, when used in the classroom, are readily observable. Numerous studies (Kolling, 2002; Stemper, 2002; Russell, 2009; Moran & Greenberg, 2008) have shown the immediate and long-term benefits of peer revising in a variety of classroom settings.

Benefitting Middle School Students

In a study that involved 50 sixth-graders, Kolling (2002) found that the results of a revision session can be significantly improved when students are given the opportunity to collaborate with others during the post-writing stage. Students in her study were given two separate writing prompts. Each prompt was graded according to a specific rubric, and the difference between initial and final writings were recorded. In addition, between the two prompts, students received several mini-lessons on how to collaborate and peer-edit each other's papers.

Kolling (2002) reported that the use of these peer-revising techniques helped her middle school students increase their writing by a significant margin, in the areas of both content and mechanics, showing improvements of up to 40% and 23%, respectively. These improvements came about through the use of structured peer-review times when teachers taught and modeled specific revision strategies.

One potential limitation to this study, however, is that both writing prompts focused only on narrative writing. While there is no “best” type of writing, there is no indication in the study itself as to whether or not these results would be duplicated if other types of writing, such as informative or argumentative writing, were assigned instead.

In a similar study, Stemper (2002) also reported a significant increase in middle school students’ final writings when given a chance to revise with a partner. Like Kolling (2002), Stemper measured her students’ abilities in the area of narrative writing, and evaluated their pieces using both a content-based rubric as well as a mechanic-based one. On both rubrics, significant increases were observed when the peer-editing intervention was implemented. These increases were found in all areas measured in the study, including “focus, clarity, organization, support, and imagery” (p. 60).

Both the studies of Kolling (2002) and Stemper (2002) suggest that peer-editing is a useful approach to improving students’ writing, and much of the design for my own study is based on their work. However, there are some differences that should be noted. In both studies, Kolling and Stemper used their rubrics to measure only the final drafts of the two narrative assignments given, and no data was collected as to the quality of the students’ initial rough drafts. While in both studies the second assignments (which were peer-reviewed) do score significantly higher, it is also possible that some of this improvement is simply the result of the students’ writing abilities improving as they progress through the school year and hone their craft. There is no comparison of the rough drafts vs. the final drafts of the same assignment, or the rough drafts of each assignment.

Without this data, it is impossible to say that final drafts in the peer editing phase of the study improved at a greater rate than the final drafts when students edited their own papers. For this reason, this present study focuses less on the scores of the students' final drafts and instead attempts to shine a light on the improvement students made between their rough and final drafts in each of the revision scenarios. This makes it easier to see whether it was the cooperative learning itself or some other factor such as general student improvement that led to student writing gains.

Another facet of both Kolling (2002) and Stemper (2002) which will not be included in my research is the formal and scheduled use of teacher-student conferencing. While student-teacher conferences can be a very effective way to instruct a student concerning his or her own individual work, they introduce the very real possibility that a student's writing is improving due to teacher interaction and instruction, rather than because of peer-related activity. Because of this, student-teacher conferences are outside the scope of this study.

A third element which will not be included in this study is a survey tool designed to measure students' attitudes towards writing and revision. While student attitude is also an important thing to be measured, this has been left out of this study so that I might simply be able to focus on one variable and one variable alone: the use of peer revision. Because of this there are very few other variables to consider in this study, other than the instruction and use of peer revision in the classroom itself.

Russell (2009) studied how peer editing assignments could help with students who were self-aware of their own struggles with writing. In a very small study of only six students, Russell first collected writing samples to gather baseline data, and then had the

students work with partners over the course of the next four week. During this time, these students wrote both a shorter passage and a longer assignment, and then revised each other's work by following and practicing a peer revision guide that walked them through the steps of assessing a partner's writing piece. Students also participated in a group conference during this study.

Russell (2003) found that all six students showed a vast improvement in all areas of writing, including the use of details, transitions, topic sentences, and conclusions. Since this study only involved six students, however, the duplication of these results on a larger group of students is not guaranteed. In addition, the use of whole-group conferencing, while seemingly effective, can also be a limitation when specifically studying the effect of smaller groups such as two or three students.

Regardless, the results of these studies show promise. However, instituting a peer-revision approach must be undertaken with care and planning. In addition to her findings, Kolling (2002) also made several clear and useful recommendations, including the modeling of various revision strategies, providing students with a peer editing guide, and monitoring the various peer feedback sessions to ensure that effective interactions take place. She even suggested being ready to join "certain groups if students are not remaining on task, or are having trouble providing meaningful feedback to their partner(s)" (p. 59).

Moran and Greenberg (2008) also found that peer editing could be useful, if certain strategies were put in place, in helping students improve their ability to edit their own papers more effectively. In a long-term study of high school honors students, they found that students benefitted the most from peer editing when they were first taught

effective ways to communicate their findings with their partners. Among the suggestions, Moran and Greenberg (2008) state that peer editing should result in specific, actionable suggestions that the writer can immediately understand and act on. In addition, by phrasing their advice in more concrete terms, they were then able to internalize these skills and apply them when it came time to look at their own papers. In short, peer editing not only helped their partners, but “it was the reflection and discussion that helped them to add the strategies to their writing repertoire” (2008, p. 39).

Benefitting Economically Disadvantaged Student Populations

As previously mentioned, peer-revising has been found to be effective in a variety of classroom settings. In a study concerned specifically with students at an economically-disadvantaged inner city school, Karegianes, Pascarella, & Pflaum (1980) reported that not only was peer-revision found to be an effective post-writing tool among the forty-nine students who participated, but those who worked together were more likely to focus and give the assignment serious attention, as they “were intensively involved in evaluating their classmate’s essays against the instructional criteria for the lesson” (p. 206). This study, focusing on students who faced a host of economic and cultural barriers to success, shows that the benefits of cooperative techniques such as peer-revision are not limited solely to the privileged and advantaged students in a class, but can have benefits for all who participate. This was important to me, as a significant number –almost half – of all the students in my school and classes are economically disadvantaged (“2017 Report Cards,” 2017).

Karegianes, Pascarella, & Pflaum (1980) also found that students who worked with each other exhibited more time on task than students who worked on their own or

with the teacher, which could also play a role in the positive outcome. One possible explanation given for this was that these students spent more time discussing and collaborating because those students felt more obligated to participate when working with their peers, as opposed to those students who conferenced with their teacher and could effectively just sit and not participate. “Editing,” it is suggested, may “function as a useful teaching technique for focusing and extending attention to task” (p. 206).

The Use of Rubrics

As mentioned earlier, one main difference between Kolling (2002), Stemper (2002), and this study will be the areas being assessed on the writing rubric. In both of those studies, the students were measured while writing narrative pieces. As South Carolina standards have a much greater focus on informative and argumentative writing (“Standards and Learning,” 2015), however, I will be focusing on those more technical styles of writing. This means that, although I will be using a rubric similar to their studies, my rubric will focus on other areas. Both Kolling’s and Stemper’s rubrics consisted of the following five areas: focus, clarity, organization, support, and imagery. In addition, they both employed a secondary rubric solely for the purpose of assessing a student’s writing mechanics. I will only use a single rubric (Appendix A), which will focus on the following areas: direction and focus, organization, use of support information, clarity of idea, language usage and style, and mechanics. This rubric is similar in style and scope to ones I have used in the past and am familiar with, so I was comfortable relying on this system to score these writing prompts.

There are two kinds of rubrics that are generally used. Analytic rubrics focus on specific criteria, while holistic rubrics evaluate a piece of writing as a whole (Brookhart,

2013). In the case of this study, while a score based on the writing as a whole is useful, a more analytic skill that breaks down the writing into specific areas could also offer some insight as to what specific areas of writing were most (and least) affected by the peer-revising intervention. Since holistic rubrics do not offer much in the way of this types of specific information or insight (Brookhart, 2013), a holistic rubric will not be used in this study.

Rubrics have long been a valuable tool for most writing teachers to help evaluate writing. For most teachers, rubrics are an easy way to measure writing, which by itself can be very difficult to measure (Livingston, 2012). For the purposes of research, any tool which gives the researcher the ability to quantify something as difficult to quantify such as writing is important, and should be used. However, there are those who criticize the use of rubrics, claiming that they can encourage students to think less and take fewer risks with their writing (Kohn, 2006). Other critics say that the use of rubrics stifles a student's natural ability to respond to a text freely and openly (Wilson, 2007). While these are valid points, and relate to the instruction of writing as a whole, in the case of this study, the ability to objectively measure a piece of writing is of prime importance. Simply put, without a rubric, it is almost impossible to have any measurable means of knowing if a student improved, and, if so, in which areas. Furthermore, the bonus of a rubric as a means of self-assessment on the part of the students (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008) makes them an invaluable tool that should definitely be put to use. Finally, since the standardized tests students will have to take in the future, such as the SAT, NAEP, and the South Carolina writing assessment, SCREADY, all employ a rubric, it makes sense to use a similar method for consistency.

Conclusion

The benefits of cooperative learning in the classroom—as well as the pitfalls—are well-known, and have been applied to virtually every aspect of the school day (Gillies, 2014). In an ELA class, the writer’s workshop is seen by some as the pinnacle of cooperative learning, and over the years has garnered tremendous support from all corners of the education community (Leung & Hicks, 2014). At the same time, changes in writing instruction over the years have naturally led to collaboration in all phases of the writing process (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2005). However, while studies have been conducted that show the benefits of the workshop approach in general, there is little out there that focuses solely on the benefits of peer-editing and revising. This study hopes to gain insight and knowledge to see how teachers can most effectively help and instruct students during this most difficult phase of the writing process.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter details the methods that were used to answer the research question: *What impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?* Through this research I hoped to determine if having students work in groups during the revising phase of a writing assignment leads to improved writing performance. To answer this, I developed a plan based on the four steps that Mertler (2014) identifies as integral to any form of action research—planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. Since this research was intended to identify a means to address a specific problem common to my class as well as others, and as an educator a necessary step is self-examination and experimentation through trial-and-error in the hopes of constant improvement (2014), an action research approach was a natural, logical one.

This section will provide an overview of my research methods and design, starting first with a quick recap of the purpose behind the research, the problem being addressed, and the question it intends to answer. After this, I will discuss the location of the research, including a short history and description of the setting as well as of the students involved. I will then continue by talking about the design of this study and the steps I will use to conduct my research, as well as laying out a plan for how to interpret the results and share them with my colleagues, administration, and other stakeholders.

Purpose Statement, Problem Statement, and Research Question

The problem as stated deals with inadequate student writing performance. Simply put, students are not learning effective techniques and strategies to revise their papers. Writing is one of the most important skills we can teach our children, as it is a skill that is applicable to every field of study (Grymonpre, Cohn, & Solomon, 2012; Wood, Jones, Stover, & Polly, 2011; Monte-Sano & Harris, 2012; Wissinger & De La Paz, 2016; Johanning, 2000; Wagner, Bright, & Hubbard, 2015; Wood et al., 2011). However, writing is often overlooked when it comes to time on task in the classroom.

Because it is a task that requires time, and time is usually a luxury that teachers do not have, writing instruction sometimes suffers. When teachers do plan for writing in the classroom, however, not all areas of writing get the same attention. Very often, teachers will give adequate time for planning and writing, but will not leave enough time for students to effectively revise and edit their pieces (Kolling, 2002). Because of this, struggling students do not learn the strategies and skills necessary, resulting in revising being nothing more than a futile, ineffectual exercise (Dinkins, 2014).

Teachers that do revise in the classroom do not always get it right, either. Because of the complex nature of this part of the writing process, it is possible for teachers to do too much for their students, making all the corrections and changes themselves so the student never learns or practices. Other teachers do too little, leaving students unprepared and ill-equipped to handle this complex task (Fitzgerald, 1987).

Student apathy also plays a role in this problem (Conner & Moulton, 2000). Many students feel like revision is a waste of time – something they do not need to do because

their paper is good enough to begin with. Other students just do not care enough to really try and revise their papers adequately.

Because of these problems having been documented in the research, but more importantly being present in my own classroom and teachings, the purpose of this action research project was to study the effects that peer-revision had on middle school students' performance on a writing assignment. This purpose statement was guided by one main question: *What impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?* By having students engage in revising through a cooperative learning approach, and using rubrics to assess improvement, I hoped to measure how this peer-revising might affect their writing achievement, which in turn could affect their overall quality of writing. Since action research is often cyclical in nature (Mertler, 2014) and teachers often repeat their studies as they learn more about a problem and attempt various solutions, this information could be critical in future studies. By finding a strategy that works, and by identifying methods that students respond to positively, it is my hope to put my findings into action in the future to help ensure student success.

Research Context

Research Site

The school that served as the research site is a large, suburban middle school in a rapidly growing area of the South Carolina Lowcountry. For the 2016-2017 school year, the most recent year where such data is available, this school served over 1,268 6th to 8th grade students from a variety of backgrounds, with the majority (68%) being white, 28% African-American, 2% Hispanic, and a small number of students reporting bi-racial, Pacific Islander, Asian, or Native American ("2017 Report Cards," 2017). This is slightly

different than those of the state in general, which in 2016 reported a lower number (52%) of white students and a higher number of both African-American (34%) and Hispanic (8%) students (“South Carolina State Snapshot,” 2016). Almost half of the students at my school – 45% -- receive either free or reduced meals (“2017 Report Cards,” 2017).

The attendance lines for the school attest to the diverse population, with students who live in town as well as students who live far away in rural areas. Over the years, this school has won numerous awards, including the Palmetto Gold and Silver Awards, which are awarded to recognize both schools that have performed exceptionally well in standardized testing as well as schools that have made significant strides in closing the achievement gap – the performance level of minority and special education students when compared to the level of white students (“Focus School Methodology 2014,” 2014). In 2015, this school was named Palmetto’s Finest, an annual award presented to one school each year for excellence in education.

This school resides in a fast-growing area of the state. In the last five years alone, the population size of the research site has increased by over 30% -- from 972 students in 2012 (“2012 Annual School Report Card,” 2012) to over 1,250 in 2017 (“2017 Report Cards,” 2017). This rapid growth has fueled a constantly growing and changing student population, where it is not unusual for teachers to frequently receive new students during all parts of the school year.

Research Sample

For this project, I used students that were assigned to my three grade-level 8th grade ELA classes. I teach a fourth English class, which is an English I Honors class. This class is made of students who have been identified as gifted and talented, and who

are taking 9th grade Honors English instead of 8th grade. Because of this difference, and the strict curriculum the English I class must follow, this Honors class presented too many variables and scheduling difficulties to be a good fit for this research project. Therefore, I limited my study to only include students in the grade-level class. My fifth class is a yearbook class, which is very different and outside the scope of this study altogether. The students that make up those three classes of focus were determined by our school registration process, so I had no say in which students were chosen for my classes, and, ultimately, this study. Since the writing prompts were assigned to all students in these three classes, all students in these classes were assumed to be participants in this study unless they chose not to participate. Other students were removed from the study by moving, or failing to turn in the assigned writing prompts. All in all, 66 students participated in this study.

Out of the 66 students in this study, there was an almost even split between male and female students. 34 students, or 52%, were male, and 32 students were female, making up the other 48%. There were 40 White students, comprising 61% of the population of the study. 21 students, or 31% of the sample, were identified as Black, and only 8% -- 2 students, were Hispanic. These numbers are similar to those of the school population as a whole.

As action research is not concerned with translating the results to a larger audience (Mertler, 2014), I was not overly concerned with the final sample size for this study. Since it was my goal to help my 8th grade students become better writers, and this study involved all of my on grade-level 8th grade students, the size of this study seemed appropriate. However, since the students were chosen at random by the guidance

department, and since I did have a sufficiently large sample size, the findings from this project could be of use to researchers and teachers elsewhere (Efron & David, 2013).

Action Research Design

This section will first discuss the nature of action research. Since this is an action research project, it is important to define exactly what that means, and how that will affect the study. After that, the discussion will move on to the specific design of the study, outlining the specific steps for this research project.

Action Research

Mertler (2014) defines *action research* as research that is undertaken by “teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn.” (p. 4). In other words, whereas traditional educational research is done by those outside of the classroom looking in, observing, measuring, but remaining apart, action research is conducted by the very people who are a part of the research study, inside the very school and classroom being studied. Action research can follow many models, but at its core, Mertler identifies four basic stages: 1) planning, where the action researcher identifies a question or problem, studies it, and develops a plan of action; 2) acting, where the researcher carries out his/her plan; 3) developing, where the results are collected and analyzed; and 4) reflecting, where the action researcher draws conclusions and attempts to improve his/her own methods and practices (2014).

Ethics in action research. Like any research study, this study carried with it ethical risks, and those concerns needed to be addressed. This was necessary, because

researchers need to remember that they are part of a larger community of educators, and need to conduct themselves as responsible members of society (Brydon-Miller, 2012). Since the students who were a part of this study were all under the age of 18 at the time, there were many ethical aspects to consider, such as consent and a student's right to privacy. Steps were taken to ensure that these considerations were all taken into account.

Informed consent. One of the first things to think about was informed consent. As a researcher, it was important to inform all relevant individuals, including administrators, my students, and their parents about my ongoing research (MacDonald, 2012). From the outset of the study, all students were kept informed of the research, the reasons behind it, and how it would affect them. It was important that they understood the reasoning behind the research, so that if asked, they could help to make decisions that would affect their learning (Mockler, 2014). Students were asked to partake of this research voluntarily, and were informed that their grades would not be affected if they chose not to participate, or if they chose to drop out of the study at some point. Since all of the potential students were under the age of 18, letters were sent to home their parents or guardians, informing them of the same information, and obtaining their permission as well.

At the time the study began, there were 82 students between my three 8th grade ELA classes. Students were given letters to take home that detailed the scope and nature of the project, their child's rights and responsibilities, and contact information should they have questions or concerns. These letters were sent home approximately two weeks before the first writing prompt was administered. In addition, detailed information was placed on my class web page. Students were reminded every day to return their letters,

and several reminders were sent out to parents through the use of our class Remind app. No parents were individually contacted, however. At the end of the two week period, 72 of the 82 letters (88%) had been returned, with all but two of the parents giving permission for their children to participate. Those students who did not return the letters, or opted out of participating in the study, were still expected to complete the writing assignments and participate in all class activities, the same as they would if I were simply assigning writing tasks as an ELA teacher. They also were not treated any differently during class or outside of the classroom. The only difference was that their scores were not factored into the overall data used to inform the study and its results.

Since this research took place during the course of normal school hours, it was also imperative to keep administrators informed as well, and obtain their permission. Even though this research study did not interfere with my normal duties as a teacher, and it did not affect my ability to teach all that I am required to teach, it was still important to keep my administrators aware of what was transpiring in the classroom at any given time. To do this, I first had to obtain permission from my school district. Once I received permission, I requested a meeting with my principal, who listened to my proposal before very quickly granting his own permission.

I also kept my fellow ELA teachers informed, as well. My school practices a team-based model of content planning, where all teachers of a specific grade and content area plan together. It is expected that our classes are covering similar content to each other – we do not have to be exactly on the same page as each other, but we do have to be covering similar areas. Since my research dictated that I focus on writing during this time, I made sure to keep my fellow teachers aware of this process by explaining to them

my research, methodology, and what I hoped to accomplish. The teachers listened and offered advice and encouragement, and assured me that they supported my research.

Student rights and confidentiality. A second ethical aspect I needed to consider dealt with the rights of the students involved. It was important that the privacy and anonymity of my students were maintained at all times (2014). Since all of my data came from the aggregate performance scores of my students on a teacher-created rubric (Appendix A), there was no need to mention individual student names. Because of this, no identifying information of any kind was saved once the prompts were scored and returned to the students.

A defining feature of this study, and an important aspect to consider when planning, was that, to an extent, I was not doing anything unusual in class, or having my students perform any task which I would not consider assigning to them anyway. I have used peer-revising as well as solo-revising techniques in the past, but before this research I never really studied their effectiveness relative to each other. This defining feature was important to me as an educator because it meant that if a student chose to opt out, they were still expected to participate in the writing and revising tasks without fear of being singled out from the rest of the class or deprived of their educational opportunities. In this case, those students who did not participate were no different from anyone else in the class, with the exception that their scores were not used for data collection or analysis.

Design of the Study

There are many different types of action research models a researcher can use when conducting an action research project. Mertler (2014) details several different models. However, at their core, most models follow a similar four-stage process (2014).

These stages are planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. Furthermore, these four stages are broken down into nine specific steps: identifying the topic, gathering information, reviewing the related literature, developing a plan, implementing the plan, analyzing the data, developing an action plan, sharing the results, and reflecting on the process.

Planning

As with any project, study, or activity, the first stage is that of planning. A researcher cannot effectively carry out a research project if sufficient time has not been given to planning out just what is going to be studied and how. This stage is divided into four distinct steps.

Identifying the topic. First and foremost, a problem that needs to be addressed must be identified. The identified problem must be explained in terms of what needs to be changed, and why.

Gathering information. Often times, a researcher chooses a topic based on personal experience. It is then necessary to speak with other related researchers, who may then be able to offer their own insight into the problem. This communication can help the researcher narrow and define their intended area of study even more (Mertler, 2014).

Reviewing the related literature. For any research project, it is necessary to take the time to review what has been done before. This literature review helps a researcher in many areas, including identifying and narrowing a topic, gathering information, and giving guidelines to help in the development of a plan (Mertler, 2014). A literature review can also help to give the researcher ideas about what has already been done and what worked or did not work in previous incarnations of the study (2014).

Developing a research plan. The final step of the planning phase is developing a research plan. Once the above information has been compiled, then the researcher is better able to determine how best to address their research question

For this particular project, I decided to answer the research question using a quantitative research plan. The independent variable for this study was the method of revision, and the dependent variable was student's writing performance, as measured on a teacher-created rubric (Appendix A). It was important to use a rubric for this study for two reasons. First, as a teacher conducting an action research project, I thought it necessary to have a tool with which to quantify findings as much as possible, even within a largely subjective field of study such as writing. Second, as an educator responsible for my students, it was still important to give students the best possible help when learning to write. Rubrics help to accomplish this, since it has been shown that students work better when having a more specific evaluation criteria to help guide their work (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007).

Within the allotted time frame of six to eight weeks, I administered two separate writing prompts. To keep extraneous variables under control as much as possible, I strove to adhere to a strict schedule concerning the amount of class time set aside for the various tasks of the writing prompts. I felt it important that students be given the same amount of time for planning, writing, revising, and rewriting for each of the prompts. In this way, I attempted to ensure that the only significant change between the two prompts was in the method of revision. In addition, because I did not want the quality of student writing to be affected by the need for students to do research, I chose to give them writing prompts that

they could answer based solely on their own life experiences. Both writing prompts can be found in Appendix D.

The first writing prompt. The first writing prompt served as a control. Students were given the prompt, “What does it mean to you to be responsible?” After the prompt, the students were given time to plan, and time to write a rough draft. That rough draft was scored using the rubric, which was used to assess students in six different areas of writing. The scores on the rubric are given on a scale of 1 – 4, leading to a possible total score of 24. However, for this study I was less concerned with the overall score, and more concerned with student improvement in each of the six assessed areas. By separating the rubric into different sections like this, I hoped not only to be able to tell if student writing improved in general, but if so, which aspects of writing were helped the most or least by this project. So as not to influence student work in any way, the students were not informed of the scores they received on this rough draft.

After the rough draft, students were then given time to revise. The revision process followed a checklist (Appendix B) based on one originally created by Writing Fix (2005), although it has been altered to align with the grading rubric. Once the students revised their papers, they rewrote, incorporating their self-guided revisions to create a final draft. This final draft was scored as well, and the scores from the rough draft and the final draft were compared to determine how effective students were in revising their papers on their own. Because the basis of my research was in how effective students are when revising, the most important number here—and the one used for later analysis—was the number marking how much each student’s writing improved between drafts. For example, if a student scored a “1” for organization on the rough draft, but then

scores a “1.5” on the final draft, the number that was highlighted and analyzed was “.5” since that was the amount of improvement shown between the two drafts.

Since the goal of this research was to determine how peer-revision alone affects the writing, it is important to note that both the rubric and the revision checklist were already introduced to and used by the students before the study begins. This was done so that the students would already be familiar with the various tools being used, and therefore their scores would hopefully not be affected by any real or perceived “learning curve” that can come whenever students are learn how to write for specific goals. Students were already familiar with how papers were graded, and what they were supposed to be looking for as they revised their drafts.

The second writing prompt. After several weeks, a second writing prompt was administered. This second writing prompt now included the introduction of peer-revising. This new prompt was, “Describe a single, significant experience in your life and the effect it had on your life.” After being given this second prompt, the students wrote an essay, just as they did for the first one. Students also had the same amount of time for planning and writing, and when an initial draft was finished, students turned it in. I scored the rough drafts on the same rubric, and returned them as promptly as possible.

The peer-revision treatment. Students were then paired up with a randomly-chosen partner and began the peer-revision stage of the study. To help ensure complete randomness, I used an online student name generator that I often use in class when calling on students (“Random Student Selector,” n.d.). In a few cases, however, I did intervene when I felt like a particular pairing would not be helpful, based on student personalities or history.

For this, students exchanged their paper with their partner. Partners read the drafts and filled out the checklist, just as they did on their own papers. However, in addition to reading and marking, conversations between working partners considered to be crucial, and were therefore encouraged. Students were asked to talk with each other about the papers they read, using the checklist and the peer-revision sheet (Appendix C) as guides and conversation starters. This peer-revision sheet contains information about the students' impressions of the papers based on their now assumed role as a reader. By having this conversation and using this peer-revision sheet, the intent was that the students would gain a better understanding of their own paper and how it appeared to someone else. It was also hoped that they would gain self-affirmation and confidence through the recognition of the more positive aspects of their writing, but would also be able to see their writing through another set of eyes, revealing mistakes, problems, and new ways of expressing themselves that were not open to them before (Fitzgerald, 1987).

Since it was important that this phase of the process consisted of positive and constructive criticism (Cunningham, 1988), rather than just being an opportunity for students to be negative towards each other, the peer-review sheet that students used consisted of sentence starters that encouraged positive conversations. While students were allowed to say other things that they felt could be helpful for their partner, they were instructed to use the peer-revision sheet as a means to start their conversations.

When the peer-revision phase was over, papers were handed back to the writers, who then rewrote their papers into a final draft, which were then turned in. Those papers were scored on the same rubric, and the differences between the first draft and the final draft analyzed.

Acting

During this second phase of the action research process, I actually carried out my study in an attempt to answer my research question. Mertler (2014) divides this phase into two distinct stages.

Implementing the plan. Since action research, by definition, requires action, this is a necessary and exciting stage of the research process. My students went through the writing prompts as I gathered the required quantitative data in the form of the rubric scorings. This entire phase of the process lasted eight weeks.

Analyzing the data. Once the research study is concluded, I then began to analyze the collected data. My study was quantitative in nature, following a quasi-experimental nonequivalent *pre-test post-test design*, which simply means that research subjects that have been assigned to a group (rather than chosen 100% at random) are then measured under two conditions – before a treatment has been administered, and the afterward, to see if there is any change in outcome (Trochim, 2005). In the case of this particular study, students acted as their own control in a repeated measure *t* test by writing two separate prompts, one with, and one without a peer-revision treatment. As stated above, the important number for each writing prompt was the amount that a piece of writing improved between the rough draft and the final draft. Once I determined the measure of improvement for both the first and second writing prompts, the students' improvement in each area of the writing rubric was analyzed. If the cooperative learning intervention was successful, it would be expected that the data show an increase in the level of improvement between the rough draft and the final draft.

Developing

The third major phase of an action research project is that of developing. This phase comprises the next of the nine steps, *developing an action plan*, and is, as Mertler (2014) states, “the ultimate goal of any action research study” (p. 36). In this phase, the researcher looks at the data analysis and determines what happens next. For example, with based on the findings of this action research study, I might begin to develop a plan to incorporate peer-revision into more, if not all of, of my writing prompts throughout the year – or I might decide that more research is needed to answer questions that popped up during the study.

Reflecting

The final phase of the process is reflecting. At the end of any project, it is important for the practitioner to reflect on what has happened to see what has been learned throughout the process. Since action research is often cyclical, this stage often asks the researcher to determine what further information can be discovered, and what new directions the research can go (Parker, 2013). This phase consists of the final two steps.

Sharing and communicating the results. One important part of this process is taking the time to communicate with others concerning my findings. I will do this first and foremost by talking to my colleagues. At the outset of this project I talked to many of my fellow teachers about the problems with revision during the writing phase, and it seems fitting to return to that discussion when it is over, armed with new information and ideas about how to overcome this process. Even though generalizing findings to a larger audience is not the intent of an action research project, I hope to use the information from

this project to help not only my class, but other teachers who are struggling with a similar problem.

After discussing and sharing with colleagues, I will also share my results with my administration, in the event that they want those results to be used as we plan for classes and lessons in the future. Often, teachers who are involved in research or other innovations at my school are given a chance to present their findings to the staff at a meeting or during professional development opportunities. This seems like a natural next step.

Finally, my district is committed to professional development, and has an annual day called “Learning by Design,” where teachers all across the district sign up to attend various training sessions that are being given by teachers, administrators, and other professionals. Often, the presenters are teachers who have become passionate about a topic, or have experience success with a technique that they now wish to share. This seems like another obvious way for me to share my findings with other, in the hopes that as a community we can learn from each other and grow in our own understanding of how best to reach our students.

Reflecting on the process. Finally, with the completion of the study it is time to reflect on the overall process, while also making plans for what comes next. It is natural during this phase of the action research process to consider what questions were answered during the study, and what questions should be visited next.

This is also at the time to look at what has been learned and decide what happens next. This is a crucial time as I return back to the beginning of the action research cycle

with new questions and ideas in hand. Chapter 5 discusses some of these questions that have been posed during and after the completion of this action research project.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this action research study was to determine if a peer-revision approach could help students revise better and more effectively. By implementing a pre-test post-test research study, with one phase lacking a peer-revision treatment, and the second phase including it, I attempted to answer the question: *What impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?*

Middle school students' writing proficiency often suffers due to many reasons, including lack of time during class, and lack of sufficient teacher training in the area of writing. Chapters 1 – 3 explained the problem, the literature that supports this study, and a detailed breakdown of the design of the study itself. In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I present the findings of my study, including an analysis of the rubrics, the peer-revision checklist, and the peer-revision comment sheet. This chapter discusses whether or not these interventions resulted in the hoped-for improvement, how much, and in what areas. In chapter 5, I discuss the implications of this research, as well as plans for implementation of these findings in my classroom and future action research projects to consider.

Chapter 4: Findings From the Data Analysis

Chapter 4 presents the findings for this action research study concerning the effects of peer revision on middle-level writing. For many reasons, writing is an area that causes students to struggle. These reasons can include such things as lack of class time, lack of teacher training, and student apathy. Many solutions to this problem have been proposed and implemented over the years, to varying degrees of success. One area that has found some success is through the use of cooperative learning practices such as peer revision and editing. The present action research study sought to determine how effective such techniques might be at helping students at a South Carolina Lowcountry middle school improve their overall writing ability.

Problem of Practice

The identified problem of practice (PoP) for this study concerned the poor writing skills of 8th grade students at an average school in the South Carolina Lowcountry. While writing has been recognized as being important in all areas of schooling, and not just Language Arts, it is often considered an afterthought by many teachers, and therefore not taught well, or not even taught at all (Kolling, 2002). In addition, students find writing to be laborious, and many do not want to take the time and effort needed to practice and improve their skills (Myhill & Jones, 2007).

Furthermore, out of the entire writing process – which is understood by most educators to include several stages including pre-writing, creating a rough draft, post-writing (editing and revising that rough draft), and writing a final draft – the area that

students struggle the most with is that of post-writing, which includes both editing and revising (Kolling, 2002). Many students do not see the importance of this stage of writing, and consider it a waste of time (Applebee & Langer, 2011). Because of all these factors, there is a clear and present problem that needs to be addressed: students are not able to edit and revise their papers adequately in order to improve their writing. The final result, then, is poor writing.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to better understand whether or not cooperative-based revising and editing strategies can help middle school students improve their overall writing skills. Because writing, and especially post-writing, is full of difficult skills and concepts that are often overlooked or poorly taught (Dockrell, Marshall, & Wyse, 2016), and because cooperative learning has been proven to be beneficial in many areas (Gillies, 2014) it seems natural to try and study what could happen when these two areas are combined. Through this research, I worked to develop a strategy that could help students write more effectively, and assist teachers in helping their students become better writers.

Research Question

With all that being said, this action research study intended to measure what effects, if any, could be had by implementing cooperative learning strategies in a writing scenario. In doing so, this study hoped to answer the following research question: *What impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?*

Findings of the Study

The first writing prompt was administered during October. It was introduced to the students by way of whole-class discussions. Students were encouraged to record and

share their thoughts and ideas related to the topic, and were encouraged to think about the comments and ideas of their peers, as well. These notes were then later used to help students generate ideas about their own writing.

After the class discussion, students were given the prompt and time to begin working in class. As the teacher, my role turned to facilitator and sounding board at this point, and I circulated throughout the room, giving advice and suggestions when asked, and trying to help students formulate their ideas onto paper. Many students already had a good idea about what they would want to write about, but other students struggled to generate ideas. For these students I spent a little extra time conferencing with them at their desks, hoping to help them as they began their pre-writing. I then spent a few more minutes in front of the students as a class, explaining my expectations for the content and format of the paper before giving them a little more time to work individually. By the end of that first day, students had begun the process of generating and organizing their thoughts.

The next day in class I presented a refresher lesson on writing organization. This lesson primarily reminded students how to organize a paper, how to construct a thesis statement, and how to create paragraphs that center around a specific topic sentence. This is information they should have been taught the previous year, but my experience as a teacher has taught me that a majority of 8th grade students still have difficulty when it comes to organization, so this was a topic I felt I needed to discuss.

The next two days in class were given to students writing on their own. Many students are completely self-sufficient at this point, and only need my help when they are stuck on a word or idea, or have a question about formatting or some other technical

issue. Other students did not find it so easy, however, so I spent these two days trying to assist these students as much as I could. While not generating ideas or actually writing for them, I attempted to help them put their ideas into words so they could at least write them down.

At the end of those days of work in class, the students were then given five more days outside of class to work on their rough draft before handing them in, while class time was used for other instructional lessons. All in all, the time taken from the first day of class discussion to the day the rough drafts were handed in totaled a little over a week.

Once the rough drafts were handed in, I then scored the papers using the rubric (Appendix A). In order to help ensure that students' editing and revising in this first phase was done by themselves with little to no outside interference skewing the results, I kept my overall comments to a minimum. In the case of a particularly egregious error of some sort I would talk to the student about it, but otherwise I did not mark on their papers.

Presentation and Analysis of the First Rough Draft

Overall, the initial scores were consistent with what I would expect to see. Some students scored very high, even for a rough draft, while other students did not. Figure 4.1 shows the students' overall performance on this rough draft.

On average, students scored between a two and a three on the various indicators. The first two columns, "Direction and Focus" and "Organization," were items that I had addressed during the initial presentation of the prompt and the subsequent lesson, so I expected a relatively high score for those two areas. Students averaged a score of 2.78 for "Direction and Focus" and a more impressive 3.01 for "Organization." Surprising to me

was the higher-than-expected score given to the “Clarity of Ideas” and “Mechanics” columns, coming in at 2.95 and 2.48, respectively. Mechanics – such things as grammar, spelling, and punctuation, can often be difficult for many students who are still learning the rules and intricacies of the English language. Students also scored a 2.53 on “Use of Support” and, coming in the lowest, a 2.27 on “Language Usage.”

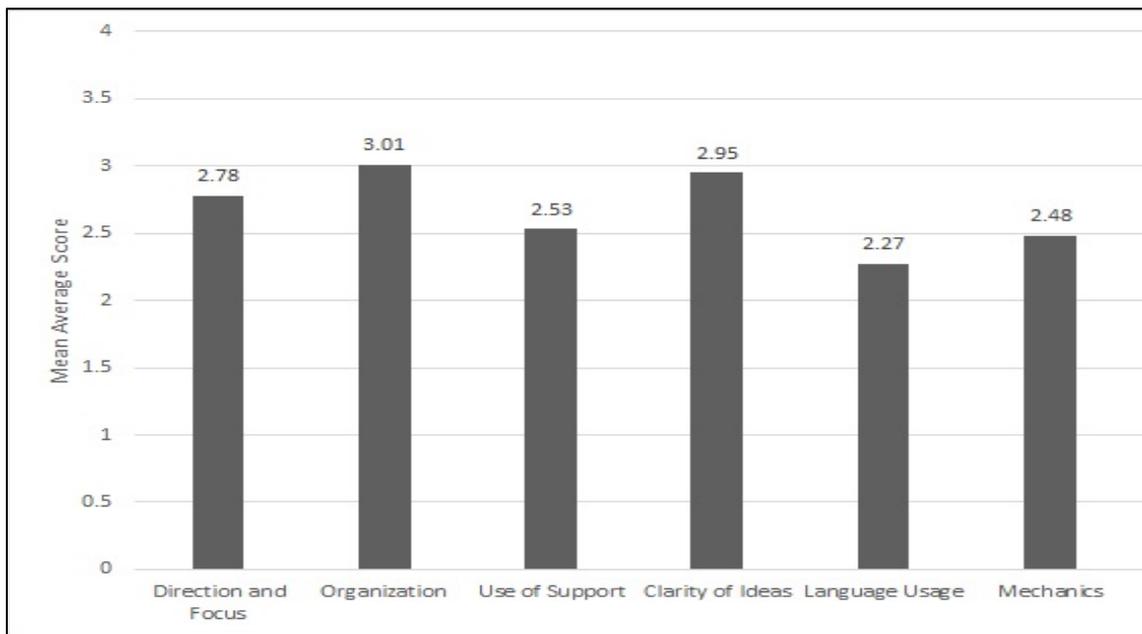


Figure 4.1. Overall Scores – Prompt One Rough Draft. This graph shows how students scored on the rough draft for this first writing prompt.

Presentation and Analysis of the First Final Draft

After the rough draft was handed out, students were given three days in class to discuss, revise, and edit their papers. To accomplish this, several steps were followed. First, students were given a copy of the Student Revision Checklist (Appendix B) to help them, and a day of class was devoted to explaining how it works and what each item on the checklist addressed. Examples of writing responses were shown – examples created by me to demonstrate a point, not examples taken from student writing – to give students

a chance to practice using the checklist. Next, a day in class was set aside to discuss some of the more important concerns I noted in the writing. Although I did not want to specifically correct individual papers, there were several errors that were made across the board that as a Language Arts teacher I felt I could not ignore. During this time, though, I intentionally avoided correcting specific student work, making marks on student papers, or using student examples for whole-class instruction. This was a necessary omission because it was important to present data that had not been influenced by my own interference.

Then, the third day in class was set aside for students to work on their revisions. In addition to filling out the checklist, students were to mark on their own paper and make visible corrections. This was a concept that we had learned and practiced earlier in the year, so no specific class time was allotted to teach this. Again, at this point my role transformed from teacher to facilitator, and I spent the day helping individual students with their concerns, rather than addressing whole-class issues. Like the rough draft, students were given both time in class to work as well as several days out of class before the final drafts were eventually handed in and scored. For this second scoring, papers were marked on and visually graded, allowing students to see my thoughts and comments on both their successes and problem areas.

In over a dozen years as an ELA teacher I have had students edit and revise their own papers many times, and almost always there is some improvement between rough and final drafts. This first prompt was no exception. As my past experiences led me to expect, the students performed marginally better on this final draft. The performance of the students on this first final draft can be seen in Figure 4.2.

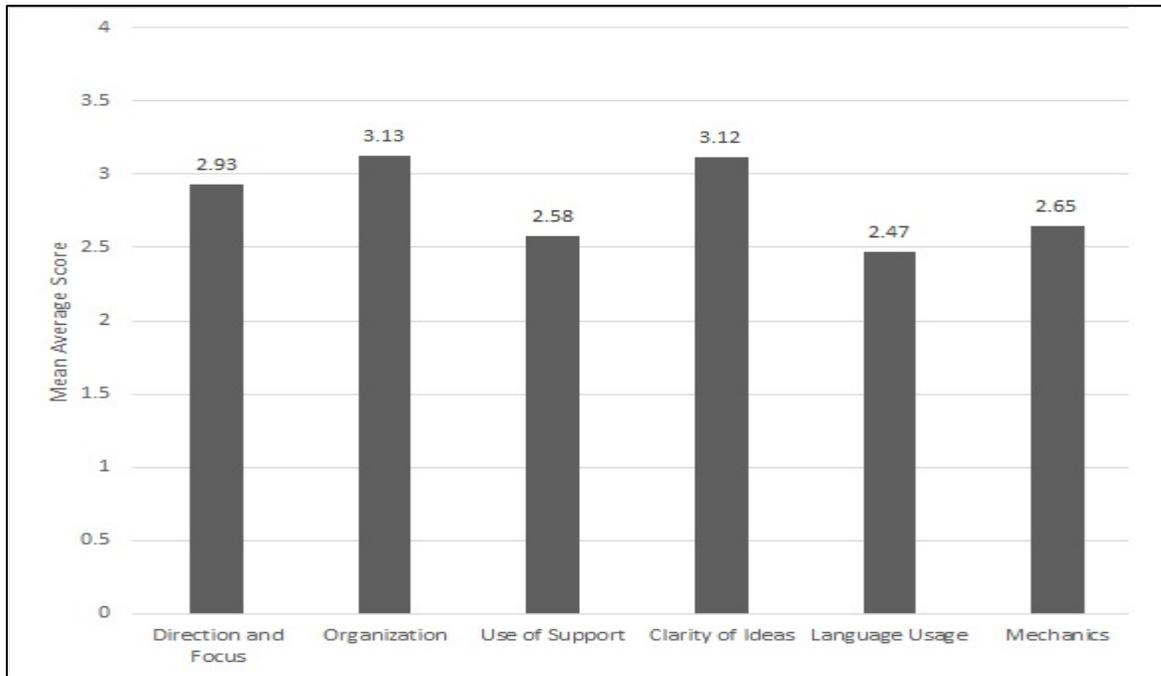


Figure 4.2. Overall Scores – Prompt One Final Draft. This graph shows how students scored on the final draft for this first writing prompt.

While the majority of students still scored between two and three in the different areas of the rubric, a majority of these students managed to raise their scores in most, if not all, of the various indicators. However, overall growth was minimal, at best, and did not really indicate much in the way of improvement. The difference in students’ performance between the rough draft and the final draft on this first writing prompt can be seen in Figure 4.3 below.

As Figure 4.3 indicates, there was growth in each of the six areas on the scoring rubric, even if it was only a slight improvement. The largest area of improvement was seen in the “Language Usage” column, which saw an average rise of .2 points. The smallest improvement took place in the “Use of Support” column, which only saw an average improvement of .05 points. Other areas also saw a small growth in scores.

“Direction and Focus” rose .15 points, “Organization” improved by .12 points, and both “Clarity of Ideas” and “Mechanics” improved by a score of .17.

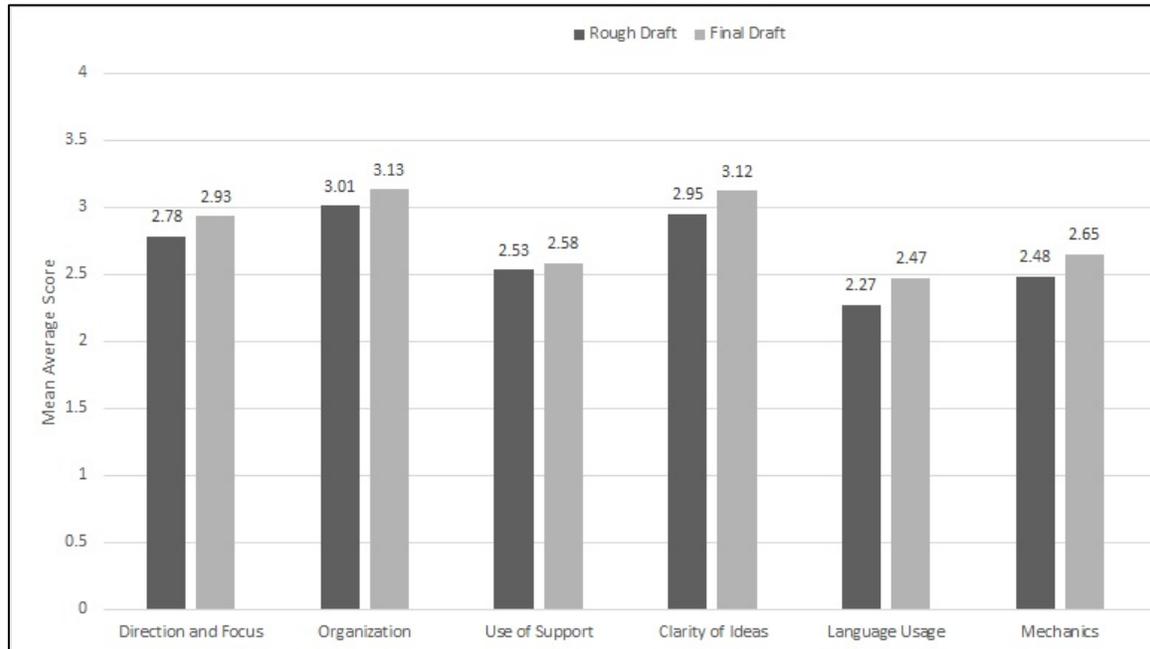


Figure 4.3. Comparison of Prompt One Rough and Final Draft. This graph shows the difference in students’ performance between the rough and final drafts for writing prompt one.

This negligible growth indicates that, even when presented with specific areas and strategies to address, most students are not demonstrating the ability to find and correct their own errors. This is consistent with research that states that students have a very difficult time self-monitoring their own writing and examining it critically (Myhill & Jones, 2007).

Presentation and Analysis of the Second Rough Draft

After several weeks spent focusing on other areas, my students were once again given a writing prompt. This second prompt was administered the last week of November. In an effort to keep the conditions for this prompt similar to the first one,

another informative writing prompt was chosen. Unlike the first writing prompt, this second prompt was not drawn from any specific topic or story we were discussing in class. However, like the first one, this prompt was informative in nature and required students to be able to draw on their own experiences, rather than have to do additional research. This allowed for data collection that was not marred by some students' difficulties when it comes to conducting and presenting research.

While students were not made aware of the results of the first writing prompt, some class time was again set aside to address some of the bigger concerns I noticed in the final drafts. Once again, organization was an issue that I spent time in class going over, and the class took time to practice recognizing and writing thesis statements and topic sentences. Another area that was addressed was the students' frequent use of sentence fragments and run-on sentences. These lessons were not presented in an effort to make students succeed more on the second prompt as much as they were presented simply within my normal duties as an ELA teacher trying to see my students improve. Since the focus of this study was not how much student writing improved between prompts, but how much it improved with peer editing, I felt that these lessons were appropriate and would not ruin the validity of the research; even if student writing improved because of them, that improvement would be seen on the rough draft of the second writing prompt before the peer editing treatment took effect, and therefore would not factor into the overall improvement.

Similar to the first prompt, the students were also given time in class to organize their thoughts and information. An entire class period was set aside for introducing the prompt and helping students decide on a particular topic and what they wanted to say

about that topic. Then, similar to the first prompt, two days in class were set aside for writing the rough draft. Students were also given another five days outside of class to work on their papers before they were due to be handed in and scored.

Overall, the students' performance as measured on the rubric was of slightly poorer quality on the second rough draft, as can be seen in Figure 4.4.

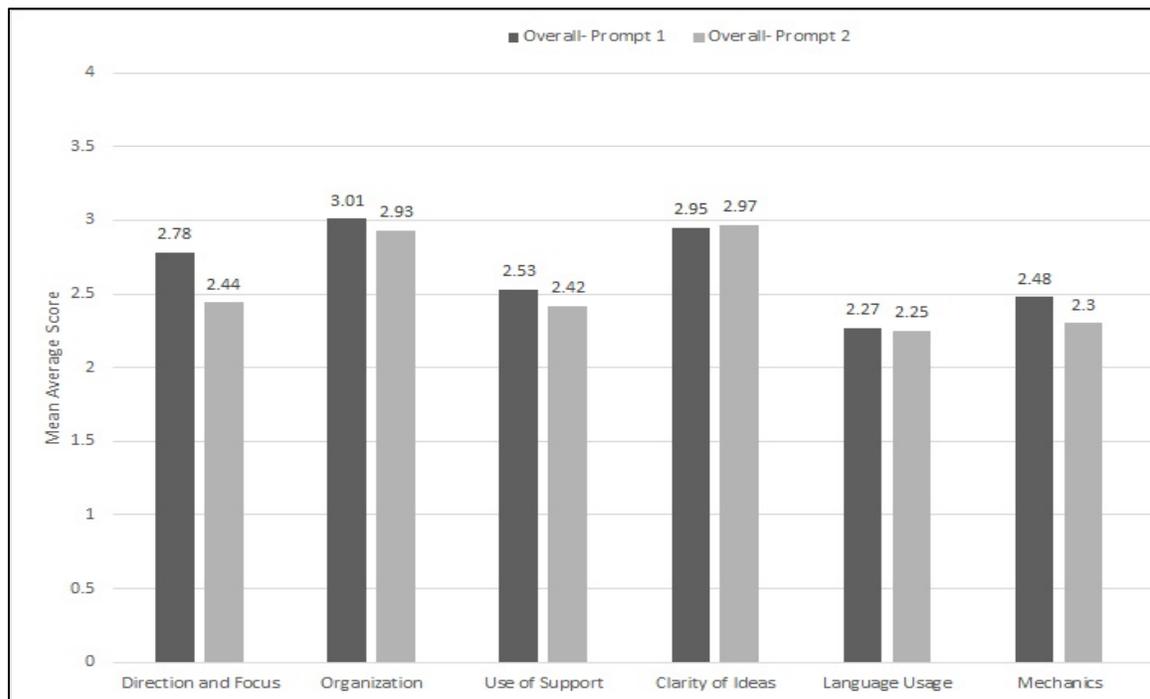


Figure 4.4. Overall Scores – Prompts One and Two Rough Draft. This graph compares how students scored on the rough draft for both writing prompts.

Most significantly, student scores on the “Direction and Focus” category dropped from 2.78 on the first draft to 2.44 on the second. “Organization” and “Use of Support” both saw drops of almost a tenth of a point, “Clarity of Ideas” and “Language Usage” showed almost no change, and “Mechanics” also saw a more significant drop of almost two-tenths of a point.

Even though time had been set aside in class to address concerns from the first writing prompt, the fact that many students did poorer on this second prompt was not something I saw as a cause for concern. Every writing prompt is different, and presents its own unique set of challenges. Things such as a student's familiarity with a topic, his or her desire to write at that particular time, or even the time of year a prompt is given can impact writing performance. For instance, the fact that the second prompt was administered in the weeks between two major holidays and their breaks could have caused students to find it harder to maintain interest in their assignment. Since I was attempting to measure the improvement in writing from the rough to the final draft, however, the different level of their performance on the rough draft alone was not of real concern to me.

Presentation and Analysis of the Second Final Draft

Just as before, several days elapsed before I was able to score the rough drafts and return them. Again, students were not given any feedback on their writing, as I did not want my own thoughts to interfere with the research. This time, however, students were assigned partners to work with. The assigning of partners was mostly done randomly, however in some cases I did change the pairings if I thought two specific students would not be a good match due to prior circumstances. In one class, there was an odd number of students so a group of three was assigned instead.

Students were then given another copy of the Student Revision Checklist (Appendix B), but this time they were instructed to read their partner's paper and fill out the checklist based on that, rather than on their own writing. In addition, students were also given a copy of the Student Peer-Revision Sheet (Appendix C), and were encouraged

to read, mark on each other's papers, and to have a short conversation with their partner about what they found and what they thought.

Just like before, my role switched from teacher to facilitator at this point, and as the students worked I walked around the room, listening to conversations and fielding questions from students who were not sure about something they had read. One surprising aspect that I noted right away was that this stage took much longer with partners than when students were working alone – instead of one class day to finish this, most pairings required two full class periods to finish.

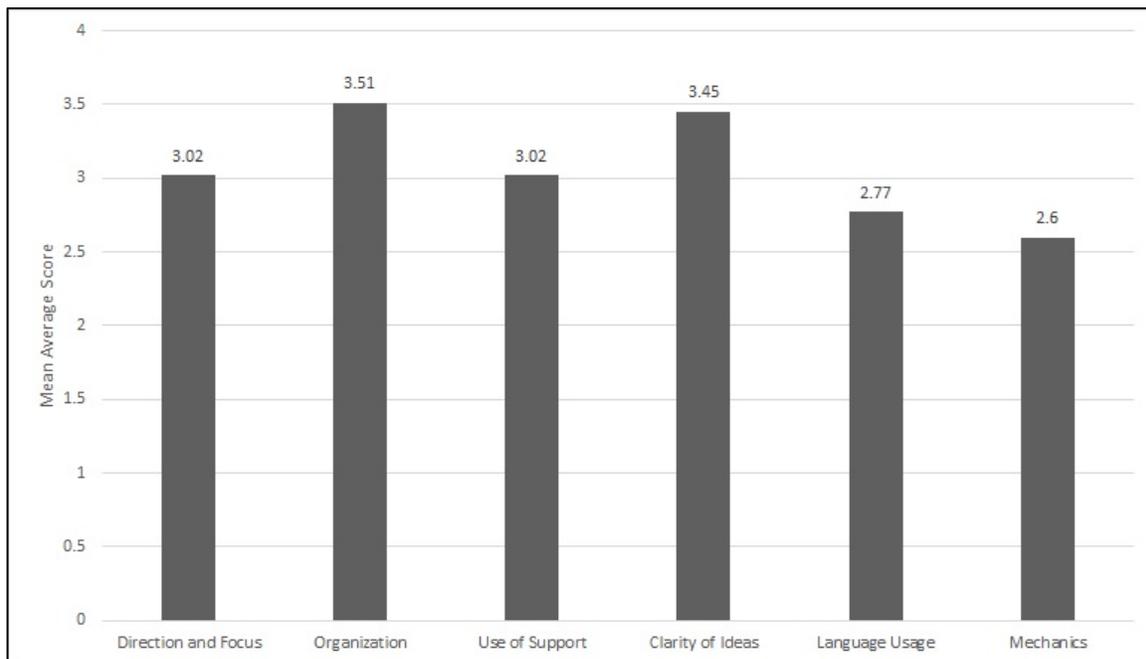


Figure 4.5. Overall Scores – Prompt Two Final Draft. This graph shows how students scored on the final draft for the second writing prompt.

When finished, students were again given several days to rewrite their papers and hand in their final drafts. Final drafts were then scored, the results of which can be seen in Figure 4.5

As Figure 4.5 indicates, there was significant overall improvement in all areas of writing after the implementation of peer-revising and peer-editing techniques. To fully show the extent of this improvement, Figure 4.6 compares the performance of students in the rough and final drafts for this second prompt.

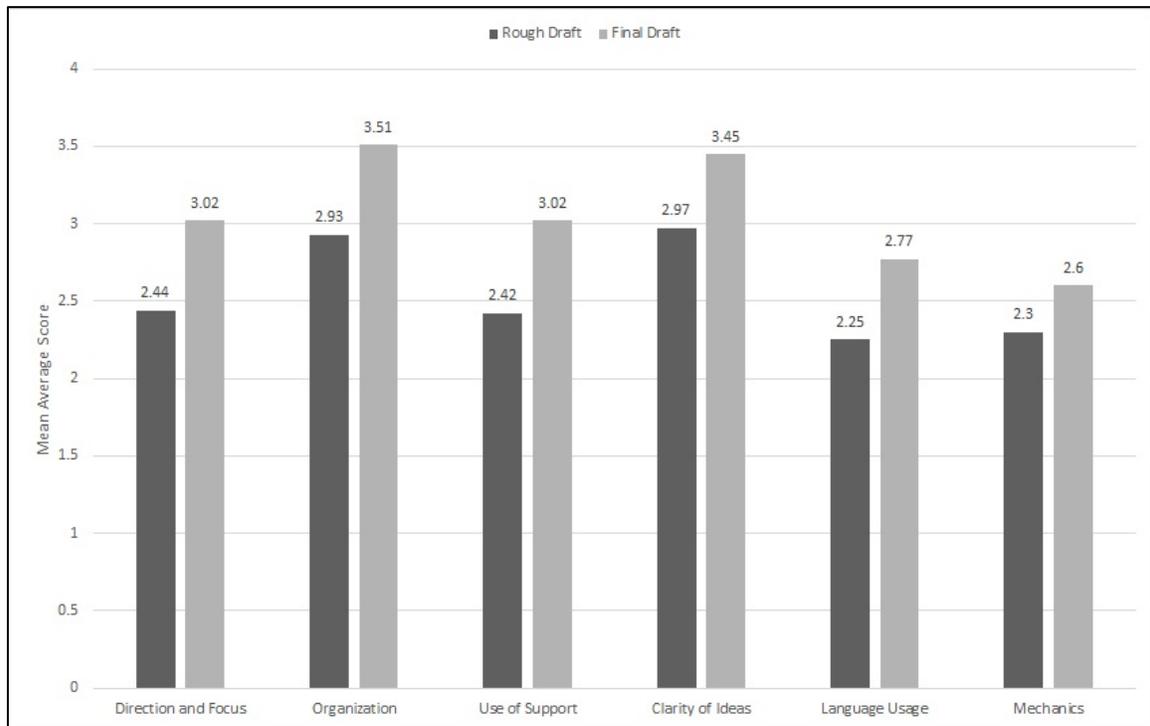


Figure 4.6 – A Comparison of Rough and Final Draft Scores, Prompt Two. This graph shows the overall improvement in students’ writing for the second writing prompt.

When looking at figure 4.6, it is easy to see that student writing improved in each of the six areas being measured, and in each area the improvement was significant. In fact, out of the six areas, five of them saw improvements of a half a point, if not more. “Direction and Focus” and “Organization” both improved by .58 points, “Use of Support” saw the biggest growth at .6 points, “Clarity of Ideas” grew by .48 points, and “Language Usage” by .52 points. Only “Mechanics” saw an improvement of less than a

half point, going up three-tenths of a point to 2.6 – which was still a larger improvement than anything seen during the first writing prompt.

Of course, with this study the key number is not how well student writing improved in the different writing prompts, but whether or not there was a significant difference in the level of improvement when comparing the first writing prompt with the second. It is the answer to this question that above will determine the effectiveness of the cooperative learning intervention. Based on the rubric, it is clear that there was indeed a significant difference in student writing achievement from the first prompt to the second.

Figure 4.7 shows this difference in student improvement.

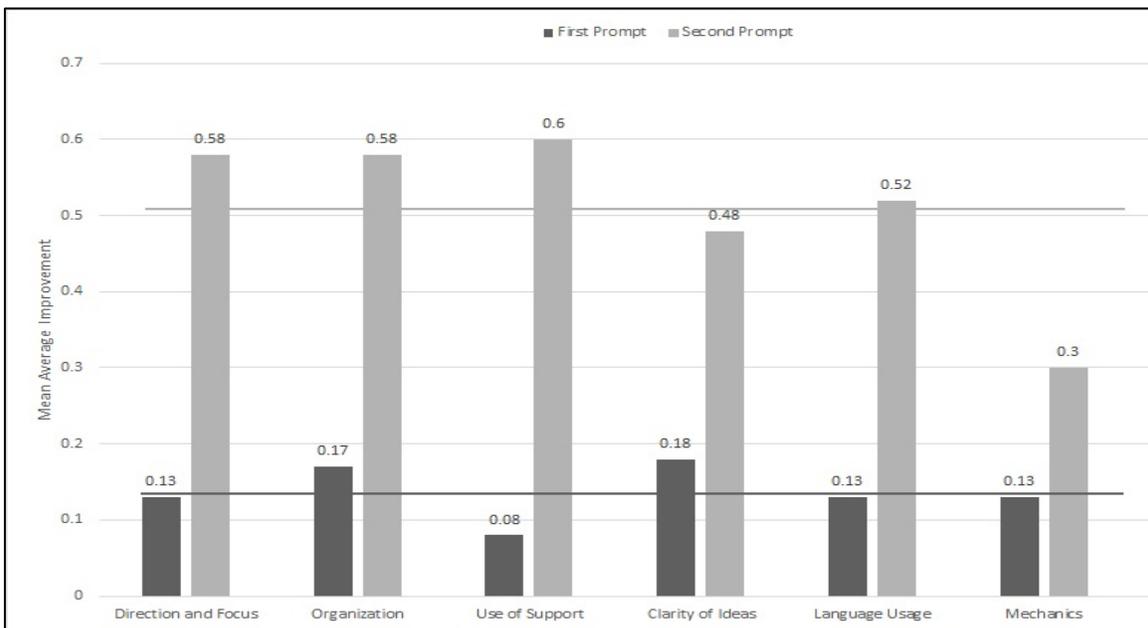


Figure 4.7 – A Comparison of Student Improvement Between Prompts. This chart compares the average improvement for student writing from the first writing prompt to the second prompt.

As can clearly be seen in Figure 4.7, student writing improved much more significantly during the administration of the second writing prompt, in each of the six rubric areas. The lines across the chart represent the average growth across all six areas.

For the first writing prompt, the average growth each student saw was .14 in each area.

For the second prompt, each student's writing improved an average of .51 points per area.

Interpretation of the Results of the Study

Based on the results shown here, it is possible to draw several conclusions from this study. First, similar to the findings of Kolling (2002) and Stemper (2002), it is clear that students in this action research study benefitted from working together in the post-writing phase of the writing process. The results of these two prompts as shown in Figure 4.7 indicate that, while students did show some gains from working on their own papers, those gains were minimal when compared to the growth displayed after working with partners. This alone is an encouraging result that suggests that, as Gillies (2002), Johnson, Johnson, and Roseth (2010), and others have stated over the years, cooperative learning techniques have definite merit and should be used in the classroom more often.

Furthermore, the fact that these strong and significant gains were seen across the board in all six areas that were being assessed suggests that these benefits are not limited to only specific students or specific aspects of writing. Students were able to help each other improve their writing in a number of ways, from the cut-and-dried aspects related to grammar, organization, and use of support to the more subjective and harder to pin down facets of writing that come from things like word choice and overall writing tone. The reasons behind this should be given consideration and attention in the future, but the fact that someone else, with a different perspective and knowledge base, was reading their papers seemed to be enough to give students a different perspective to base their re-writes on. This allowed students to see their writing from a different point of view, including the

flaws that they would not normally notice themselves. This resulted in better writing overall.

Finally, the fact that the gains in the area of “Mechanics,” while still significant, were noticeably less than the gains seen in the other areas, is also important, and might have implications that need to be researched as well. While the reasons for this are not immediately clear, it is possible that this is merely the result of students in the same class, learning the same grammar lessons over the years, are on roughly the same level of knowledge when it comes to the mechanics of language. This could suggest that cooperative revising, while more helpful than students working alone, does not address all writing issues equally.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the results of this action research project. Throughout the course of several weeks students were assigned two different writing informative writing prompts. The rough drafts and final drafts of each prompt were scored in a variety of areas, and through this project it was determined that cooperative learning, in the form of peer-revising, is an effective way to improve student writing. In chapter 5, these findings and their implications are discussed at greater length, including suggestions on how teachers and other educators can use this information to improve student performance in their own classrooms.

Chapter 5: Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5 concludes this paper by summarizing the action research project, its methods, and its results. After this brief summary, these findings and their implications as they relate to current and future educational practices are discussed, with an emphasis on how educators can begin using these methods in their classroom sooner, rather than later. Finally, this paper closes by suggesting areas of future research that could help us understand more the benefits of cooperative learning and its role in the classroom.

Focus of the Study

The intent of this action research project was to answer the question: *What impact does peer-revision have on students' writing performance?* Because of the difficulty students face in learning to write, and because of low performances on writing assessments, many students do not demonstrate the ability to write well. This deficiency, brought about by many factors including a lack of teacher training, a lack of time in the classroom, and student apathy, can be a major factor in students' overall writing performance, because the ability to write well is a skill that is applicable to all subjects.

Overview of the Study

To answer this question, a quantitative quasi-experimental pre-test post-test research project was implemented. Based on the theory of the *zone of proximal development*, put forth by Vygotsky (1986) in the early 20th century, and explored by others in the preceding decades who have researched the positive effects of cooperative learning (Gillies, 2002; Johnson, Johnson & Roseth, 2010; Slavin, 2014), a cooperative-

learning approach was employed, whereby students assisted each other in the post-writing (editing and revising) phase of a writing prompt. This research study was modeled after similar projects (Kolling, 2002; Stemper, 2002), but adapted to suit the needs of my particular students. Its goal was to measure the effect on student writing when post-writing activities are done by a pair of students working together, as compared to a student working alone.

Summary of the Study

Over the course of two months, two separate informative writing prompts were administered to my 8th grade ELA students. While the prompts themselves were different, much of the instruction before and during the prompts was similar. This was done to minimize variables that could affect student performance.

For the first writing prompt, students were given the prompt as well as ideas for how to approach their writing. They were given time in class to begin collecting and organizing their thoughts, and then they were given several days to write and turn in their rough draft.

When rough drafts were turned in, they were scored using a teacher-created rubric (Appendix A), but students were not made aware of their scores nor of any of their mistakes. Then, the papers were returned to the students. After a class period spent instructing students on how to use the Student Revision Checklist (Appendix B), students were given time both in and out of class to edit and revise their papers. Then, the final drafts were handed in, and scored again. The difference between student writing in the rough and final draft was compared.

After several weeks, the students were given a second informative writing prompt. This was also informative in nature, and students were given a similar opportunity during class at the beginning of the process to collect and organize thoughts. Again, students had time in and out of class to write their rough draft, and then they were turned in and scored. Again, their scores were withheld from them at this stage.

When the rough drafts were handed back, students were then paired with a peer. Then, all students were given another copy of the student revision checklist as well as a Student Peer-Revision Sheet (Appendix C) to assist them in their peer-revising. Students were given time in class to read each other's papers, mark on them, and fill out the accompanying sheets. Students also held mini-conferences with each other to explain their thoughts.

Afterwards, students were once again given time to rewrite their papers before turning in final drafts. These final drafts were scored, and the progress from rough draft to final draft once again tallied.

The results overwhelmingly showed that student writing improved when they worked with a partner. These improvements were seen in all areas that were assessed on the rubric, although one area, "Mechanics," did not see as much improvement as the other five areas.

Discussion of Major Points of the Study

Based on this study, there are several major points that will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Point One: Student Writing Drastically Improved

As reported earlier, the students displayed a significant improvement in their writing when peer-editing and revising. This is in keeping with similar findings reported by Kolling (2002), Stemper (2002), Russell (2003), and others who have conducted similar experiments. While extensive research on the field of cooperative learning by Stevens and Slavin (1995), Gillies (2002, 2004, 2014), Slavin (2014), and countless others has in part already shown the benefits of cooperative learning, the amount of improvement in this particular action research project demonstrates yet again how beneficial such an activity can be.

Because writing is such a personal and subjective activity (Lipson, Mosenthal, Daniels, & Woodside-Jiron, 2000), it is not always possible to know exactly what might have caused certain students to perform better at the second writing prompt than the first. Maybe the student in question was naturally more interested in the second topic. Maybe another student was more interested in the editing and revising because they liked the person he or she was paired up with. Maybe a third student was distracted by outside factors during the administration of the first writing prompt. All of these possibilities could affect how a single student performed on one prompt compared to the other. However, with such a significant improvement being displayed by so many students, it seems clear that individual differences and personal preferences did not affect the students' performances as much as the single different condition ascribed to the second prompt – namely, the individual vs. cooperative nature of the post-writing phase of the writing process. If, as Roseth, Johnson and Johnson's (2008) theory of positive social interdependence states, students working together to achieve a common goal are more

willing and able to succeed than those who work on their own or in competition with others, then it makes sense to draw the conclusion that the success of the students during the second prompt is due in large part to the cooperative nature of that activity.

Point Two: Student Success Was Seen in All Areas of Writing

Another important takeaway of this research is that significant improvement was displayed in all six areas that were measured on the rubric. This is important because it helps to show that the mere act of trading a rough draft with someone else, and letting a different set of eyes edit and revise, can be enough to result in a better final product.

If, instead, the peer-editing had resulted in an improvement in only one or two areas on the rubric, rather than all six, then it would should show that peer-editing is a good possible strategy to use or consider in a writing class, but by itself is not nearly enough to help students as they strive to become better writers. An across-the-board improvement, on the other hand, shows that students' writings benefit in all areas, and that with just a small amount of training students can quickly learn how to help themselves and each other become better writers.

Because writing in the classroom today is so often treated as an after-thought and not given the time in class needed to teach students how to write effectively (Applebee & Langer, 2011), and because revising and editing are even more neglected in the typical class (Dinkins, 2014), using a strategy like this that can help students improve quicker than by working on their own is not only a good idea, it is necessary. This is not to say that other methods, like teacher mark-ups or conferencing, could not still help improve a student's writing even further, even with the improvements seen here. Indeed, when it comes to helping students improve, many methods have been shown to work, but it may

be beneficial to employ more than one method to assist in editing and revising (Fitzgerald, 1987).

Point Three: Students Are, in Fact, Capable of Helping Each Other Improve

One concern that is voiced when students become peer-editors is the worry that, since they are merely students and still ostensibly learning how to write, they do not necessarily have the knowledge or skill needed to help each other improve their own writing (Makela, 2012). This can lead to several problems. For students who are equally matched in writing ability and knowledge, the concern is that neither will be able to help the other much, if at all. In circumstances where students of different abilities are paired together, the concern is that this mismatch can lead to a situation where one student benefits while the other suffers due to a lack of help (Poole, 2008). When it comes to certain types of language skill or knowledge, such as the right-or-wrong nature of grammar and mechanics, this objection might hold a certain validity. If student A does not use a comma correctly, for example, and student B does not know the rules of commas enough to recognize it as a mistake, then it stands to reason that no correction will be given.

However, this did not seem to be the case in this study when it came to other areas of writing. In this study, improvement was seen even in areas that are less rule-based and more comprehension-based. Clarity of ideas, for example, was an area in which students were still able to help each other improve. This could be because the nature of this area only requires that writing be understandable and make sense. It does not take a student with a teacher's level of knowledge to recognize when a sentence or paragraph is confusing. When it comes to essay organization, students were also able to recognize

when a particular thought, idea, or sentence might be out of place or in the wrong paragraph.

Even if students do not possess intricate knowledge of the rules and details concerning English grammar, they still were able to offer suggestions and advice on how to make their partner's essays more believable, understandable, or even more organized.

Point Four: Less Improvement Was Seen in “Mechanics”

As mentioned above, the amount of improvement seen in the “Mechanics” area of the rubric was significantly smaller than the other areas. Figure 4.7 illustrated this difference, with the average improvement in the “Mechanics” section being three-tenths of a point, while the average improvement for the other areas of the rubric was a little over half a point, almost twice that amount.

It is most likely that the reason for this disparity is due mainly to the nature and role of mechanics in language. Unlike other areas of writing that were assessed which are concerned with more complex, whole-essay ideas (Witte, 2013), “mechanics” refers to the specific, rule-based applications of language such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling (Myhill & Jones, 2007). For students, mistakes in this area are only easy to catch if they are also aware of the same rules (2007). Students in a standards-based education environment are taught more or less the same rules of language throughout their course of study. It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that most students in a given class will have a similar level of knowledge when it comes to mechanics, having been taught the same standards as their peers over the course of their schooling.

Of course, exceptions do apply; students make mistakes even when they are aware of the rules, and some students are more knowledgeable and capable than others,

both of which can explain why students are still able to correct others' writing in this area to an extent. Because recognizing mechanics-based errors is easier for students and requires less sophisticated linguistic processing (Myhill & Jones, 2007) the contradictory result is often that, when encountering mechanical errors that they know the rules for, students will be able to find and correct those mistakes easily – but that level of competence only extends so far as the limits of which rules those students have been taught. If errors have been made that students are not able to catch, the result is less change on the rubric for the final draft, because the errors still persist even after the peer editing has taken place.

Point Five: Cooperative Learning Techniques Can Help Students' Writing

The final point to draw from this action research study is that using cooperative techniques during the revision phase of a writing prompt can lead to significant improvement in student writing. As demonstrated by Kolling (2002), Stemper (2002), and further underscored here, taking the time in class to teach students how to work together to edit and revise their writing can lead to significant gains.

This is important for several reasons. First, because teachers often pay less attention to effective writing-based assignments due to the perceived amount of time that is necessary in order to teach students how to write effectively (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy (2013), finding more efficient ways to teach writing is essential. While this peer-revision method will not necessarily shorten the amount of time it takes for a teacher and student to work through a complete writing unit, assignment, or prompt, it could conceivably lessen the amount of overall class time that needs to be devoted to

writing throughout the year, as students could possibly demonstrate improvement in their own skills at a faster pace, allowing the teacher to move on to other areas of study.

A second reason why research like this is important is to help teachers become more effective educators. Many teachers enter the workforce unable or unequipped to teach writing effectively to their students (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2013). For teachers like these who are working to teach their students the writing standards for their grade level, the availability of useful strategies and instructional methods can make a significant difference in determining whether a writing skill is taught successfully or not (Beltran & Decker, 2014).

A third reason why these findings are important to the field of writing instruction is that, with the increased importance of literacy in all subject areas (Grymonpre, Cohn, & Solomon, 2012; Monte-Sano & Harris, 2012; Johanning, 2000), writing is more essential to a students' success now than ever before. As students are required to incorporate more literacy skills into math, social studies, science, and other areas, the ability to use writing in a variety of subjects is going to become even more valuable. In an environment like this, students are expected to be able to write well regardless of the content area ("Standards and Learning," 2015). To accomplish this, effective writing strategies are a must.

Finally, this research is important because, as mentioned before, writing is a difficult skill for many students, and it is an area that many students struggle to master (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Any technique that makes this difficult task easier for struggling writers is worth exploring, even if it means trying new concepts or ideas in our classrooms.

Action Plan: Implications of the Findings

As with most research, the findings for this study have implications well beyond the scope of this report. Taking the data from this report to heart, I have developed an action plan that involves not only improving my own techniques in the classroom, but also making sure that these findings are made known to others in the community.

It seems clear that more cooperative learning activities should be taking place in the writing classroom. Since writing can be such a difficult task, both to teach and to learn, the use of effective cooperative learning strategies such as peer-revision can be a useful way to alleviate this problem and enable students to become better writers all around. With this in mind, the first step in my action plan is to determine how I can implement more cooperative-based assignments into my own classroom. As an English teacher, my students frequently write short and long assignments. Based on the results of this research, I plan on having students work together on these writing assignments more frequently in the future. One way that I can take this even further is to consider implementing a writer's workshop in my class, where the entire writing process is undertaken as a cooperative activity.

A second step in my action plan is to report these results to others. I meet with fellow Language Arts teacher regularly – with the teachers at my grade level on a weekly basis, and all of the ELA teachers at my school on a monthly basis. In addition, I meet with teachers district-wide several times throughout the course of the school year. I plan on reporting my results to these teachers at various times, as well as opening up discussions as to how we can use this information to help support what we are trying to accomplish in the classroom.

A third step involves me presenting my findings to an even larger community of educators. My district hosts an annual staff development day which involves teachers signing up to both deliver and attend presentations, and the district encourages teachers who have conducted action research studies to participate. I am planning on completing an application to present these findings to teachers from all over the district, including teachers from possibly every discipline and grade level. At the same time, I can present the strategies I use as well as any new strategies that I am able to find.

Finally, as with any action research, the process began here is a cyclical one does not end so much as evolve (Mertler, 2014). With this in mind, I plan to continue researching the concept of cooperative learning in my own classroom, adding to what I have learned so far and hoping to learn more in order to become a more effective educator in the future.

Suggestions for Future Research

In an effort to keep this study as specific as possible, many other questions that could have been discussed were left unexplored. The most pressing question I am left with after completing this study is why – why, exactly, did student writing improve when subjected to peer editing and revision? Was it only as a result of “fresh eyes” being able to spot mistakes that the writer misses? Was it because of motivation – did students feel more obligated to pay attention and do a good job during the second writing prompt because they knew that someone else’s grade was on the line? Or was it some other factor that helped the students to improve so much more during the second phase of the study? To answer these questions, future teacher-researchers should focus on students’ attitudes

as well as performance, attempting to determine what students were thinking and feeling about the process during the peer revision treatment, and how they felt about it afterward.

Another question to consider in the future is the extent of peer involvement. As indicated before, many teachers use cooperative techniques during the entire writing process, from pre-writing through drafting to the very end. With this in mind, teacher-researchers should consider whether or not incorporating a “writer’s workshop” approach like this is more effective than only having students work together after the rough draft has been composed.

A third question to ponder is how effective peer editing and revision are when combined with other methods, such as student-teacher conferencing. Kolling (2002) and Stemper (2002) both used a combination of strategies, and they reported success in overall student writing performance. Teacher-researchers should continue these studies by incorporating student-teacher conferencing and other methods into future studies.

A fourth question to consider is how these cooperative learning techniques impacted the performance of student sub-populations, such as minorities, females, and students from lower socio-economic classes. Although there are students from all of these sub-groups in my classes, this was beyond the scope of my study, so I did not collect any data specific to this question. Teacher-researchers should conduct similar studies to this one while also gathering and analyzing data on how students from these various demographic groupings are impacted by these strategies.

A final question to consider is which strategies are more effective in peer editing. This research study involved the use of both a checklist as well as a short answer-based questionnaire to help students express their findings to their partner, but what other forms

of revision strategies could be used effectively in peer-based writing assignments? Future studies should involve similar methods, but explore other ways that students can help work together to peer-revise and edit.

By researching these questions, the education community can work together to understand more about why cooperative learning methods can help with writing, and which strategies are potentially the most effective in helping students to become better, more proficient writers.

Conclusion

With writing being such an important part of any curriculum, it is imperative that stronger, more efficient, effective ways of teaching writing to our students are developed. As our understanding of how the writing process works and should be taught in schools has evolved over the past century, so too should our understanding of what works best for our students. The act of writing should not be a source of frustration or angst for teachers and students, but should be seen as a natural extension of and companion to everything else that goes on in the classroom. By embracing ideas such as peer revision, teachers can show their students that writing is a task in which success and improvement are achievable to all students.

The success of the students during the peer revision phase of this action research project should be seen as an encouragement to teachers who have struggled and despaired on how to teach. As research continues in the areas of writing and cooperative learning, it is hoped that even more strategies for success will be developed that will help all students improve their overall writing ability, and it is my hope that this project will, in some small way, contribute to this field overall.

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Appendix A: Writing Rubric

Writing Rubric					
Area of grading	1 points	2 points	3 points	4 points	Grade
Direction and Focus	There is no thesis statement; there is no focus to the paper.	A thesis statement is attempted, but the paper does not stay on topic.	There is a clear thesis statement, but the paper loses focus occasionally.	There is a clear, well-written thesis statement. The paper maintains clear focus throughout.	
Organization	There is no discernible organization to the paper or paragraphs.	Paragraphs do not stay on topic. Ideas are not ordered logically. Many irrelevant or out of place ideas.	Each paragraph has a topic sentence and stays mostly on topic. Most ideas are organized logically. Only a few ideas are out of place.	The paper is organized. Each paragraph has a topic sentence and maintains focus. Ideas are organized logically.	
Use of Support	Information and ideas are not backed up by evidence.	Ideas are poorly supported. Evidence does not relate, or does not tie back to the topic.	Ideas are mainly supported. Most of the evidence is effective. Some evidence is explained.	Ideas are well-supported. Evidence is effective and explained.	

Clarity of Ideas	Sentences are unclear; overall, the paper doesn't make sense	Some sentences are clear; the paper is difficult to understand	Most sentences are clear; the paper makes sense but is confusing in places.	All sentences are clear and understandable; the paper itself makes sense.	
Language Usage and Style	Words and sentence structure are boring and repetitive. No transitions between ideas.	Little attempt to vary words or sentence structure. Few transitions.	Some attempt to vary words or sentence structure. Some transitions.	The paper flows smoothly. Words and sentence structures are varied and accurate. Transitions are used effectively.	
Written Language (Mechanics)	Very little correct use of standard English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Errors make it hard to read.	Partially correct use of standard English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Frequent errors.	Mostly correct use of standard English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Some errors.	Correct use of standard English grammar, punctuation, and capitalization,	

Appendix B: Student Revision Checklist

Put a \checkmark if the statement is true	Direction and Focus
	There is a clear thesis statement.
	The writing stays on topic.
	The written ideas all relate to each other.
	The paper makes sense.
	There are no irrelevant ideas.
	All paragraphs relate to the topic of the paper.
Write two or three thoughts about the direction and focus of the paper.	

Put a \checkmark if the statement is true	Organization
	The introduction grabs the reader's attention.
	The introduction introduces the topic and gives background information.
	Each paragraph has a topic sentence.
	The ideas are presented in a logical order.
	The use of transitions between ideas is effective.
	The conclusion is strong and wraps up the paper.
Write two or three thoughts about the organization of the paper.	

Put a √ if the statement is true	Use of Support
	Each paragraph helps to support the main idea.
	Each paragraph contains support material.
	The evidence clearly supports the ideas in the paper.
	The evidence and support material is effective.
	The significance of the support material is clearly explained to the reader.
Write two or three thoughts about the use of support in the paper.	

Put a √ if the statement is true	Language Usage and Style
	The sentences vary in length and complexity.
	The writing flows and sounds conversational.
	The vocabulary is varied, strong, and interesting.
	The words and tone are appropriate for the intended audience and situation.
	Every sentence makes sense and has a clear meaning.
	The writer's personality comes through in the writing.
Write two or three thoughts about the language style of the paper	

Put a ✓ if the statement is true	Written Language (Mechanics)
	All words are spelled correctly.
	All words are capitalized correctly.
	Punctuation is used correctly.
	All sentences are complete -- no fragments, comma splices, or run-on sentences.
	All verbs are correct.
	There are no errors in formatting, including spacing and indenting.
Write two or three thoughts about the written language of the paper.	

Appendix C: Student Peer-Revision Sheet

Complete these questions after you have filled out the checklist about your partner's essay. Use these sentences to help start your conversation about the writing, but feel free to talk about anything you think needs to be discussed about your partner's paper.

1. One suggestion to improve the introduction is

2. The best part about this paper is

3. One item I did not understand was

4. One piece of information that could be removed or rewritten is

5. The organization of this paper is

6. Above all else, this paper needs

7. While reading this paper, I learned

8. The most interesting aspect about this paper is

9. The conclusion could be improved by

Appendix D: The Two Informative Writing Prompts

Writing prompt 1: “What does it mean to you to be responsible?”

Writing prompt 2: “Describe a single, significant experience in your life and the effect it had on your life.”