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Los Angeles

In Their Words:

Reports of Teacher Learning through Writing Curriculum Development and Implementation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Ke'Yuanda Evans Robertson

2025

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

In Their Words:

Reports of Teacher Learning through Writing Curriculum Development and Implementation

by

Ke'Yuanda Evans Robertson

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Lorena I. Guillén, Co-Chair

Professor Nicole Anne Mancevice, Co-Chair

The ability to write is critical to academic and professional success. Yet, writing remains a neglected area of instructional focus in secondary schools. One significant challenge in teaching writing—both as a subject and as an activity—is the variability in teachers’ conceptions of writing and knowledge of how to teach it. While research on writing pedagogy has been conducted in public schools, little attention has been given to understanding writing instructional practices within private schools. This qualitative study examined how instructional leaders at private secondary schools develop and implement writing curricula and explored what they reported learning through the process. A phenomenographic research design was used to analyze

variations in five participants' experiences and perspectives. Data were collected through two semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Analysis revealed two key findings: (1) the development of writing curricula is an iterative process characterized by incremental change, and (2) curriculum development serves as a vehicle for both personal and professional growth. These findings provide insight into the complexities of writing curriculum development in private schools and emphasize the influence of competing factors on fostering curriculum innovation and professional development.

The dissertation of Ke'Yuanda Evans Robertson is approved.

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DEDICATION

To my dad, who made me feel like I could do anything and believed it too. I share your love of learning and big ideas. This milestone, to you, would be no surprise. The real accomplishment you'd make clear: It is everything I learned along the way despite where I thought I was going or where others wanted me to go.

To my sister, who did this school thing better. You always were the favored student. More studious and more dutiful, your way would've helped me complete this manuscript "on time." Ironically, that way is one reason I finished it at all.

I wrote this dissertation in honor of you both, and I offer it as a gift to my children.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“How do you teach students to ‘write seamlessly?’”

If he had asked the question in person, my now-colleague would have witnessed my shocked and taken-aback expression: ears perked, head tilted forward, eyes widened in surprise. But because the inquiry was spoken over the phone, during a job interview, I used the space between my cell and the office line to my advantage.

“I don’t.”

As confidently as I could, I explained how the summary at the top of my resume was a mere attempt to engage my audience. “It just sounds good,” I said. “And, I wondered if anybody would catch that.” I soon found my footing in a quick response about there being no such thing as *seamless* writing: “Real writing, *good* writing, necessitates the act of rewriting, which suggests that writing is never really done.”

Though I didn’t consciously know it at the time, my writing—those words on the page—invited my interviewer to enter into a conversation with me. The opportunity encouraged a subsequent exchange of ideas and offered me a window through which I could see the activity differently.

Before the interview, I believed that “seamless” writing was clear and concise. My direct instruction and practice activities could yield student writing that flowed naturally with smooth transitions, precise language, and the purposeful application (or misapplication) of grammar rules. However, a simple and practical question from a peer challenged my conception of writing

and how it could or couldn't be taught, and I considered whether my thinking about writing was limited and flawed—or worse, wrong.

This study was inspired by my personal experience and interest in writing instruction and teacher learning. Through interviews with instructional leaders, I explored how English teachers at private schools like the one where I teach experience, understand, and learn from one another through the process of writing curriculum design and implementation. The findings from this study contribute to understandings about writing pedagogy and the way teachers learn and evolve informally on the job.

Statement of the Problem

Background

Writing plays a critical role in life. At home, it is the means by which individuals initiate and maintain connections with others. Texts, emails, and social media posts are both composed and consumed daily. In the workplace, writing ability is a ticket to professional opportunity. A person's ability to write and communicate effectively contributes to their professional success. In schools, students who demonstrate knowledge of writing-related concepts experience academic success. Yet, writing remains a neglected instructional focus in secondary schools (Graham, 2019). Since writing is an important skill, teachers of writing should be equipped with knowledge of how to teach the subject and activity effectively.

What is Writing?

Like me in the conversation with my now colleague, teachers in the workplace are often challenged by conceptions of subject matter and knowledge of how to teach it (Morgan & Pytash, 2014; Smagorinsky et al., 2002). For English and English Language Arts (ELA) teachers,

those conceptions include ideas about what constitutes writing. In a literal sense, writing can be defined as the physical act of getting words on a page: handwriting or typing words with attention to discrete skills like penmanship, spelling, and sentence construction (Applebee & Langer, 2011). A more complicated definition adds the expression of ideas, first with sentences, then with paragraphs to elaborate on thinking. More abstractly, writing is characterized by the development of whole compositions, where the writer focuses on meaning making through construction, while thinking of a specific audience, in a specific context, and adhering to specific conventions of genre (Bomer et al., 2019). Defazio et al. (2010) describe the latter as a cognitive process involving the “comprehension, application and synthesis of new knowledge” while encompassing creativity, problem-solving, reflection, and revision (p. 34).

In secondary schools, writing across disciplines is most commonly taught using step-by-step guides with predictable emphasis on how to write generally (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Bomer et al., 2019; Graham, 2019). Little time is dedicated to composing complete drafts. Instead, students typically respond to fill-in-the-blank, short answer, and copying prompts (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gillespie et al., 2014; Ray et al., 2016). When writing to learn about content is the specified learning goal (as opposed to writing to develop writing skills or learn new approaches to writing), Klein et al. (2019) added journaling and summary writing to the list of go-to strategies. Done well, the former encourages metacognition, while the latter encourages discourse synthesis. More often, however, teachers resort to baseline instruction of these strategies, which include overly specific writing prompts and grading rubrics that discourage thoughtfulness and reflection out of convenience and necessity (McKnight, 2023).

Challenges to Teaching Writing

One explanation for the prescriptive approach teachers use to teach writing can be attributed to the gap between writing expectations and writing practices (Graham et al., 2014). In 2010, The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) provided a set of benchmark writing skills and applications that students should master at each grade and across grades. The standards stipulate that secondary students in English classes—where writing is most explicitly taught (Applebee & Langer, 2011)—publish narrative, informational, and persuasive texts while attending to the writing process: planning, revising, editing, and collaborating with others. Not surprisingly, the CCSS do not specify how writing should be taught. The policy makers who created the standards believe districts and local schools should make those decisions independently. However, competing demands constrain the administrative teams charged with implementing curriculum at their institutions (Edwards-Groves et al., 2020), leaving in-service teachers to float.

Few Teachers Trained to Teach Writing

Compounding this problem is the fact that colleges and universities do not typically train prospective teachers on how to effectively teach writing (Gitomer & Bell, 2016; Troia, 2007). In fact, methods courses on how to teach writing are rare for most post-secondary students, including those in composition studies (Wardle & Adler-Kassner, 2019), in part because writing for different purposes requires varied approaches. Preservice educators enrolled in teacher preparation programs are trained in general literacy knowledge and related instructional practices; in addition, greater emphasis is placed on reading rather than writing (Cassidy et al., 2016; Graham et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2019; Pytash, 2012). In-service educators who hold higher education degrees, such as PhDs in English, but not teaching licenses are trained to

research specific topics in literature and tasked to write about them—again, without learning how to teach others essential writing skills. Finally, second career educators with professional writing backgrounds have experiential writing knowledge specific to their industry, their broad audience, and their professional purpose (Graves, 1983). These are trained writers with practical insights but perhaps limited understanding of adolescent learners. Because writing instruction is rarely a central academic training focus for any educator who teaches English or ELA in school settings, teachers’ individual approaches to writing instruction may vary widely (Hebard, 2016; Kohnen, 2019); so too, their ability to teach.

How Teachers are Learning to Teach on the Job

Despite the lack of formal training in writing instruction for teachers, educators find supplemental ways to improve their instructional writing knowledge in the professional sphere. For example, in-service teachers develop informal learning communities within their institutions to collectively address authentic challenges in teaching, regardless of external constraints or directives (Wenger, 1998). This grassroots approach allows teachers to share insights, strategies, and best practices, thereby bridging the gap between variable training, theoretical knowledge, and practical application in the realm of writing instruction. In English departments, this exchange of information can lead to a purposeful creation and development of writing curricula rooted in the authentic experiences of teachers and students alike.

Gaps in the Research

While extensive research on writing pedagogy has been conducted in public secondary schools (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gillespie et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2019), little attention has been given to understanding writing instructional practices within

private schools serving students in the same grades. Unlike their public school counterparts, private schools operate independently from standards-based writing curricula and national teacher quality measures, granting them autonomy over academic programming and hiring decisions (“About NAIS,” n.d., para 2). Consequently, private school teachers bring diverse academic and professional backgrounds (NCES, 2012), which may influence—for good or for worse—their approaches to writing instruction. This variability in curriculum focus and instructional practices across private schools underscores the need for research into how teachers in these settings design writing curriculum and instruction to improve students' writing abilities.

Study Overview

Private schools have the freedom to choose what types of writing to teach, how, and when. On one hand, such freedom may allow for flexible and innovative teaching techniques that lead to better student outcomes. On the other hand, this freedom may put these institutions at risk of adopting mismatched curricula and ineffective pedagogies. To gain deeper insights into this dynamic, this study explored how instructional leaders at private schools developed and implemented writing curricula at their schools and investigated what they reported learning about writing and other related topics through that process.

My study focused on the teaching of writing within private school English departments because, despite the subject's interdisciplinary nature, English and ELA classrooms serve as the primary settings in which explicit writing instruction is observed (Applebee & Langer, 2015). I used a qualitative research design and interviewed instructional leaders from schools located in the Western region of the United States. These were English teachers with department chair titles who conceptualized and designed writing curricula at their respective schools, as well as

implemented elements of that curriculum in their classrooms. Interview findings offer insight into teacher practices, writing pedagogy, and on-the-job learning.

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do private secondary school instructional leaders¹ develop and implement curriculum for writing?
- 2) What do private secondary school instructional leaders report learning through the process of curriculum development and implementation?

Study Design

This study used a phenomenographic approach to explore instructional leaders' perceptions about site-specific writing curriculum, writing goals, and instructional strategies/approaches. I distributed a pre-interview questionnaire to identify a pool of potential interview participants. The brief survey collected preliminary data about educators' core job functions and job-related autonomy and agency.

A total of five participants engaged in two 1:1 semi-structured interviews conducted and recorded on Zoom, lasting approximately 45 minutes each. The first interview asked participants to describe their school's current writing curriculum and talk through the process for curriculum review and revision within the department. Those narratives served as the basis for a second follow-up interview, where each interviewee discussed a writing assignment and correlating student product that generated conversation about teaching and learning with department

¹ Instructional leaders are defined in Chapter Three as department chairs who develop and implement writing curriculum at their schools.

colleagues. I inquired about the prompt and instructional strategies used to prepare students to meet the designated learning outcome/s. Additionally, I asked participants about their learnings—what, if anything, they would do differently if given the opportunity and why. My analysis of each interview helped me identify the variations in how instructional leaders experienced, understood, and learned through the process of writing curriculum development and implementation.

Study Significance

Writing is hard: it is a complex process with many moving parts. Teaching writing is equally hard. Since few teachers are formally trained in instructional writing practices, learning to teach the discipline informally, on-the-job is one way to improve instructional writing knowledge. This study explored that process in private schools, a currently under-researched area of scholarship. Additionally, this study provided an opportunity to understand the varying skills, knowledge, and experiences that educators bring to this work. I investigated how instructional leaders developed and implemented writing curricula within English departments, and I give an account of what they reported learning through the process. Insights gleaned contribute to understandings of communities of practice, curriculum design, and writing pedagogy within the context of private secondary schools.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The activity of writing consists of many moving parts and is hard to conceptualize—likewise, the ways it can and should be taught. Research suggests that the way writing is conceptualized determines the way writing curricula are designed and subsequently implemented in schools (Bomer et al., 2019; Ivanič, 2004), potentially leading to significant variation across classrooms. Given that writing is a threshold skill (National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2004), important in both academic and professional contexts, instruction should be a thoughtfully planned, collaborative effort (Zumbrunn & Krause, 2012). Building a framework for this work is a multifaceted endeavor that includes identifying beliefs about writing and mapping clear and conceptually linked instructional targets across grade levels.

Why Secondary School?

Much of the research that examines the way teachers think about and subsequently teach writing is centered around instruction in the elementary grades (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Primary school is a time when students’ writing foundation is laid. In grades K-3, students learn fundamentals like handwriting, spelling, and sentence construction—skills that are built upon in the upper elementary grades. After third grade, however, students’ motivation for writing wanes, which is a trend that continues through most of their education (Hodges et al., 2019). Importantly, this lack of motivation is tied to achievement (Singh, 2001). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2012) found that only 30% of eighth graders and twelfth graders in the United States are competent in writing.

With this in mind, understanding secondary school writing instruction during students' critical formative years (Schaefer et al., 2016) is an important research focus.

Secondary students need high-quality writing instruction (Hodges et al., 2019), and teachers remain a significant factor influencing student ability (Graham & Perin, 2007; Myers et al., 2016). However, many secondary school teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to teach writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gillespie et al., 2014; Hodges et al., 2019; Kiuahara et al., 2009). If secondary teachers do not feel equipped to teach this critical skill, the instruction they provide will be subpar, thereby contributing to students' negative attitudes toward writing and poor writing achievement outcomes (Hodges et al., 2021). Therefore, it is especially worthwhile to explore the ways in which secondary school writing teachers develop their curriculum and learn from that process.

The remainder of this chapter explores the literature that points to the need for my study. First, to underscore the variation in writing instruction, I describe various conceptions of writing that underlie many teachers' knowledge about the subject and pedagogical approaches. In particular, I elaborate on the most common thinking about writing specific to secondary school. I then discuss other influences on teachers' writing instruction, including the way classroom practices are shaped by teachers' personal experiences and minimal training. I conclude the chapter with a description of the conceptual framework for the study and a justification for conducting the study in the private school setting.

Conceptions of Writing and Approaches to Teaching Them

The ability to "teach writing" is a long-contested notion in K-12 and higher education circles (Bomer et al., 2019) because educators don't agree on a single definition of the

multifaceted skill and practice. In an empirical analysis of more than 80 studies about writing and writing pedagogy published between 2000 and 2018, Bomer et al. (2019) identified six different conceptions of writing that scholars and educators explicitly and implicitly ascribe to when discussing matters of teaching and learning to write. The *process* discourse is frequently paired with other notions about writing ranging from widely recognizable *creative*, *social-practices*, and *skills-based* orientations to more obscure conceptions (but no less popular) like *genre* and *sociopolitical* discourses. These diverse perspectives within the education community shape the way writing is taught. In the subsections that follow, I discuss each of these discourses and the ways they play out in practice in classrooms.

Process Discourse

The process discourse for writing, perhaps the most practiced conceptualization, is deeply ingrained across various writing contexts. Writers of all kinds attend to its components, which include prewriting, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Journalists, for instance, pitch stories and collect facts over a short period of time. While drafting, they organize information into digestible narratives for the public, then send their work through editors before publishing. Fiction writers employ the same strategies, sometimes over the span of years. They gather seed incidents—notes about people, places, and situations—that provoke exploration and discovery (Doyle, 1998), opportunities “for the unexpected to intrude and even take over” (Emig, 1983, p. 112). These seeds serve as the soil from which their narratives spring. Even student writers, under timed assignment constraints, engage in this methodical approach. Their task demands deliberate ideation about subject-specific content before culling evidence to plan their approach to writing. They draft but only sometimes revise within the minutes, hours, or days

designated for assessment (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016) and submit their work to educators for review. This process is as much a way of thinking about the subject of writing as it is a learned skill.

Creativity Discourse

Beginning in elementary grades, educators use the creativity discourse for writing to teach the writing process. Bomer et al. (2019) found that primary school teachers focused on content and style rather than “correctness” of form in their instructional approach. They leaned heavily toward positive interactions, providing feedback and praise to help students find their authentic voice (Calkins, 1986). Under this construct, students exercise choice and agency to make decisions about their compositions and use their lives to serve as the “raw material” for written products (Gardner, 2018, p. 17). When afforded adequate time to write and revise, students’ full-length written works are shared with classmates who are in pursuit of the same basic goals and purposes for writing (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Graham, 2018; Graham & Perin, 2007b, Murray, 1968).

Lucy Calkins (1986) popularized the creative discourse and process pairing for writing instruction through the use of writing workshop mini lessons. Short, targeted ten-minute lessons instructing students on actionable ways to improve their written products addressed the need for direct instruction and the common challenge of limited protected writing time. Calkins’ curricula, a series of weeks-long units of study in reading and writing, have been formally adopted by school districts nationwide for use in elementary and middle schools.

From the outset, one of Calkins’ aims was to motivate students to write for their own reasons (Strech, 1994) and, as a byproduct, instill in them a sense of joy in writing. In the 2016

"Growing Extraordinary Writers" report, Calkins explained the buzz her method produced in the classroom:

Many of us implemented [the approach] with a kind of “write your stories and whatever you desire while we play music to help you write, write, write” feeling. There was a joyous release to that atmosphere, and many students who came to class fearing writing ended up loving it. (Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016, p. 8)

According to researchers, this positive writing identity and developing sense of self-efficacy boosts students' confidence and motivation to learn (Calkins, 2020; Harris et al., 2006). Critics, however, argue that Calkins' widely accepted child-centered workshop model oversimplifies or ignores other key components of the activity (Feinberg, 2007; Wexler, 2021). Her “as long as you're writing” approach leads young secondary students to believe that the sheer volume of their writing makes them good writers or makes their writing good; this contradicts the belief sometimes held by upper secondary teachers that "good" writing is determined by adherence to specific writing conventions (West & Saine, 2017).

Social Practices Discourse

Originally, writer's workshop was a social practice among adults (Graves, 1983). Experienced and aspiring writing professionals with “good” fundamental writing skills abided by a set of established community norms to help each other improve their craft. These norms function as the heart of the social practices discourse and include patterns of participation, systems of collaboration and support, the collective use of time and space, the integration of technology and other resources, and most importantly a real purpose and audience for writing (Ivanic, 2004).

The teacher who ascribes to the social practices conceptualization provides ample opportunity for students to write for a range of social and rhetorical purposes, both real and imagined (Stagg Peterson, 2012). To illustrate, inside the secondary classroom, writing as a social practice may consist of small peer groups that meet regularly to discuss how or how well ‘must-have’ writing elements are working in each group member’s assigned draft. Outside of the classroom but within school walls, the social practice might include a larger peer audience that reads and responds to students’ writing in the school newspaper or yearbook. Outside of the school setting, a public audience might engage with students’ written work published online—a teacher-assigned blog or social media post, for instance, or an online review. Each of these examples reflects writing opportunities that force students to consider the needs of real people (e.g., what information to include to ensure the audience’s understanding, or what information to exclude given the audience’s familiarity with the topic or context) alongside their intended purpose in a specific context. The teacher’s teaching under this construct is therefore implicit rather than explicit because it is the writing that invites others to talk back to the writer versus solely the teacher’s red pen.

Genre Discourses

When it comes to the genre discourses of writing, the audience again plays an important role. Here, however, conventions of genre take precedence (Ivanic, 2004). This discourse emphasizes the written product and bases its success on how well the composition adheres to common guidelines pertaining to the immediate social context of which it is a part. Writers contend with and attend to a set of pre-established rules about the structure, tone, and linguistic features of a particular form of writing—rules that their audience is familiar with and privy to;

rules that, when followed, determine whether the written work is good. Done well or even imperfectly, real people (experienced “teachers” though maybe not in the formal sense) let the writer know if they’ve effectively achieved their goal.

Writing teachers who focus on genre studies aim to teach students specific conventions of form. They employ instructional strategies centered around the use of models (Graham et al., 2016) and use the “read like a writer” immersive approach to empower students with the skills needed to determine conventions of genre on their own (Graham & Perin, 2007a; Pytash, 2012; Stagg Peterson, 2012). Teachers guide students through close reading exercises, helping them to notice and question how written works are constructed. In so doing, students begin to recognize the structure and expectations particular to the type of writing being studied. This cultivated vision equips learners with insight into how their own subsequent genre-specific compositions should or could be crafted (Ray, 2006).

Skills Discourse

Genre studies and discourses are germane to elective English courses in the 11th and 12th grades. Most secondary English teachers, however, teach general classes and develop foundational writing skills in grades 7 through 10. According to Bomer et al. (2019), these educators most often view writing as a series of discrete skills and approach its instruction prescriptively—an approach aligned with the skills discourse. They emphasize a systematic and somewhat predictable way of doing, focusing on what students “must/should” learn (Ivanič, 2004). Most often, this looks like explicit instruction on “proper” grammar and “correct” spelling, or exacting directives on how to construct a sentence, paragraph, or five-paragraph essay. Teachers use grading rubrics to assess mastery of writing elements (e.g. “student uses a

topic sentence to introduce new ideas in each body paragraph"), rather than mastery of writing as a dynamic process (Young & Morgan, 2020). When students are offered the roadmap too soon in the learning experience, they may be compelled to tailor their approach to writing specifically to what will be graded.

Sociopolitical Discourse

Sociopolitical discourses for writing give context to the reasons why people conceptualize writing a certain way and functions as a form of critical literacy. An educator who ascribes to a sociopolitical discourse makes it a point to reveal and make clear the social, cultural, and political influences at play when it comes to beliefs about literacy in the context of writing. These teachers develop students' "critical awareness of why particular discourses and genres are the way they are...the factors which shaped them and shaped the patterns of privileging among them" (Ivanič, 2004, p. 238). For example, a classroom educator might explain what highbrow literature is and how the language in those texts can prevent certain groups of people from accessing its content. The teacher might, in turn, encourage students to work toward understanding the formal, standard lingual patterns so that they can understand the ideas being presented. Going a step further, the teacher may ask students their opinion about the writing—whether they think it's good or not; whether they think it's effective. They might then challenge students to create their own written texts that subvert conventional thinking about language (Stagg Peterson, 2012), encouraging them to make choices about how, why, and to or for whom they write (Lee, 2000). Instructionally, they might also choose to read texts from authors who have chosen to do the same, which supports researchers' findings about the ways teaching writing is closely tied to teaching reading (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Shanahan, 2006).

How Conceptions of Writing Underpin Writing Curricula

Ivanic (2004) suggested that any writing curriculum that includes a single discourse without another reflects “an impoverished view of writing...and [of] learning to write” (p. 241). Attention then, should be divided among the discourses as not to deemphasize or overemphasize process and product (Stagg Peterson, 2012). Hyper-focus on creative expression and process, for example, may ignore conventions of form particular to a given writing purpose and social context. On the other hand, fixed attention to genre-governed writing products undermines the thinking processes that make students active and engaged writers. Elaborating on discourses for writing and approaches to teaching them reveals the complexity surrounding a teacher’s ability to implicitly or explicitly teach writing well.

The Impact of Teacher Beliefs on Writing Instruction

Teachers’ experiences with writing inform the way they teach the subject (Graham, 2019; Hodges et al., 2019). For example, teachers who believe themselves to be writers and feel adequately prepared to teach it confidently devote more attention to instruction (Wang et al., 2015). Similarly, teachers who express confidence in their own writing ability expend more energy planning instruction and persevering in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1993; Graham, 2019; Pajaras, 2003) like administrative mandates, curriculum sameness, and lack of time. These teachers are more inclined to create pathways to attaining better student writing outcomes (Poch et al., 2020; Troia & Graham, 2016) by offering diverse writing activities, modeling writing practices, and creating environments where writing is supported.

Even so, teacher confidence and beliefs about writing can differ across writing contexts. A teacher, for example, may report confidence in specific writing skills (e.g., knowledge of

argumentative structure) but not confidence in completing related writing tasks (e.g., crafting a compelling argument). Similarly, a teacher may express enjoyment and facility writing literary analyses but not crafting fictional narratives themselves. If a teacher cannot perform a particular writing task, they are more likely to de-emphasize and avoid that type of writing instruction in the classroom (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Applegate and Applegate (2004) referred to this as The Peter Effect²: Teachers cannot teach what they do not know or have not learned. Likewise, students cannot learn what they have not been taught.

Inadequate Training to Teach Writing

Given the variety of discourses surrounding the instruction of writing, it is important to understand additional factors contributing to teachers' inability to effectively develop students' writing ability. In the first study found to focus on teacher beliefs about writing standards specifically, Troia and Graham (2016) found that 1 in 5 public school teachers surveyed in their 482-person study were not familiar with state-mandated writing competencies. Another study examining public school teachers' view of standards more broadly reported respondents relating their shortcomings to lack of professional development (Ajayi, 2016). This aligns with Troia and Graham's (2016) reports of inadequate professional training.

Specific to writing instruction, Graham et al. (2013) reported that 64% of public middle school teachers received little to no formal preparation to teach writing, while 42% took just one writing methods course in college. The same teachers expressed that their personal learning experiences had a more profound impact on the way they teach writing, findings furthered by

² The Peter Effect is a term derived from the New Testament book of Acts. The biblical reference explains the disciple's response to a beggar who asked for money: "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give to you" (Acts 3:6, New International Version, 2011).

Kiuhara et al.'s (2009) study of public high school teachers. The national survey of 361 educators reports that 77% of English teachers received adequate to extensive training to teach writing on-the-job rather than in their formal college preparation classes. Zimmerman et al. (2014), referred to this real-world training as an apprenticeship: a life-long exposure to writing and its demands in its naturally occurring environment.

Research from Hodges et al. (2019) supports the idea that the writing individuals encounter day-to-day has a more profound impact on writing knowledge than collegiate training. This mixed methods study showed that a collection of schooling and employment experiences made public middle school teachers feel most familiar with the writing elements that cross genres (e.g., organization, clarity, cohesiveness). Survey responses revealed that participants felt most prepared to evaluate the overall quality of student writing. Their confidence waned, however, when assessing writing for various purposes and audiences, a student writing competency requirement of the CCSS that may not have been emphasized with the standards that guided instruction during the respondents' K-12 schooling.

Conceptual Framework

Because teachers have different conceptions of writing based on their personal experiences, English department faculty at secondary schools must work together to create and implement curriculum that reflects a robust and informed view of writing that serves all students. Collaborating to design and refine curricula is then an opportunity that teachers can benefit from, one that encourages critical thinking and problem-solving, characteristics of authentic teacher learning (Ormond et. al., 2021; Rata, 2016; Rata, 2019).

Communities of Practice

According to Wenger (1998), communities of practice comprise individuals informally bound and mutually engaged in a shared practice, learning collaboratively from one another. In a secondary school, teachers working together within an English department can represent a community of practice. Such a community develops around the issues or problems that matter to its members, and in a secondary school English department those concerns may center around curriculum, instruction, and student performance, alongside institutional values. When its members meet, they contribute to “the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.)” that have developed over time (Wenger, 1998, p. 2). Each educator, by bringing their individual perspectives on writing and considering those of others, reflects on and renegotiates understandings about the activity and subject that are important and necessary for both their learning and that of their students (Grossman et al., 2000).

Yet, for this work to happen, a true community of teachers must exist. Grossman et al. (2000) found that gatherings of teachers at school sites sometimes exist under the guise of communities of practice. Pseudo communities like these are characterized by educators pretending to share beliefs and values. During interactions with one another, pseudo community members suppress conflict and instead assume a “behave as if we all agree” disposition. Non-verbals witnessed in group meetings become the topic of behind-the-scenes or “offstage” conversations, and classroom practices reveal teacher members’ real, hidden beliefs. In a secondary school setting, English department members may meet formally to discuss big-picture learning goals and assessments for the writing curriculum. Independently, teachers may be expected to implement those changes in their classrooms.

However, as Grossman et. al (2000) asserted, it is what the individual teacher goes back and does that cements the learning that has taken place within a given community. For example, when a teacher tries out a new way of thinking (i.e., strategy or approach to instruction), they may be in the process of learning. When a teacher adopts a new way of thinking, their practices may demonstrate what they have learned. When a teacher goes back to doing what they have always done, they may not have learned at all.

A Justification for Research in the Private School Setting

Independently funded and operated private schools do not have to abide by federal and state mandated writing curriculum standards, benchmark testing, or teacher quality measures like requiring educators to undergo formal teacher training. These schools, unlike most public schools, maintain school-site autonomy, which includes flexible hiring, academic programing, and instructional practices. They attract teachers who come into the profession with a range of academic and professional experience (NCES, 2012), teachers who may think differently about writing and writing instruction based on the contexts in which they were trained (Graham, 2019; Graham et al., 2014; Hodges et al., 2019; Kiuahara et al., 2009). While this diversity of thinking and perspectives can be a strength, it can also create challenges as schools seek to implement writing curricula and provide students with a cohesive writing curriculum. As such, the ways in which teachers come together to share ideas and calibrate their approaches to instruction are especially important.

Conclusion

Writing is both an activity and a subject (Wardle & Adler-Kassner, 2016). The writing that teachers engage in to create curricula is akin to writing a traditional text. The activity

requires specific content knowledge which includes conceptualizations of the subject. English teachers as curriculum writers must work together and attend to their educational context, their audience or stakeholders, and their instructional purpose. Doing so effectively necessitates ongoing conversations about teaching and learning—conversations that demonstrate a commitment to collegial growth alongside student growth (Grossman et. al, 2000)—and flexible instructional strategies implemented in the classroom to address diverse student needs across writing contexts.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This purpose of this study was to understand how teachers learn through the development and implementation of writing curricula in the private school context. Through interviews with English department chairs at independent schools located in the Western United States, the findings provide insights into the practices and learning experiences study participants reported.

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do private secondary school instructional leaders develop and implement curriculum for writing?
- 2) What do private secondary school instructional leaders report learning through the process of curriculum development and implementation?

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a qualitative study that relied on a phenomenographic approach to describe the different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand aspects of a phenomenon within a particular context (Marton, 1986). In this case, the phenomenon is writing curricula development and implementation, and I explored it in the context of English department chairs and their specific private school community. I focused on the comparative content of each instructional leader's responses by looking at the variation in what study participants said. The findings from my study were obtained through the inductive analysis of a series of interviews.

Sample, Recruitment, and Participants

My sample consisted of instructional leaders from private day schools characterized by their Western geographical region, large secondary student population, and self-reported degree of curriculum and instructional autonomy on a pre-interview screening questionnaire (Appendix A). I recruited study participants by first accessing the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) database of secondary schools located in the Western region of the United States. Within that database, I looked for institutions that identified as day schools, serving at least 500 students in Grades 7-12. Large student populations suggested the likeliness of English departments with two or more team teachers per grade level, which would encourage greater instances of interaction, collaboration, and subsequent learning among colleagues. Once I identified schools that met the above criteria, I referenced school websites to find educators whose public-facing titles suggested their participation in writing curriculum design and implementation (department chairs and directors of teaching and learning, for example).

I reached out to 18 educators via email and explained the general focus of my study (Appendix B). Within the body of that message, I positioned myself first as a private school English teacher, then as a UCLA graduate student and researcher. My goal was to establish my familiarity with potential participants' respective teaching contexts, hoping they would be more inclined to share their true experiences. Next, I explained my study's unique opportunity to understand how educators at private institutions, schools not beholden to federal and state curriculum mandates, approach the task of developing student writers. My email correspondence included a hyperlink to a pre-interview screening questionnaire (Appendix A) designed to determine fit and interest in study participation. Screening questions prompted respondents about

their core job functions, job-related autonomy and agency, and professional training.

Respondents who reported that teaching and developing and/or implementing a writing curriculum was not a core function of their job did not fit the criteria for participation.

I hoped to cast a wide net in search of suitable participants; however, my initial mid-June 2024 recruitment efforts yielded limited results: Only two people responded to my request to complete the screening questionnaire (Appendix A) after one week's time. Those same respondents were the only instructional leaders to supply contact information for fellow department members in response to the snowball sampling safeguard included in my outreach. It is likely that end-of-school-year demands consumed educator attention, or there was minimized study interest given end-of-school-year burnout. Therefore, to increase the pool of participants, I leveraged my network within the independent school community and leaned on the professional relationships I established and maintained over my 10+ years as a private school educator. I reached out to former colleagues and asked them to personally encourage their own school-site colleagues to respond to my initial outreach email. Nine additional questionnaires were completed, bringing the total number of survey responses to 11 (only nine of which were from eligible participants). Three respondents declined to participate in the study, leaving six potential interviewees. I selected five participants for interviews, each of whom shared two professional titles: English department chair and English teacher.

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the five interview participants. Each has amassed one to eight years of experience in the role of department chair, while their overall teaching experience spanned 13 to 18 years. The number of years participants spent at their school site ranged from one to nine years. Nearly all participants indicated that they learned to

teach, both generally and specific to writing, at their jobs. It is important to note that participants' self-reported learnings do not indicate whether they hold teaching licenses; instead, it highlights where they believe they gained their teaching knowledge.

TABLE 1

Characteristics of the Study Sample

Pseudonym	Years Teaching	Learned to Teach	Learned to Teach Writing	Years at Current School	Years as Department Chair	Number of Department Members
Letita	11-15	Credential Program Graduate School Employer	Employer	6-10	1-5	11-15
Andre	16-20	Graduate School	College Graduate School Employer	1-5	6-10	6-10
Harry	11-15	College Graduate School	College PD Training	1-5	1-5	11-15
Elaine	11-15	Employer PD Training	Employer PD Training	6-10	6-10	21-25
Sheila	16-20	Graduate School Employer	Graduate School Employer	1-5	1-5	11-15

Data Collection

During the months of June, July, and August in 2024, each study participant engaged in two 1:1 semi-structured Zoom interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes each. These conversations helped me to gain a detailed understanding of individual perspectives about personal learnings obtained through writing curriculum design and implementation at specific school sites. The loosely structured nature of my interview protocols (Appendices D and E) allowed my conversations with participants to jump from one discussion point to another as their

responses dictated. When initial replies to prompts were vague, I used follow-up probes to elicit elaboration.

Questions in the first interview were designed to gather information about the existing writing curriculum at the participant's school—what factors contributed to its design, for example. Additional questions prompted participants to think about specific instances when they interacted with colleagues to develop the writing curriculum (Research Question 1).

Prior to a second follow-up interview, I asked participants to share an electronic copy of a writing assignment and corresponding anonymous student product that generated conversation about teaching and learning between them and their colleagues (Table 2). I did not offer guidelines about whether the student product should be a “strong” or “average” example of student work but instead let participants choose; this was because student performance on the assignment was less important than what instructional leaders reported learning from implementing the assessment. Table 2 classifies participant-submitted artifacts by their distinct characteristics.

TABLE 2*Characteristics of Writing Curriculum Artifacts*

Pseudonym	Artifact	Artifact's Distinguishing Feature(s)	Writing Orientation(s)	Topic(s) of Conversation	Strategies for Implementation
Letita	Argument Essay	Critical literacy prompt Race focus Thinking vs. writing rubric distinctions	Sociopolitical Process Skills	How to respond to cultural landscape of literature in the wake of DEI	Think as You Read Brainstorm Refine Ideas Argue Revise
Andre	Argument Essay	AP Language synthesis prompt Gender focus No point values associated to rubric categories	Sociopolitical Process Skills	Lack of clarity defining writing types/purpose Student voice	Think as You Read Argue
Harry	Analytical Paragraph	Traditional flagship assessment	Skills	Holistic grading	Think as You Read Argue
Elaine	Writing Portfolio	Metacognitive assessment No point values associated to rubric categories	Process Skills	Collaborative development Student writing goals	Assess Your Writing Revise
Sheila	Analytical Paragraph	Collaborative twist to traditional flagship assessment	Process Skills	Grading norms	Collaborate Choose Argue

During the second interview, I asked each interviewee to talk me through their writing assessment artifact and speak to how it was created, by whom, for what purposes, and to what effect (i.e., how the student response measured up against the desired learning goals). Each participant explained what, if anything, they learned from their experience or what they would do differently if they were to give the assessment again. Participant explanations, rooted in concrete talking points, shed light on aspects of the assignment and context for creation that I was not familiar with and otherwise capable of making sense of on my own. In one instance, an interviewee did not remember the original context for assessment guidelines because the assignment, in part, was inherited rather than self or co-created. Still, like other interviewees, they were able to speak to the instructional strategies and approaches they used to teach toward the articulated learning goals. At the conclusion of both interviews, I expressed my appreciation to participants verbally, via type-written thank you notes, and physically with a \$50 Amazon gift card.

I standardized each recorded interview by removing the video content before saving and uploading the audio files to Rev.com for human transcription. Afterward, I corrected inaudible passages missed during transcription and saved them to both an encrypted cloud and the qualitative data analysis software, Dedoose, which I used for coding.

Data Analyses

Before formally analyzing the data, I listened to each interview twice, without taking notes, to create a mental inventory of the information. According to Alsop and Tompsett (2006), taking notes or beginning a formal analysis too early can “fix the analysis on aspects, or details,

that appear important” initially, but “may not hold significance after further review” (p. 247). During my third listen, I recorded analytical voice memos to capture my informal takeaways.

During formal analysis, I adopted an inductive approach starting with a review of participants’ first interview transcripts. I included quotes that described how they developed writing curricula and what they learned throughout the process. I then created coding categories using five to seven-word phrases and charted patterns of occurrence across participants. Before identifying key themes, I reviewed the transcripts from each participant’s second interview, following the same analytical process. Additionally, I examined the distinctive features in the writing curriculum artifacts participants submitted before the interview (Table 2). I used these distinctions to better understand the discussions about teaching and learning the educators in my study engaged in during the design, development, and/or implementation of one element of their writing curriculum.

Positionality

I am a middle and upper school English teacher employed at a progressive Los Angeles private school. The faculty in my department hold varying beliefs about writing constructs and key competencies. Their writing and pedagogical knowledge also vary due to their different academic and professional backgrounds. My department chair, colleagues, and I work collaboratively to determine the writing goals we wish for students to develop by the time they graduate and matriculate into college. Some goals are negotiable while others are not.

On occasion, I have been completely unfamiliar with the type of writing I have been required to teach. In those instances, I’ve adopted multiple approaches to learning how to design writing curriculum and implement instruction, both in isolation and with colleagues. For the first

six years of my independent school career, I did that work on my own because I was the sole secondary English teacher at my school. After that, I worked as one of many English department members and collaborated with colleagues to make decisions about writing curriculum. Sometimes, that process began with an attempt to produce a “working” definition of the writing form, which was followed by a hunt for exemplars. If there were no models to be found, I taught haphazardly, failing many times before I succeeded and arrived at a more complete understanding of my objective. I routinely relied on my colleagues as both resources and thought partners because, in my experience, our collective knowledge bridged the gaps in our individual understanding.

As it relates to my study, I acknowledge that not all participants share my experience. Every private school that I have worked at has functioned differently. The same may be true for the schools where my study participants work. The instructional leaders I interviewed may conceptualize writing differently than me, perhaps because of the way they were trained. Consequently, their approach to writing instruction may be different than my own. Because the goal of my study was to understand how private school instructional leaders developed writing curriculum and report what they learned in the process, I made no judgments on what they reported their experience to be. Instead, I used their words to describe their experiences and presented them as findings.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

The credibility of my study hinges on the clear and precise description of the research process. To ensure transparency, I have taken care to detail my approach to developing open coding terms and subsequent categories of description. This manuscript therefore provides a

clear outline of the interview questions and procedures, a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the data, and excerpts from interviews that allow readers to assess my conclusions and interpretations.

Säljö (1997) argued that communication (i.e., talk) is the primary tool through which we learn about a person's experience. To provide participants with ample time and opportunity to share their experiences, my study's iterative interview design made room for thoughtful reflection. At the start of each interview, participants were encouraged to think aloud, be doubtful, and even pause if necessary as they responded to interview prompts. Before their second interview, they were asked explicitly if there was anything from our previous conversation they wanted to clarify or elaborate on. Only one participant chose to reiterate key points. Since I had already transcribed and coded data from the initial interviews, I could confirm my understanding of their responses and seek clarification if needed during the second interview. According to Miriam and Tisdale (2016), member checks like these are "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on" (p. 246).

My personal experiences with writing topics informed both the study's design and my approach. To reduce the risk of reactivity (i.e., participants telling me what they think I wanted to hear), I emphasized my genuine interest in all the ways independent school English teachers develop and implement writing curricula and how they assess student writing. Two of the five participants needed additional clarification on the type of writing artifacts to submit and examples of how I planned to use the requested items to meet research objectives. I did my best to explain and encouraged them to find and submit artifacts different from what I modeled in

response to their inquiries. At other points throughout my research, I took care to minimize bias by refraining from describing my own approach to writing curriculum design until after the conclusion of each interview. Additionally, I engaged in an ongoing process of reflection using researcher memos and discussions with committee chairs to consider how my professional knowledge and experiences might be impacting the study.

Ethical Concerns

An important ethical consideration in my study involves protecting the anonymity of participants and the institutions where they work. Instructional leaders might have hesitated to share details about their schools, colleagues, or practices fearing that their responses could expose misalignment with the school's mission and vision or highlight gaps in instructional writing practices. To address this concern, I reminded them that I planned to use pseudonyms for all participants and would avoid naming institutions or providing detailed profiles of their schools.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study exploring how five independent school instructional leaders developed writing curriculum and learned through that process. Each participant, serving as both English department chair and teacher, engaged in two semi-structured interviews conducted between June and August 2024. Their responses provided data that addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do private secondary school instructional leaders develop and implement curriculum for writing?
- 2) What do private secondary school instructional leaders report learning through the process of curriculum development and implementation?

Finding #1 - Developing Writing Curricula Involves a Process of Incremental Change

Overview of RQ1 Key Findings

This section presents interview excerpts addressing RQ1, which explores how instructional leaders developed their writing curricula. Participants and their schools were at different stages of designing or refining curriculum. What they shared in interviews is reflective of where they were in that process. The data illustrate how interviewees engaged in incremental change, the gradual process of making adjustments to build on the existing foundation of writing instruction at their schools. Participants discussed the cultural and institutional factors that heightened the need to be more explicit in their thinking and articulation of writing curricula: a global pandemic, the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and the onboarding of new teachers into their departments. What followed was a slow and steady

revision of writing curricula. Sometimes changes stemmed from top-down directives and collaborative conversations with colleagues. Other times, they emerged sporadically through unplanned challenges and tensions among colleagues with diverse backgrounds. While there was no single progression that participants followed, each of their English departments moved toward a more well-rounded writing curriculum that integrated diverse writing orientations and more equitable approaches to instruction.

1.1 Participants Respond to a New Sociocultural Educational Landscape for Writing

The COVID-19 Catalyst

Conversations with participants revealed that a significant motivating event often prompted instructional leaders and their teams to recognize the need for changes in the writing curriculum. Four participants identified COVID-19 as the initial catalyst for such change and recalled the pandemic's impact on their school's writing programs. The socio-emotional toll of quarantine led administrators at one participant's school to prioritize people first. Elaine recalled that during lock down, the messaging she received from senior administrators was to "get through the content [you] can get through, but...make sure that [students] are okay." Teachers, the implementers of that charge, were left to navigate academic priorities, "and that meant different things in different classrooms," Elaine explained. Since then, and because of subsequent confusion, the English department she leads does not have an organized method of discussing what happens in the classroom day to day.

Andre, a veteran educator with more than 15 years of experience, faced a similar challenge but for different reasons. He recalled how "things just rotted out from the inside" after the pandemic, so much so that his English department has struggled to regain focus since that

time: “We haven’t recentered... We haven't defined and haven't gotten back to ‘this is what we do,’ ‘this is how we do it’.” Reestablishing that baseline is especially difficult given his institution’s lack of administrative guardrails. Though Andre feels empowered by his complete autonomy to direct writing curriculum development within his department—a freedom he acknowledged in his response to the study’s screening questionnaire—he feels unsupported. As he explained, “It gets really difficult when...there’s not other leadership behind me.” His institution, unlike Elaine’s, has provided no guidance or direction for developing a new or refocused instructional path post-pandemic. Consequently, the writing curriculum at his school is currently disjointed.

The Rise of Artificial Intelligence Writing Tools

Creation of AI Policies. The widespread introduction of AI in 2022 compounded the challenges participants faced teaching writing post-pandemic. Each participant noted that students, for one reason or another, were using platforms like ChatGPT to either help them write or write for them completely. Letita, who took on the role as chair when her school reopened its doors after quarantine, acknowledged the need to “try something new” within her department. She noted that what her team had in terms of a writing curriculum, and what they were doing in terms of writing instruction, “wasn’t working.” Their students tended to “put more work into cheating sometimes than...doing the work.” In response, her team, like the teams of three other participants, engaged in a process for creating policies to mitigate against AI.

Elaine’s English department had to contend with a school-wide decision that accepted AI as useful. The middle and upper school division heads, alongside the assistant head for teaching

and learning, developed an AI classroom policy that essentially viewed the tool as helpful so long as students cited it as a source. Elaine's department thought otherwise:

We're saying, wait a minute, some of the core skills that we are teaching are being somehow replaced by this bot. Because we have typically been a thoughtful and talkative department, we were able to articulate the reasons why it was important for us to tell kids that they couldn't use ChatGPT on an essay.

For English teachers, the instructional focus often involves guiding students to read and understand texts independently, then express their own interpretations in writing. While AI could support learning in other disciplines, like history where it might clarify information about a key event, Elaine's team felt that allowing AI on English essays would compromise students' development of essential skills in reading, analysis, writing structure, and organization.

The decision Elaine's department made was informed, in part, by information presented to department members who attended a professional development conference hosted by a university-based professional development institute on the East Coast. Conference facilitators shared essays written by AI and essays written by kids with attendees, then modeled the evaluative process they used to help students determine the limitations of AI. Elaine remembered how they prompted students to consider what was good in each version of the writing samples:

Over and over, it's this thing of, well, this one might sound really, really polished, but there's no analysis or there's no depth of thought, or there isn't even a thesis. Whereas the kid-written one is maybe kind of messy but demonstrates a lot of thought.

Elaine and her colleagues found the institute's lesson helpful. However, insights from facilitators sparked offshoot conversations between department members about the objective behind their

writing prompts. For instance, if the goal of an assignment is to think critically about literature, the teachers questioned why students were being assessed on writing polish. They sensed that conference attendees from secondary schools across the country defined writing as more thinking than craft, a topic I will discuss in further detail later in the chapter.

New Instructional Writing Processes. Sociocultural factors changed how participants and their teams approached teaching writing. They considered how AI tools impacted students' development as writers and adjusted their instructional strategies accordingly. Each of the study's five participants explained how English department members now provide students with in-class writing time, a solution that is both helpful and flawed. Andre described that decision as "triage" in the sense that if students are just going to plagiarize at home, then teachers need to have them write in class. "I don't know that's the best way to do it," he admitted. One of the 12th grade teachers in Elaine's department completely flipped his class so that he could circulate around the room, see the progress students were making, and work with them one-on-one while they write. According to Elaine, that teacher went from having multiple kids using AI to most kids not using it because the teacher's new instructional approach created student buy-in.

Some of both Harry and Sheila's department members have taken in-class writing a step further and gone "old school," such that students are "doing handwriting again." This return to practice, however, does not come without a new set of challenges. Writing by hand within a timed class period limits the speed and efficiency students benefit from when typing on a laptop. They miss the ease of quick revisions—such as using copy and paste commands to rearrange the structural content of their work—which can hinder their ability to organize and refine their thoughts under time constraints.

So, out of both ease and necessity, and despite students being tempted to utilize AI tools when allowed to write on computer devices, each of the five participants now require students to use Google Docs when typing their written work. The word processor tracks student writing, offering a record of changes over time. The “version history” feature, specifically, monitors students’ writing process both in and out of class. It provides quick answers to questions about when students are writing or how much time they are spending doing that work. And sometimes, it offers insight into whether students are doing their own writing at all.

When Sheila and her English colleagues notice large chunks of text copied and pasted into the document, they tell students to also “turn in that other document, the one that you wrote it on.” It is a “tricky” practice, one that the department members don’t all agree with: “Some people are feeling like the tone we’re setting is very distrustful. We’re sending a message to the students that we don’t think they’re going to do their own work or it’s punitive.” Sheila acknowledged her own use of the policy as a defensive strategy and “really crummy” way to think about classroom practices. The attempt to manage student behavior may do two things unintentionally: undermine a teacher’s ability to build a positive, trusting classroom culture and hinder students’ sense of ownership and pride in their independent work.

English teachers at Letita’s school use Google Docs’ “version history” for the same reasons as the teachers at Sheila’s school, but also to explore the process-oriented nature of writing. During in-class lessons, English faculty display models of sample writing and use the version history feature to explain what iterations of writing look like from the moment a prompt is assigned to when the corresponding written response is finished: “We show the students what it looks like when a natural writer writes. They start with messy notes, and then they change

words here and there, or they shift things around.” While the instructional strategy is not a sure-shot way to combat plagiarism, it is a helpful way to demonstrate to students that writing takes time. Its thoughtful crafting requires a series of decisions, big and small, that speak to both thinking (the progression and development of ideas) and sophistication (attention to syntax, sentence variety, word choice, voice, and overall style).

The process-focused instructional strategies that Letita and her department members use go beyond Google Docs. Her team developed learning objectives to guide both their lesson planning and approach to writing instruction. Sample learning goals include writing an effective outline, using revision to improve based on teacher and student feedback, and crafting a brainstorm upon which another composition is based. Rather than a checklist to account for whether students simply completed a task, the team’s approach centers how effectively students have met the goals set for them. Letita’s department incorporates other process-oriented activities, too. Like Andre’s team, they created a standard cover letter template for citing sources. If, during the writing process, a student conferenced with a teacher, tutor, or friend, they are required to have that person sign an acknowledgment page confirming how, specifically, they helped the student. Additionally, students are encouraged to reflect on their work with prompts such as “Here's how I approached this essay,” “Here's the feedback that I took from the last one,” “Here were the goals that I had that I really wanted to work on,” “Here's how I felt.” These reflective prompts engage students’ metacognitive thinking, a goal the department prioritized after attending a writing professional development conference on the East Coast.

Teacher Onboarding to Document Writing Curricula

At any institution, it is common for teachers to come and go. At some institutions, however, teachers go more than others which requires teaching teams to frequently catch new hires up to speed. The “What do we do?” and “How do we do?” school culture questions posed by two of three participants new to their institutions and roles as instructional leaders revealed gaps in their schools’ established writing curricula, suggesting the need for documentation.

Before her appointment as department chair, Sheila taught middle school for two years in an interdisciplinary humanities department, an arrangement in which she was excited to participate. However, after two years of “spinning our wheels trying to figure out what we were doing,” the humanities team split, allowing Sheila’s new English-only department to create its first dedicated writing scope and sequence:

We had a meeting where we had a huge whiteboard, and everybody just wrote down the kinds of writing that we do...poems, memoirs, essays, personal essays. We just brainstormed every single type of writing that we know we have assigned in our classrooms...We essentially ended up with a list of the types of writing in each grade level.

By the end of the one-hour meeting, the team had not addressed foundational questions such as what they believed about writing or why it should be taught in specific ways, but they did complete an integral first step in curriculum design: taking stock of existing practices. Next on their list of action items is determining how to scaffold writing skills progressively from sixth grade through the upper grades.

At Harry's school, newer teachers, educators with fewer than 10 years of experience at the institution, are "thinking about making the writing program more dynamic." To do that, there first must be a writing program. Since his hire, Harry and some of his newer colleagues have been raising concerns:

There's been no sort of unified way of saying this is what we're doing... The only thing we have that's sort of a plan that's unified, is this shared Google Doc of books that we all teach...I posed a question. I'm like, "Do we have a doc like this for writing? ...What do we teach in seventh grade? What skills do we focus on in eighth grade? What skills do we focus on in ninth grade?" And the answer was no.

This school year, the newly hired director of teaching and learning will oversee a Writing Committee composed of English department members from both the middle and upper schools. For years, the departments worked in their own silos. This year, however, the committee plans to convene to research and gather evidence of best practices in writing instruction. By the end of 2025, they will present what the research discovered and what the teachers at Harry's institution believe as writing teachers. At that point, the formal development of a more robust writing program can ensue.

1.2 Participants Reinforce Valued Writing Practices

The gradual development of writing curricula at participants' schools is, in large part, directed by internal constraints. Each participant reported using the AP exam as a blueprint to guide what writing type to prioritize when teaching and preparing students to meet the demands of college-level writing. Instructional leaders backwards mapped writing curriculum goals to

scaffold their school's valued writing skills and experimented with other writing types as their schedules permitted.

The private schools where participants teach are known for preparing students to attend top-ranked colleges and universities. To support this goal, these schools offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses, including AP Literature and Composition and AP Language and Composition. Harry, a “new” middle school department chair, shared that at his institution, “There’s an idea that students can be prepared [for college] by only focusing on literary analysis.” He and his department members use a strict analytical writing structure identical to one that every other study participant uses: claim, context, evidence, and explanation (or what some participants at other schools call analysis). Harry uses the formulaic structure to guide his ninth graders through the writing of their typical assessment, a single paragraph analytical response. As students progress through the upper grades, the length and complexity of their analytical compositions increase. Notably, the structure never changes. It is mirrored on highly-scored AP English exam responses—performance results students seek because it makes them more appealing to colleges.

In discussing a student's response to an AP synthesis essay prompt, Andre pointed out how the formulaic approach to writing instruction described above does not reflect the cognitive act of writing. The student, whom Andre described as “super smart” and “a great thinker,” has a “shotgun approach” to writing. Her work typically includes all the necessary elements of an analytical response but “there’s no craft involved.” Andre sees this as no fault of the student. AP writing tasks are often designed to privilege content over actual writing skill. The synthesis essay Andre submitted as a study artifact, for example, asks students to cull a small collection of

literature, synthesize its ideas about the gender topic, then string together an evidence-based argument about the degree to which the readings reflect gendered perspectives. What ends up happening, however, is students summarize each text but fail to link how one idea connects to the other. Based on the AP exam rubric, that's okay: to earn a top score in the evidence and commentary rubric category—worth four points out of six total—students need only to consistently explain how the evidence supports their argument. The College Board awards just one point toward writing sophistication, which includes using effective rhetorical strategies (i.e. writing craft) to strengthen the student's argument. Andre views this approach as a conveyor belt model of teaching: teachers present formulaic structures so students can score well on tests, gain college admission, and manage subsequent college-level writing. There is nothing “inherently wrong with that approach,” Andre noted. It's just “not teaching writing, it's teaching school.”

Two participants shared that the AP centered writing curriculum at their schools relegates experimentation with diverse writing products to grades 7-10. Letita explained that she has had to consider whether the department's writing program should lead up to the AP exam, or if teachers can take detours to capture student interest and creativity through diverse writing activities. Andre shared similar concerns, expressing added frustration with AP teachers at his current school who seem to have reached a point in their instructional writing journey where “their job is just to perfect what they've been doing already instead of growing and trying new things and trying out different modes.” At his old job, AP teachers taught to the AP exam *and* experimented with other types of essays. Andre attributed their creativity to his former institution's well-defined academic program which included a more clearly articulated mission, vision, and writing scope and sequence that allowed teachers to work within parameters. His

current school doesn't have that. So, for now, he's encouraged department members, starting in grade 10, to "rethink and redesign" more imaginatively using a backward design curriculum planning model.

Unlike the writing innovation happening in the upper middle grades at Letita and Andre's schools, the more experimental instructional writing strategies in Sheila's department starts in senior level writing courses. The school recently phased out AP classes. Now, upper school teachers are "really involved" in honing their curriculum, creating new advanced level classes to pitch for UC approval. Sheila spoke about the challenge of balancing seniors' desire for the weighted grading of a rigorous English course with their desire for academic ease and enjoyment once college application and acceptance season has passed. She continued, explaining how teachers are "always fighting between what the students will sign up for because they want a certain thing and what we want to give them in terms of intellectual excitement and exploration." In her first year as department chair, Sheila gained familiarity with upper school English classroom practices by observing how students interacted with course material at the 12th grade seminar level. She enjoyed seeing the ways in which other teachers were creating projects in classes that "bring in lots of different media and disciplines and students working together." As her team continues the work of formally building out their documented writing curriculum, Sheila will prioritize defining student writing goals. This focus aims to ensure that instructional strategies equip students to confidently manage the diverse writing tasks they will encounter throughout their secondary education.

1.3 Participants Use Professional Development to Steer Teams

Participants noticed a lack of student engagement with traditional, literary-based analytical writing tasks and recognized the need for additional writing resources beyond what their schools provided. To address this, four participants tapped into external professional development (PD) resources—two alongside their teams to guide departmental changes and two independently to sharpen their personal teaching practice. Each effort encouraged other department members to engage in a process of exploration and implementation of new approaches to writing instruction in their classrooms, sometimes with no immediate push to influence curriculum development.

Letita, who became an English instructional leader after an amicable divorce of the humanities program at her school, embraced the opportunity to build a writing curriculum from the “ground up.” To design that curriculum, she took her middle school team to a well-known, university-based writers’ workshop conference on the East Coast. While there, they experienced a paradigm shift. Workshop activities disrupted their previous ‘do this, then that’ approach to instruction and helped the team understand that “if we’re going to teach writing, we’ve got to teach writers how to write like writers, and they need to have their own opinions.” By the time Letita’s team left the conference, middle grade department members sketched a rough outline of a new curriculum plan and formed an essential question about writing that they could learn about throughout the school year via action research.

Once back at school, Letita partnered with an upper school colleague already familiar with conference activities and strategies, and they read professional development books to refine their instructional approach. When asked how that conference and joint task of reading shaped

her teaching practice, Letita reflected on the "Why are we writing this?" and "How is it useful in the world?" questions she now asks herself before assigning writing prompts. That impact is best seen in the introduction of critical literacy to a previously standard teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Rather than ban the polarizing American classic divisive because of its rich prose alongside racist portrayals, teachers now ask students to "hold two or three or four separate ideas" about the book's cultural fight "in their head at one time," then build an argument about the book's relevance for today's adolescents. The writing has become more about students' ability to craft a persuasive argument rather than their interpretation of the literature.

Top-down directives for innovating writing curriculum, like at Letita's school, becomes more feasible with ample resources for professional development. Elaine's institution allocated both funding and time for PD such that a particular school-wide effort spanned three-years. A few years back, the focus shifted to equitable grading, with training for the administrative team and department chairs that included a book study in the first year and consultant-led workshops in the second. In year three, the English department specifically, was tapped by an administrator to pilot their own response to the school-wide grading mandate:

Usually, any innovation that happens with the curriculum comes from the department or the department chair. We're sort of a grassroots kind of place... This idea that our division head had came out of a conversation she had with... an English teacher who had done a professional development that suggested not giving students grades.

Though initially met with resistance due to its top-down nature, the team proposed a writing portfolio as a cumulative assessment. Enthusiastic about the idea, the division head offered support including paid summer planning and substitutes for school-year planning sessions. Now,

instead of a traditional timed final exam, the new portfolio assignment asks students to periodically review past work, reflect on their performance, interpret their grades, and develop a thoughtful plan for improvement before executing it.

Elaine has used school-sponsored professional development opportunities to also deepen her personal understanding of how certain writing products enhance students' understanding of literary craft. She attended a university-based institute aimed at "getting [students] deep down into sensory writing and little moments" so that subsequent student analysis of other people's writing is through the lens of, "I know what my authorial intent was...and now I kind of know what that person's is." The creative writing approach to improving students' literary analysis skills is, from Elaine's perspective, a far more engaging way to build student buy-in. Students practice making intentional style choices in their own compositions before identifying, interpreting, and writing about the craft moves in someone else's. Elaine has not yet used this approach but in a future department meeting, she plans to share what she learned along with corresponding writing prompts. Her ask, to start, will be to "just think about this. Think about how this aligns with the practice you're doing now. How you might experiment with it this year." She will explore the new approach in her own classroom before addressing the bigger question: "How are we going to make this happen with more than just me? That's always the next push."

1.4 Participants Share Writing Lessons and Resources

The day-to-day demands of a classroom educator are many: lesson planning, classroom instruction, communication with students and families, and grading. That list does not account for institutional demands from administrators passed down through middle managers like department chairs to be stewarded. To fulfill all the obligations under their charge, each of the

participants reported using department meetings to check in with their teams of 6 to 25 members, share information, and tend to housekeeping tasks. Despite meeting one to two times a month, participants reported not having enough time to get everything done—namely curriculum design—which resulted in shared writing resources across teams rather than co-created ones.

The English teachers at Harry’s school abide by a curriculum pacing guide that requires them to teach the same lesson from the same unit on the same day. Despite the general school community believing itself to be collaborative, Harry denied that as true. In the middle school English department, for example, grade-level teachers take on sole responsibility for creating specific units of study:

Let’s say I’m planning the lessons on *Fences*...I would have a team meeting, and I would say, ‘Here is my first cycle of my lesson plans’...I’ve worked on these plans on my own. Maybe I’ve gone into the archives, and I pulled some stuff from like four or five years ago, but that’s not true collaboration. ...The way we have set up the program, it’s not a collaborative approach.

Despite teachers working with one another to bear the load of daily lesson planning while contributing to a year-long course of study, Harry sees the development of individual units of study as transactional. The bulk of plans provided by one team member is different from rotating contributions among team members within the same unit, as it reflects only one perspective in the instructional design.

Elaine explained that if she wants English faculty to work together to innovate, she has to find or create time in the day, or “bribe them with food or jolly them along in some way.” What usually ends up happening, however, is that grade level teams meet on their own. Middle school

teachers get together weekly to plan and are aligned in their curriculum and instruction. The upper school teachers, however, have fewer common planning periods. Ideally, they would check-in every other week to say, "Here's where I am. Here's where you are. I'm going to write the vocabulary quiz. Maybe you can write the whatever quiz... But that, especially when people get busy, that falls apart." The solution, then, becomes the digital sharing of specific grade-level documents: writing prompts, assignment samples, and grading rubrics for example. Elaine has tried creating master documents that department members will contribute to, but "some people do, and then other people don't." That leaves teachers' scheduled rotation in the school's writing center as an opportunity to gain passing familiarity with the writing happening across divisions. For instance, at any moment during their assigned duty, a teacher might be helping one student with their seventh-grade personal essay and another with their 11th grade research project.

Faced with a similar lack of time for collaboration, Sheila proactively addresses time constraints that hinder collaboration within her department. She partnered with the school scheduler to ensure department members had the time they needed to work together. She asked the scheduler ahead of time if he could match free periods for grade-level teachers. She recalled that "he tried as best as he could" but there were "just so many other things" he needed to think about that were out of his control. As a result, only certain team teachers will have time in their daily schedule designated for collaboration this school year. For those that don't, Sheila, like Elaine, will make time.

1.5 Participants Address Tension Between Teachers with Different Backgrounds

Veteran teachers, educators who have been at an institution for a number of years or those who have taught the same subject and maybe the same grade for an equally long number of

years, possess a cultural capital that makes them knowledgeable about established practices. This knowledge base is helpful as it offers answers to the writing curriculum “what do we do” and “how do we do” questions discussed earlier. It is also challenging to the five participants who seek to introduce new approaches to writing in their departments. Instructional leaders reported having to lean into the tension between new and old team members as a slow but necessary process for enacting curriculum change.

Sheila noted that long-time members of her department are “a little set in their ways ... A new teacher might express frustration of any organizational chaos that happens,” to which the veteran teacher might respond “Well, that's the institutional way” or “That's what happens here.” Sheila doesn't interpret these remarks as cynical; she believes her colleagues are good-hearted and simply recalling how things have always been. For Letita, that status quo mindset is less tolerable. When she became chair, some teachers resisted her efforts to revamp the former writing curriculum. They would explain that based on their years of experience, repetition of writing type (analytical) and its prescriptive structure reflected “what works” in terms of developing student writers. That teacher, “the last old guard of that writing style” voluntarily left the institution despite the writing-specific instructional coaching he had been receiving. Ultimately, he decided that his writing values no longer aligned with that of the department.

In his first year as chair, Harry faced similar tensions as both a leader and peer supporting others. During a joint middle and upper school English faculty meeting, a 30-year veteran challenged a first-year teacher's approach to a writing task. The new teacher proposed having students analyze the complexity of the protagonist in a foundational Western text, examining his heroism alongside his flaws, including problematic behaviors like rape. The veteran colleague

labeled the new teacher's approach "sacrilegious," dismissing its value. Harry chimed in defensively by spotlighting the positionality and credibility of the book's translator, telling the group, "This is a woman ...who has studied Greek. She's read it, and she herself says that the character was a complex person." By Harry's estimation, his colleagues believed that the new teacher didn't know what she was doing. They thought her approach deviated from formalism, a literary school of thought that favors and centers the technical or stylistic aspects of writing like structure, language, and literary devices over analysis of the sociocultural context that may have influenced an author's works. The latter is "what teenagers would probably prefer to write about," Harry emphasized. But the veterans, unconcerned about whether the idea came from a novice teacher or a classically trained scholar "didn't feel that that type of thinking about the character was very valuable."

A grade norming meeting at Harry's school further exposed the divide between the way veteran teachers with formalist values and newer teachers with reader-response leanings evaluate student writing. When reviewing a student's response to a literature prompt, veteran teachers awarded an "A/A-" for its adherence to the prescriptive analytical structure sanctioned by the school. Newer teachers, however, gave it an "A-/B+" because the essay, while technically sound, was "constrained" and lacked the student's distinct voice and personal insight. Harry attributed the grading discrepancies to differences in training. Most veteran teachers, particularly in the upper school, have advanced degrees in English but lack formal education training. In contrast, newer teachers often blend their expertise in English with pedagogical training that emphasizes diverse teaching methods beyond the formalist approach, fostering more student-centered values.

Summary of RQ1 Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic brought attention to inconsistencies in instructional approaches, prompting participants' schools to adjust school-wide and departmental writing values. As AI technology gained traction, participants collaborated to create policies to limit its use. Some participants chose to adapt their instructional focus through professional development, while others experimented within institutional constraints. Limited time prevented collaborative lesson planning, so participants' department members primarily shared resources. Team meetings surfaced varied beliefs about writing, opening the door to constructive dialogue and personal learnings which I will elaborate on in the presentation of RQ2 findings.

Finding #2 - Curriculum Development is a Vehicle for Personal and Professional Learning

Overview of RQ2 Key Findings

This section presents data from participants addressing RQ2, what instructional leaders learned through the process of curriculum development and implementation. Curriculum writing of any kind reflects a best-case scenario of teaching and learning: What co-creators hope for in terms of student learning outcomes and how they plan instruction accordingly to meet those goals. Study participants gained valuable insights by engaging in that process at their schools: learnings about themselves and others that were both predictable and happenstance. That learning varied based on participants' positionality and years of experience at their current institution and in their instructional leader roles.

2.1 Writing is Personal

During study interviews, I asked participants where they had learned the strategies they use to teach writing. In response, participants spoke about writing, explicitly or implicitly, in

ways that paired their beliefs to personal experiences with “schooling.” Two participants could not remember being taught how to write, but credited learning what writing should look like generally—in its most accepted analytical form—on-the-job. Sheila, for example, recalled that she “probably learned it from starting to teach English myself...other colleagues, or searching the internet, trying to figure out what's the best way to start teaching students how to do this.” Two other participants credited their writing knowledge and personal and professional writing practice to graduate school, English and fine arts programs specifically. Only one participant explained how their racial identity, a point I elaborate on in detail because of its variation, influenced their beliefs and current instructional practices.

Harry, a Black man, observed how his teaching approach differs from that of his White peers. Rather than simply giving students a handout on writing structure, he breaks down complex writing concepts in class and models analysis step-by-step, often focusing on writing elements at the word level: “On the second day of school, I put a quote on the board and ...I'm like, ‘Hey, how do the verbs suggest the meaning in this text?’ And some students are like, ‘What are you talking about?’” Because Harry’s ninth grade class welcomes both new and returning students who may or may not be groomed in his institution's brand of writing, his teaching approach ensures that all students, from his perspective, have an equal opportunity to succeed.

His attempt at leveling the playing field contrasts sharply with colleagues who believe students needing such support do not “deserve to be at [the institution].” At department meetings, where White teachers made such statements, Harry noticed how passionate he became and wondered where his intensity came from. He recalled that his equity-based writing and teaching

philosophy came from his attendance at an all-Black Catholic school in the South, where Black women teachers instilled in him an “I owe it to everybody to teach ... all things” sense of responsibility. This mindset is exemplified in Harry’s defense of his new colleague’s culturally relevant approach to the teaching of a canonical Western text and in his focus on guiding students through the writing process in a way that prioritizes understanding over mere compliance.

2.2 Leadership Training by Doing

Participants’ reported learnings revealed trends based on their years of leadership experience and tenure at their institutions. Predictably, leaders new to their schools, regardless of prior department chair experience, discussed learning curriculum implementation strategies in alignment with their school and department cultures. In contrast, experienced leaders with longer tenures emphasized developing their leadership skills, particularly by supporting colleagues in the implementation of writing curriculum and navigating writing-specific interdepartmental challenges in real time.

Authority, Responsibility, Accountability, and Support

Curriculum design is not just about content. It is about supporting colleagues through professional change. It is about leveraging expertise and ensuring that team members are equipped to implement curriculum whether or not they buy into a shared professional vision. For two participants, challenges achieving consensus spotlighted the need for leadership strategies better suited to guiding their teams. While implementing a new grammar curriculum, Elaine faced the difficulty of balancing teacher autonomy with the need for cohesive departmental practices. After abandoning in-house efforts to create a program themselves, her department

unanimously agreed to adopt a pre-packaged curriculum. However, by the following school year, some colleagues seemed unclear about its purpose, leading Elaine to question whether the decision to use the curriculum had been rushed or imposed. Her colleagues reassured her that neither was the case. Yet, a third of the department opted out of using the grammar book, creating inconsistencies in student instruction. Elaine reminded her team that while the curriculum choice may not be “a perfect decision, it is a good decision” considering their shared goal. Though it is difficult for Elaine to sit with the tension of making a decision that not everybody’s going to like, she is learning how to hold her department members accountable both for decisions they have made together and to one another.

Unlike Elaine, Andre views the appearance of consensus as a red flag, often indicating underlying issues. Instead of striving for unanimous agreement, he aims to foster a departmental culture where open disagreement is encouraged and accepted. Early on, his inexperience championing diverse perspectives challenged his ability to effectively lead. At his previous institution, senior teachers stifled new hires’ contributions. Andre initially believed that that conflict would resolve itself naturally, but issues festered and resulted in people either leaving the institution or being unhappy and unwilling to teach on teams with certain colleagues. Seeking to improve his leadership skills, Andre read about ways to deal with this type of interdepartmental tension and talked with other department heads about how they’d approach the situation. Since then, he has become more heavy-handed with his public support for others’ diverse perspectives: “it's not enough for people to think they're supported. They have to know and hear that they're supported.”

Elaine uses public support as a leadership strategy too, but only after private off-stage meetings with colleagues. These “check-ins” provide insight into individual concerns, desires, and plans: “People sometimes don't want to say what they're really concerned about; they'll just sit and think and assume that you know what they think.” Elaine learned the value of private, individual meetings during her first year as chair when an English teacher suggested adding electives to the list of course offerings. Elaine eagerly presented the idea to the department, and remembered how frozen people were in their immediate reaction. Although the idea originated within the group, the team wasn't ready to discuss it publicly. A former chair still in the department advised Elaine to “check in with people first and just get a sense.” Elaine listened and committed to synthesizing individual views communicated during private conversations. That practice is now a part of her leadership toolkit. Today during department meetings, she outlines her purpose for agenda items, summarizes the range of views she has gathered, and opens the floor for discussion. This approach ensures everyone feels heard and prepared for collaborative dialogue.

Gentle Intervention

Preparation for dialogue is just a starting point. Instructional leaders reported other ways of equipping team members to effectively implement curriculum design even if they cannot or do not buy into a shared professional vision. Three of five participants learned that they have to coach fellow teachers into professional growth. Elaine noted that despite how common it is for her department members to walk out of the classroom thinking about what worked well and what didn't, there's still something preventing certain teachers from trying new approaches. Sometimes it's personal life circumstances taking up brain space. Other times, teachers are

threatened by the idea of change. In either case, Elaine recalled that teachers “get stuck in a cycle.” They try to do things the “right” way because that's how they were taught to do it, and “when that way isn't working, ...[teachers] feel like a failure, and then feel like [students] are a failure.” That negative spiral led Elaine, as chair, to reflect on ways to best intervene and redirect before stepping in as cheerleader and coach.

Letita pondered intervention strategies, too, and ultimately decided to avoid the bulldozer approach to change. She acknowledged that when teachers don't believe in a plan, they won't do it well or at all. So instead of forcing a particular way, she offers options that empower colleagues to choose how to proceed: prompts like “Why don't we try this?” or “What happens if you do this?” and replies like “Let's see what happens” or “Let's practice.” By encouraging teachers to experiment and accept mistakes as a part of the process, Letita is contributing to a positive work culture where teachers can lean into the department's new writing process experientially. This approach has also enabled Letita to “be more gentle” and offer “a little more grace”—compassion that helps create a supportive and trusting environment for change.

Summary of RQ2 Findings

Participants gained expected and unexpected insights by engaging in curriculum development and implementation at their schools. A newer instructional leader reflected on his contributions to conversations in department meetings and realized that his writing values were tied to his identity. More experienced instructional leaders noted that departmental conflict sharpened their leadership skills. When challenged by an inability to reach consensus, participants learned the importance of accountability: specifically, why team members need to uphold the commitments they have made to each other. Sometimes this involved reminding

department members of the group's collective why. Other times it meant publicly (and privately) encouraging teachers to voice dissenting views for the greater good of the group. In more sensitive situations, department chairs found that gentle, individualized support was essential for effective intervention.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Research on writing and writing pedagogy primarily focuses on public schools (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gillespie et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2019), with limited investigation into these practices in private secondary school settings. Privately funded and operated institutions have considerable autonomy (National Association of Independent Schools, n.d.). Freedom from federal and state mandates on curriculum standards and standardized testing enable them to adopt, develop, and implement their writing curricula as they see fit. Such freedom can improve or hinder student outcomes, given the diverse perspectives and academic and professional backgrounds of educators employed by these institutions (NCES, 2012).

My study explored how five English department chairs from private schools in the Western region of the United States developed and implemented writing curricula at their schools. My research questions were:

1. How do private secondary school instructional leaders develop and implement curriculum for writing?
2. What do private secondary school instructional leaders report learning through the process of curriculum development and implementation?

Over the course of two semi-structured interviews, each participant shared how and to what degree they developed a writing curriculum and reported what they learned about writing and related topics through that process.

In this chapter, I summarize study findings and elaborate on key implications. Additionally, I address the study's limitations and propose recommendations for practitioners

and future research. Finally, I reflect on how the process of completing this study was informed by and informs my work as an English educator in a Los Angeles private school.

Discussion of Key Findings

The findings of this study suggest that writing curriculum development at participants' schools is always in process: It happens horizontally, within grade levels, and vertically, across grade levels, at the same time. Development is often slow-growing, hinging upon cycles of conversation and experimentation within educator communities first, then with students. Conversation about writing curriculum—writing products and assessments, specifically—is integral to its evolution, sometimes leading English department members to develop a shared professional vision based on valued conceptions of writing.

How Writing Conceptions Underpin Writing Curricula

Post pandemic and the rise of AI, each of the study's five participants described the ways in which their English departments were working toward the development of a more well-rounded writing curriculum. Consistent with existing literature, the way participants and their schools conceptualized writing influenced the way new or refined writing curricula were developed and subsequently implemented (Bomer et al., 2019; Ivanič, 2004). Bomer et al. (2019) outlined six distinct conceptions of writing that educators draw upon when discussing matters of teaching and learning to write. Conversations with participants in this study revealed that four of those conceptions were valued and practiced at their schools. At institutions emphasizing the process conception, department members were encouraged to adopt a similar iterative approach to learning new methods of teaching writing. Over time, this led to more diverse ways of thinking about and engaging with writing as both a subject and activity, which was reflected in

the developing writing curriculum. Conversely, the sole participant who noted their institution's narrow perspective on writing reported a single conception being disproportionately emphasized, what Ivanič (2004) argued is an insufficient means for teaching writing well.

Conceptions of Writing

The process and skills orientations for writing, paired together, were most common within each participants' English departments. Only four participants, however, described process and sociopolitical (critical literacy) pairings as relevant. Two participants referenced an emerging social practices discourse for writing at their schools, an orientation that, at this point in writing curriculum development, remains aspirational.

Process Discourse

Participants' newly adopted process-oriented approach to writing included instructional strategies that Graham (2019) identified as integral for effective writing instruction: the addition of dedicated in-class writing time, digital writing tools, and a familiar practice of planning, drafting, revising, and later evaluating compositions. The "plan" for writing at participants' schools often relied on prescriptive and overly specific structural guides—not the fill-in-the-blank, short answer, and copying prompts discussed in research (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gillespie et al., 2014; Ray et al., 2016), but rather detailed rubric descriptions. Participants noted that students often tailor their writing to meet rubric scoring criteria, rather than engage with writing as a dynamic, creative process, which corroborates Young and Morgan's (2020) finding about the way rubrics hinder writing development. Two participants' schools employed strategies to circumvent this student practice. They made distinctions between thinking and writing on rubrics and removed all point values. Sometimes, as was the case with Letita and

Andre, instructional leaders integrated writing plans with reading plans using close reading and corresponding reader response exercises. The combination strategy exemplifies what Graham, Liu, Aitken, et al. (2018) identified as an effective method for teaching writing. Participants who valued a process-oriented approach to writing provided students with feedback and time to rework their writing before submitting it for grading. Additionally, they incorporated evaluative activities, which included metacognitive guides, and allowed students to revise and resubmit graded drafts despite conflicting departmental and school-wide guidelines. In this way, study participants established pathways for improving student writing outcomes, reinforcing the findings of Troia and Graham's (2016) study on teacher beliefs.

Skills Discourse

Each private school where participants work has a reputation of sending students to top-ranked colleges and universities. To prepare students for this path and the demands of college writing, participants' schools offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses such as AP Literature and Composition and AP Language and Composition at the junior and senior level. Each participant in this study emphasized the importance of analytical writing skills at their schools, identifying it as the only type of writing scaffolded in each grade and across divisions. The continuity of this writing type and its associated skills—strict adherence to the standard claim, context, evidence, analysis argument structure—within the curriculum was driven by high-stakes testing, in this case AP exams, which confirms what Applebee and Langer (2011) identified as a key force behind decisions of curriculum and instruction at schools.

Sociopolitical Discourse

Participants embraced culturally responsive teaching to engage students. Two instructional leaders submitted writing curriculum artifacts (Table 2) with content that focused on themes of race and gender. Both assignments challenged conventional thinking about language (Stagg Peterson, 2012) and spotlighted the factors that influenced “the patterns of privileging among them” (Ivanič, 2004, p. 238). That high-interest content alone was not enough to engage and equip developing writers.

Graham (2019) contended that differentiated writing instruction is key to improving student writing outcomes. Participants expressed similar sentiments, specifying the importance of explicit writing instruction to meet the needs of all learners, chief among them struggling writers. Individually, Harry created and implemented writing exercises to help students select best evidence and analyze word choice prior to drafting analytical responses to literature. Sheila designed partnered writing tasks to encourage cooperative learning through paired student discussion. Andre, reflecting on how he would implement a writing task differently in the future, plans to employ lessons on quote integration. Each participant’s approach relies on specific lessons in writing and formative assessment tailored to student needs (Graham et al., 2015). More importantly, their approaches reflect flexible, evidence-based practices refined over time in recognition of what has worked and what hasn’t (Graham, 2019).

Social Practices Discourse

Applebee and Langer (2011) observed that secondary teachers, particularly at the middle school level, assigned authentic writing tasks intended for responsive audiences of more than just the teacher. In contrast, this study found that upper school teachers were more likely to adopt this

practice. Participants who implicitly ascribed to the social practices orientation to writing encouraged students to acknowledge and explain how feedback from other teachers, tutors, or peers helped them to develop their thinking. These explanations, provided through templated cover letters, were neither graded nor formally responded to by instructional leaders, emphasizing the importance of open dialogue between real audiences that is central to the social practices discourse.

Teacher Beliefs on Writing Instruction

Harry and other "new" colleagues desired to make their English department's writing program more dynamic after finding that it included only skills-based analytical writing. However, any attempts to do so—by discreetly allowing more than two approved revisions or incorporating creative writing prompts to engage students—were done independently behind classroom doors. Grossman et al. (2000) described this behavior as typical in pseudo teacher communities: Teachers take on a “behave as if we all agree” disposition in group settings, but individual practices reveal their real beliefs. This was not entirely true for Harry, who openly voiced his preference for more equitable and inclusive writing practices in department meetings. And yet, he did not broadcast or fully disclose to veteran teachers within his department the ways in which he and others circumvented the established system for writing instruction at their school.

Communities of Practice

Though Harry recounted instances of teacher behavior hidden behind the guise of a department-wide community of practice, the behavior of a select few within his department did suggest true community with each other. At Harry's school, the new teachers of color

instinctively banned together and engaged in shared learning around equitable writing instruction. This finding supports Wenger's (1998) assertion about learning being a social process. Within their community of practice, Harry and his peers considered their own positionality and aimed to teach writing the way they were taught or as they wished they had been taught. Each member contributed a different but necessary expertise to the group's repertoire of instructional strategies: a systemized way to teach skills, for example, or a collection of reflective prompts to help students improve their own writing. Their goal to make writing instruction more explicit is rooted in a collective desire to improve the learning outcomes of students who may not be familiar with "the school's brand of good writing" or have access to tutors and other support.

All study participants, including Harry, described the development of writing curricula as being shaped by internal departmental, grade-level, and division-specific communities of practice, as well as external professional networks. English department policies to mitigate plagiarism, for example, were birthed out of conversations about the negative cultural impact of AI on student writing. Grade-level teams played a key role in achieving horizontal curriculum alignment. Though instructional leaders had a general sense of the writing goals for each grade, they acknowledged that team teachers were better suited to discuss specific writing products and implementation strategies, as they were directly responsible for developing the corresponding scope and sequences. For the most part, these teachers independently created or obtained resources and shared them when time constraints limited opportunities for collaborative co-creation. Divisionally, community members shared writing values and problems of practice. For example, a preference for formalism or issues surrounding grading. Each of these examples

demonstrate evidence of communities of practice, but patterns of participation related to professional development suggest otherwise.

Instructional leaders attended professional development conferences where they interacted with educators across local, regional, and national campuses and gained new knowledge and insights about writing and writing instruction. Participants reported these learnings during department meetings at their schools and occasionally collaborated with colleagues to further develop and implement the ideas. Often, however, department members used school-sponsored PD opportunities to deepen their personal practice. Chairs reported having no expectation that those individual interests and pursuits immediately influence the work of the team. Instead, department members were encouraged to experiment with newly introduced strategies for instruction in their classrooms, revealing a disjointed approach to innovating curriculum—one that lacked shared goals, what Wenger (1998) describes as a key feature of communities of practice.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that I was not able to recruit a broad range of instructional leaders. My participant pool was limited to department heads who may have shaped the portrayal of their institution's curriculum and framed personal insight to align with their content expertise and leadership perspective. Including perspectives from other members of their departments, (teacher-leaders, for example, or teachers new to the profession), could have offered alternative viewpoints. This would have provided a more balanced understanding of how writing curriculum is developed at a single institution and what department members learn from that process, based on their roles and years of experience.

Another limitation of the study is the participants' ability to recall details from interactions that may have occurred several months or years ago. Instructional leaders shared artifacts to be used as discussion points during their interviews. They may not have provided a complete account of the circumstances surrounding the submitted writing assessments or fully elaborated on their experience implementing them. This could be due to difficulty remembering specific details, which may have affected the depth and accuracy of insights shared.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

The findings of this study are consistent with existing research—surveys, observational case studies, mixed methods investigations, and meta-analyses—about the way writing is taught in secondary public schools (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gillespie et al., 2014; Graham, 2019; Graham & Perin (2007c). My study extends that literature by adding the voices and experiences of private school teachers via in-depth qualitative interviews. Notably, none of the participants in this study discussed curriculum development as a vehicle for professional teacher learning. Instead, their responses highlighted the broader policy and practice issues driving curriculum design at their institutions—such as Advanced Placement exams and the need to align English courses with A-G college requirements—despite having autonomy. Consequently, participants and their English departments had not yet mapped more innovative instructional writing targets and corresponding strategies to use across grade levels. This important step in writing curriculum design reinforces the need for strong organizational leadership, specifically the articulation of writing curriculum's multiple goals and the development of a shared professional vision for writing and writing instruction.

Organizational Leadership

Private school English departments need clear directives from senior administrators about writing curriculum priorities. In this study, department chairs shared that autonomy within parameters was particularly helpful when developing curriculum. Directives from upper administration, then, should ideally tie writing goals to the school's overarching mission and vision for students.

People and Goals

Curriculum goals at any school center around the desired outcomes of multiple stakeholders including students, parents, and teachers. In private schools like those in this study, one goal is to prepare students for admission to top-tier colleges and universities. This goal, in part, is shaped by parents who have invested in private education for that reason. Another goal, informed by my personal experience and shared by parents and teachers alike, is that students practice the skills to make them better writers. That includes writing for different purposes and audiences, activities that participants reported often being relegated to the middle grades and limited by time constraints. That lack of time impedes on yet another goal: making students feel supported in the process of learning how to write. Instructional leaders described minimal collective engagement in the more nuanced micro-level aspects of curriculum development, such as how to actively interact with students to support their growth as writers. Instead, department meetings often centered broader, overarching discussions about what can or cannot be taught and what should or should not be taught—big topics tied to the sociocultural landscape of writing and their school's college-going culture. If department chairs as middle managers are to steward others through the implementation of writing curriculum, then they need to both be and feel

supported doing so. One such way involves senior administrators making the multiple goals of writing curriculum explicit and providing department chairs with guidance for their implementation.

The experienced department chairs in this study discussed how confronting tension between colleagues is a prerequisite for curriculum implementation. Because a large part of a cohesive writing program hinges on interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration, instructional leaders must value their department members as people more than goals. Instructional leaders should identify department members' personal values, motivations, and impediments to progress before helping them develop their craft as practitioners. Only then can department chairs effectively employ path-goal leadership strategies that enable and empower their teams to be learners committed to doing their best work in service of students.

Shared Vision for Writing and Writing Instruction

Developing a shared vision for writing and writing instruction is one avenue for ensuring that writing curriculum goals align to an institution's mission and vision for students. A shared vision fosters collaboration and coherence within a department and enables members to learn from one another through the exchange of expertise. Ultimately, professional learning strengthens the department's capacity to equip students with the skills necessary for academic, professional, and personal success.

Teacher Training

This study did not explore participants' undergraduate and graduate majors or the academic subjects in which they were formally trained to teach. Additionally, it did not examine whether the training they received, both general and specific to writing, adequately equipped

them to teach writing in today's social and cultural context. Future research should investigate how teachers' professional preparation influences both what they contribute to and learn from the process of writing curriculum development. Such studies may shed light on educator beliefs about the effectiveness of teacher training and its impact on writing instruction.

Diverse Teaching Teams

Study participants noted that colleagues in middle and upper school held different views about writing and the way it could and should be taught. Middle school educators favored explicit instructional practices, while upper school educators relied heavily on implicit instruction. Two participants noted that educators at their schools with teaching licenses prioritized research-backed instructional best practices, whereas those without licenses were more inclined to experiment with novel approaches. These dynamics suggest that educators from diverse backgrounds bring different values and skills to their English departments. These educators, strategically placed across divisions and within grade-level teams, can help to refine writing curricula by drawing upon a broader and more inclusive pedagogical and content-specific knowledge base.

Writing Teachers of Color

One participant spotlighted their identity as a person of color. In both his first and second interviews, Harry, a Black man, emphasized that he and other colleagues of color at his institution approached the task of teaching and assessing writing in distinct ways. This suggests that people of color may have different experiences with writing—both as learners and as educators. A study examining beliefs about writing through the lens of race, alongside the

instructional writing practices used in the classroom, could offer insight about the way racial identity influences writing instructional practices.

Case Study for Teacher Learning

None of the participants in this study discussed curriculum development as a tool for teacher learning. However, if this is a goal, department chairs and members should approach curriculum design as a professional learning opportunity. A case study where researchers facilitate teacher learning through curriculum development at a single school site could create an understanding of how one private school English department learns together and from one another.

Final Thoughts

I conducted this study to get a sense of what is happening in private schools particularly around writing instruction. While I knew writing was being taught in English classes, I was curious about the types of writing assignments, the methods used to teach them, and the rationale behind those choices. My primary focus, however, was not the specifics of writing products but what teachers from diverse backgrounds, with ostensibly different beliefs, learned about all manner of topics—teaching, writing, department norms, school values, etc.—by partnering with others to develop a writing curriculum.

What I was reminded of during this process, is that curriculum development is a means to an end. Traditionally, its focus prioritizes student learning outcomes over teacher learning outcomes. The goal has rarely been for teachers to learn by creating curriculum, perhaps for good reason. The trial and error characteristic of true (teacher) learning could negatively impact

students at integral stages of their writing development. Even so, the learning opportunity that curriculum development affords teachers is one that cannot be discounted.

When I joined the English department at my current institution, I was intrigued by each teacher's respective thinking about teaching and writing. I can recall one occasion when teachers from different training backgrounds clashed in their opinions about writing competencies in a larger discussion about vertical alignment. My traditionally licensed colleagues deemed instructional writing standards a key component of backward design—the benchmarks helped to frame the year-long learning goals that would shape daily instruction. My PhD-touting colleagues expressed their view of standards as constraining: a recipe for what secondary school students should know but not indicative of the skills and ability educators from higher education find valuable. (And certainly not representative of the *real* practice of writing.)

I hadn't known until that moment that my own thinking landed somewhere in the middle. My experience as a journalist showed me that the practice of writing is not always tied to literature, fictional narratives, or persuasive essays, as prioritized by Common Core Standards. In the workplace, my writing looked like clear and concise emails to colleagues, organized status memos to senior producers, strategically formatted call sheets for crew, and modified long-form stories to suit digital platforms. The shape of my writing changed based on my audience and purpose, and rarely (if ever) assumed the analytical nature/structure characteristic of school-based writing. And still, I was prepared to do that writing because of basic skills learned and practiced throughout my many years of schooling.

As a schoolteacher preparing students for the writing required in the next grade, college, and eventually real life, learning outcomes (i.e., writing standards) made sense. How else would

teachers assess student progress? How, as an English department, would we align curriculum and instructional practices to develop student writing ability? How, if not by acknowledging our opposing views, would we get on the same page about teaching and learning given our varying conceptualizations of writing and writing pedagogy?

I asked these questions of myself and others before embarking on this research study. Now that it is finished, I have a better sense of what schools other than my own are doing to develop writing curriculum. Likewise, I have a basis from which to compare my own professional learning.

APPENDIX A

PRE-INTERVIEW SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. I am collecting data on educators' experiences creating, developing, and implementing writing curricula and would like to learn more about your work at your school. This screening questionnaire should take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Thank you in advance for your time!

- 1) What is your name and current job title?
- 2) Is creating, developing, and/or implementing a writing curriculum for your school's English department a core function of your job?
 - Yes
 - No
- 3) Do you collaborate with colleagues to create, develop, and/or implement the writing curriculum at your school site?
 - Yes
 - No
- 4) Is teaching a core function of your job?
 - Yes
 - No
- 5) How long have you been a teacher?
- 6) Where did you receive your training to teach? Check all that apply.
 - College (undergraduate)
 - Credential program
 - Graduate school
 - Professionally (e.g. place of employment)
 - Other _____
 - Not applicable
- 7) Where did you receive your training to teach writing? Check all that apply.
 - College (undergraduate)
 - Credential program
 - Graduate school
 - Professionally (e.g., place of employment)
 - Other _____

8) How much educator autonomy do you have around writing curriculum design and implementation at your school site?

	Complete autonomy	Some autonomy	Little autonomy	No Autonomy
Writing curriculum design				
Writing assessment design				
Writing instructional practices				

9) How would you describe your experiences related to autonomy around curriculum, assessment, and instructional practices?

- I'm satisfied with the autonomy I have
- I would like more autonomy
- I would like less autonomy
- Something else _____

10) I would like to identify, contact, and recruit others at your school site to participate in my research study. Besides you, or if not you, who at your institution would you say is most responsible for writing curriculum design in the English department?

Colleague's name _____

Colleague's email address _____

The next phase of my research consists of two additional 45-minute Zoom interviews about your experiences.

- The first interview focuses on the process for creating and developing the writing curriculum at your school site.
- The second interview focuses on implementing the writing curriculum in your classroom and includes the use of an anonymous writing assignment and corresponding student product.

11) Are you interested in further participation in my study?

- Yes
- No

If yes...

You indicated that you are interested in additional study participation. Respondents selected for interviews will be contacted directly, some time in the next month. Please include the best email to reach you.

Email address _____

That's it! There are no more questions. If you are ready to record your responses, click the submission arrow. Thank you!

APPENDIX B

COVER LETTER FOR SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear _____,

My name is Ke'Yuanda Robertson. I am an English teacher at an independent school and a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA. I am conducting research to learn about private school educators' experiences creating, developing, and implementing writing curricula, and I could use your help! Existing research on writing instruction focuses on public schools. Private schools, however, offer a unique opportunity to understand how educators at autonomous institutions approach the task of developing writing curriculum and learn through that process.

Participation in my research study is voluntary. Your answers to the attached questionnaire will help me to recruit interview participants and your responses to the prompts will take less than five minutes to complete. If eligible and interested, selected respondents will be contacted directly for follow-up interviews.

I am available to answer any questions you may have about the study and can be reached directly at kxxxxxxxxx@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

Ke'Yuanda Robertson

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PARTICIPATION EMAIL

Dear _____,

Again, my name is Ke'Yuanda Robertson. Thank you so much for filling out the initial screening questionnaire! As you know, I am a fellow English teacher at an independent school and a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA.

I am conducting a research study that is focused on the way private school educators approach the task of developing a writing curriculum and what they learn along the way. Based on your questionnaire responses, I would like to invite you to participate in two Zoom interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes each.

- In the first interview, I am hoping to learn more about the process for creating/developing the English department's writing curriculum at your school site.
- In the second interview, I would like to learn more about the way you implement the writing curriculum in your classroom. This interview will take place 1-2 weeks after the first interview. To prepare, I will be asking you to select a writing assignment and corresponding anonymous student product that generated conversation about teaching and learning between you and your colleagues.

If you are willing to complete both interviews, please use this [Calendly link] to schedule our first interview. As a small token of gratitude for your participation, you will receive a \$50 Amazon gift card at the completion of the study.

- Please note that preservation of confidentiality is important to me. Any identifying information you share that might connect to an individual or a specific institution will be redacted from transcripts, and names will be replaced with generic terms such as "the institution", "faculty" or "staff" to protect confidentiality. I will do my best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality.
- Know that study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.
- Your data (including de-identified data) may be kept for use in future research.
- If, at any time, you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than me, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040 or by email: participants@research.ucla.edu.

If you are no longer interested in being interviewed for my study, please let me know by replying via email.

Thank you for your consideration.

Ke'Yuanda Robertson

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #1

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I appreciate your time. As you know, I am an independent school educator and graduate student at UCLA. This interview is an important part of my doctoral dissertation. My goal is to learn about your experiences creating and developing the writing curriculum at your school.

This interview should last approximately 45 minutes. In order to be fully present and attentive to your responses, I would like to digitally record the interview rather than take notes. Do I have your permission to record? At any time you may ask me to pause the recording or delete some or all of the recording after the interview is completed.

When you respond to each open-ended question, please feel free to think aloud, be doubtful, and even pause if necessary. You might have lots of interesting things to say, but to ensure that I get to the handful of questions that are essential to my study, I might have to pause or interrupt you to move on. Please know that you may request to skip a question or stop the interview at any time. Everything we discuss in this interview is confidential so feel free to speak openly. As a reminder, I will not include identifiable demographic information such as your name, others' names, or your school site in my final report. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Writing Values/Conceptualizations

1. How long have you been serving in the role of department chair at your school?
2. Tell me a story about an important conversation you've had around writing or the teaching of writing with your English department colleagues?

- a. What prompted that conversation?
 - b. What challenge were you facing?
 - c. How, if at all, did you collaborate with colleague(s) to navigate that/those challenges?
3. What did you learn / what are you learning from that experience?
 - a. How, if at all, are you using what you learned?

Collaboration

4. In your pre-interview questionnaire, you said that you collaborate with others within your English Department to design/develop the writing curriculum. Tell me (more) about that work.
 - a. Who do you typically collaborate with?
 - b. How do you collaborate? What's your typical process?
 - c. Talk me through a specific example of a conversation you've had (within your department, during a department meeting, for example).
5. What, if anything, have you learned through collaboration?
 - a. What are you still learning?

Existing Writing Curriculum

6. What you shared gives me some sense of the writing curriculum at your school. Can you talk to me about the writing curriculum more broadly? How would you describe it?
 - a. How long has it been in effect?
 - b. What factors would you say contributed to the way the current writing curriculum was created? In what ways?

- c. How does the English department sequence writing goals in grades 7-12?
 - What is the rationale for that sequencing?
- d. What writing products do students produce to demonstrate their ability to meet said writing goals?
- e. How were decisions about those writing goals and products made?
 - What did those conversations between colleagues look and sound like?

Curriculum Revision and Development

- 7. What does the general process of writing curriculum review and revision look like for you and your department?
 - a. How often does the writing curriculum change?
 - b. Why are changes to the writing curriculum typically made?
 - Can you talk me through a specific example?
 - How, if at all, did the department go about creating a shared vision for writing/writing goals?
 - c. What expectations, if any, are there for English department members to participate in the process of writing curriculum review and revision?
 - individually? collaboratively?
 - d. How have you been encouraged to participate in that process?
 - e. How are other teachers in the English department encouraged to participate in that process when they are...
 - new?
 - unfamiliar?

- reluctant?

f. How are changes to the writing curriculum documented?

Wrap-up

8. Is there anything related to the writing curriculum at your school that I haven't asked about that you think I should know?
9. Is there anything else you've learned through the process of creating and developing a writing curriculum that you haven't already communicated?

GENERIC PROBES:

- "Would you expand upon that a bit?"
- "Do you have more to add?"
- "What did you mean by..."
- "Could you please tell me more about.."
- "Can you give me an example of..."

Thank you for sharing your time and experiences with me today. In the next day or two, please be on the lookout for an email from me. Included within the body of that email will be a Calendly link and a request that you book your second, follow-up interview within the next 7-14 days. Prior to your interview, I would like for you to share with me an electronic copy of a writing assignment along with a copy of a corresponding anonymized student product. I will offer more details about those artifacts in my soon-coming correspondence. Thank you again, and I will see you soon.

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL #2

Thank you for agreeing to a second follow-up interview. I appreciate your time. You know that I am a fellow independent school educator and graduate student at UCLA with a strong interest in writing curriculum and instruction. This second interview is to help me learn more about the way you implement an aspect of the English department's writing curriculum in your classroom.

This interview will last approximately 45 minutes. To be fully present and attentive to your responses, I would like to digitally record the interview rather than take notes. Do I have your permission to record? At any time, you may ask me to pause the recording or delete some or all of the recording after the interview is completed.

When you respond to each open-ended question, please feel free to think aloud, be doubtful, and even pause if necessary. You might have lots of interesting things to say, but to ensure that I get to the handful of questions that are essential to my study, I might have to pause or interrupt you in order to move on. Please know that you may request to skip a question or stop the interview at any time. Everything we discuss in this interview is confidential so feel free to speak openly. As a reminder, I will not include identifiable demographic information such as your name, others' names, or your school site in my final report. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Warm-up

The last time we spoke, you shared your perceptions of the writing curriculum at _____ and the way the English department there reviews and revises that curriculum.

1. Is there anything that we spoke about in our last interview that you want to clarify or elaborate on?

Assignment Selection

Today's conversation will center around curriculum implementation. I'd like to start by getting a sense of the assignment you self-selected.

2. Tell me about the assessment and why you chose it.
 - a. What kind of conversations with colleagues did you have about the assignment itself? About the student's performance in response to it?
 - b. How, if at all, did those conversations change your thinking?
 - about writing?
 - about teaching writing?
 - about teaching (generally)?
 - about something else?
 - c. Based on this student's writing product and others', how, if at all, would you change your approach to writing curriculum design and implementation (instruction) in the future? What would you do differently?

Assignment Design and Development

3. How long have you/the English Department been using this assignment to assess student performance?
 - a. When in the school year was this assessment assigned?
 - b. How has the assignment changed over time? Why?
 - c. Who contributed to those changes? In what ways?

- d. What grade-level does it represent?
4. What is the assignment's targeted learning goals?
- a. How did you sequence instruction to help students achieve those learning goals?
 - b. What instructional strategies or approaches do you use when teaching toward these goals?
 - c. How do you scaffold instruction for this assignment for different types of learners?

Instructional Strategies

5. Tell me more about when and where you learned about these strategies for instruction.
- a. What was that/those experience/s like?
 - b. To what extent did that/those experience(s) change your thinking?
 - about your teaching (in general)?
 - about teaching writing?
 - about writing?
 - about something else?

Wrap-up

6. Is there anything else relevant to this assessment, your instructional writing practices, and/or student performance that you would like to share?

GENERIC PROBES:

- "Would you expand upon that a bit?"
- "Do you have more to add?"
- "What did you mean by..."

- “Could you please tell me more about...”
- “Can you give me an example of...”

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me.

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