

Lone star literacy: Phenomenological insights into elementary writing instruction under new
Texas literacy initiatives

by

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B.A., The University of Texas at Austin, 1996
M.Ed., The University of Texas at Arlington, 2012

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

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This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to extend the body of foundational literacy research by examining the perceptions and experiences of third-grade educators teaching English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) under the new literacy initiatives in Texas. In this investigation, the perspectives and experiences of educators will be examined to understand the factors that influence their instructional decision-making processes and teaching practices. Phenomenological methodology and sensemaking theory will be applied to data gathered through a focus group and follow-up interviews.

By exploring teachers’ perceptions and experiences related to writing instruction, these findings support researchers, teachers, and other stakeholders' consideration of evidence-based writing instruction to determine how to best guide practitioners’ instructional practices and overcome the obstacles that impede student growth and achievement.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Suzanne Porath

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Dedication

To my literacy tribe, whose unwavering support and encouragement have been my anchor throughout this journey. I dedicate this work to you with deepest gratitude and love.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Researchers have indicated that reading and writing are intimately connected and have outlined evidence-based instructional methods essential for students to become proficient at literacy in the foundational grades (Abbott et al., 2010; Auray & Lazar, 2020; Graham & Hebert, 2011). Third-grade achievement is particularly interesting because literacy proficiency is linked to profound effects on a student's quality of life beyond graduation (Fiester, 2010). Federal, state, and local policies endorse, mandate, assess, and monitor literacy proficiency. These policies have created a renewed and pressing urgency concerning reading instruction. However, writing instruction continues to be less prioritized, and educators lack awareness and accountability regarding its significance (Abbott et al., 2010; Rietdijk et al., 2018). I focused on discovering how third-grade teachers are impacted by this phenomenon by examining their perceptions and experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas.

Chapter 1 lays the foundational framework for the research by providing a comprehensive overview of several critical components. The chapter begins with a statement of the problem, elucidating the central issue the study will address and its relevance. The research questions are outlined to guide the investigation and focus the inquiry on specific aspects of the problem. The chapter includes the definitions of terms to ensure clarity and consistency of key concepts and terminology used throughout the study. The purpose of the study is articulated to specify the research objectives and goals. The significance of the study is discussed, highlighting the importance of the research findings and their potential impact on existing knowledge and practice. The chapter touches briefly on the details of the methodology, describing the study's research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques. Additionally, I address my stance as the researcher, acknowledging my perspective and potential biases. Finally, the chapter

provides an organization of the study, outlining the structure of the subsequent chapters to guide readers through the research process.

Statement of the Problem

A skilled writer can employ the writing process across a range of tasks and adapt the process to the specific purpose of writing (Serravallo, 2017). Effective writing instruction practices in the elementary grades should be researched and evidence-based to address purpose, process, product, and readability (i.e., fluency, content, conventions, syntax, and vocabulary) and disciplinary literacy (Carroll & Wilson, 2019). Findings from studies conducted on the most effective ways to teach writing in the United States have shown that teaching practices do not align with evidence from research studies regarding instructional methods required for students to become proficient writers (Mo & Troia, 2017; Rietdijk et al., 2018). These findings mean that students in Grades K–5 are not receiving sufficient instruction or practice, which could adversely impact them in and out of the classroom (Kriebel, 2020).

Research Questions and Study Focus

Two primary research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive their experiences with state and district-mandated literacy initiatives?

RQ2: What challenges and tensions do teachers encounter in their writing instruction practices?

These questions aimed to explore the teachers' perspectives on implementing literacy initiatives and their specific difficulties in writing instruction. By addressing these inquiries, the study provided insights into the effectiveness of current literacy policies and their impact on

classroom practices. By answering these questions, the goal was to understand the practical implications and outcomes of literacy initiatives for educators.

Definition of Terms

For clarity and consistency, the following key terms are defined:

English Language Arts and Reading in Texas (ELAR): A new definition was adopted in 2017, reflecting the holistic integration of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and critical thinking across seven interconnected strands: foundational language skills development, comprehension, response, multiple genres, author's purpose/craft; composition, and inquiry/research in teaching and learning (Title 19, Part 2, Chapter 110, Subchapter A)

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA): ESSA is a U.S. federal education law signed by President Obama. ESSA replaced the previous version of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). ESSA governs the nation's K–12 public education policy (ESSA, 2015).

HB3 Reading Academies: House bill 3 (HB3), enacted by the 86th Texas Legislature in June 2019, mandates that all kindergarten through third-grade educators and principals participate in a teacher literacy achievement academy (House Bill 3, 2019).

High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM) per Texas: HQIM is educational resources, materials, and tools that support engaging, rigorous, and standards-aligned instruction. The selection and adoption of HQIM are critical decisions for school districts and educators, as these materials significantly impact the quality of instruction and student learning outcomes (TEA, 2024).

Literacy Initiatives: Literacy initiatives are programs, projects, or efforts to promote and improve literacy skills in education (Henk & Moore, 1992; Thomas, 2022).

Literacy Professional: A literacy professional is trained and experienced in advancing literacy skills by supporting reading and writing proficiency. Their responsibilities encompass various roles and activities, including oversight of literacy programs, curriculum/assessment development, and instructional support for educators and learners (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018).

State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR test): The STAAR test evaluates student achievement according to the TEKS, the established curriculum standards in Texas per TEA (TEA, 2024).

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): TEKS outlines the state-mandated expectations for student knowledge and abilities (TEA, 2024).

Texas Education Agency (TEA): The TEA is the state agency responsible for overseeing public education in Texas. It serves as the administrative arm of the Texas State Board of Education and implements education policies set by the Texas Legislature and the State Board of Education (TEA, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

This study explored third-grade teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas. This investigation aimed to understand the factors influencing their instructional decision-making processes and teaching practices. Specifically, research participants gave their perceptions through an online focus group and individual follow-up interviews. I was interested in understanding how these teachers perceived the effectiveness and impact of these initiatives on their instructional practices and how their experiences teaching writing have changed since the implementation of the new policies. This research can support

thought partnership discussions with decision-makers by illuminating shifts in policy and practice that can be made to make evidence-based writing instruction a priority.

Catalyst for Current Research

My research was built on the findings of an exploratory project on elementary writing practices completed in March 2023. The pilot study was designed to investigate third-grade teachers' perceptions of English language arts instruction and identify and remove barriers that obstruct evidence-based classroom writing instruction.

That study revealed that fear, lack of knowledge, training, resources, and time impacted teachers' writing instruction frequency and quality. Unclear and misaligned messaging regarding expectations and responsibilities without consistent teacher accountability also contributed to their abandonment of writing instruction. The pilot revealed that teachers viewed writing as essential to teaching and learning and desired a standards-based curriculum with high-quality instructional materials. Finally, teachers were confused about how to prioritize professional learning opportunities and unsure of how to dedicate sufficient time and effort to instruction and assessing student learning outcomes. In light of those themes, I pursued a more extensive approach than the pilot study by using different data collection methods to uncover deeper meanings and better understand teachers' experiences.

Research Goal

This study has a qualitative design rooted in phenomenology as the methodology, framed through the theoretical lens of sensemaking. The goal was to gain insight into how third-grade teachers interpret their teaching experiences and construct meaning from their interactions with educational practices, policies, and challenges under the new literacy initiatives in Texas. The findings from this research provided a foundation for exploring their broader implications within

education, highlighting potential avenues for future research, and guiding the shift toward prioritizing evidence-based writing instruction.

Significance of the Study

Teacher Writing Practices

Findings concerning teacher writing practices in the United States have revealed a significant misalignment between teachers' classroom practices and the research-based instructional methods necessary for students to become proficient writers (Mo & Troia, 2017; Osborn, 2018). Writing instruction is often limited to short, formulaic tasks rather than extended, meaningful writing experiences, and teachers spend less than an hour daily on writing instruction, which is insufficient for developing proficient writers (Graham, 2019). Teacher writing practices in Texas and across the nation may not effectively address the challenges students face in writing. Despite a focus on narrative, informative, and persuasive writing in the 2007 Nation's Report Card: Writing assessment, the percentage of eighth-grade students performing at or above the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) proficient level remained low (26%) and stagnant for nearly a decade (31% in 1998 and 2002) (NCES, 2012). Similarly, the 2011 national results indicated that only 27% of eighth and 12th grade students were proficient in writing (NCES, 2017). This trend points to weaknesses in writing instruction, potentially insufficient emphasis on writing skills, ineffective teaching methods, or lack of resources to support students' writing development. Stagnant proficiency rates highlight the need for improved instructional strategies to support student writing achievement.

In 2024, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted an NAEP reading assessment with representative samples of fourth- and eighth-grade students nationwide, including states, the District of Columbia, Department of Defense schools, and 26 large urban

districts. This assessment evaluated students' reading comprehension skills through literary and informational texts. Students also responded to survey questions about their learning opportunities and engagement with reading both inside and outside of school. The average reading scores for the nation at the fourth and eighth-grade levels in 2024 were 2 points lower than in 2022 and 5 points lower than in 2019. NAEP scores were also reported at five specific percentiles to highlight the progress of students across different performance levels: lower-performing (10th and 25th percentiles), middle-performing (50th percentile), and higher-performing (75th and 90th percentiles). The current scores for all percentiles, except for the 90th, were lower in 2024 than those from 2022. Compared to the initial reading assessment in 1992, the average score in 2024 showed no significant change (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1992–2024). Again, writing was not assessed in these reports.

Excluding writing from instruction contradicts both theoretical models and empirical evidence. For instance, a recent large-scale meta-analysis (Kim et al., 2025) demonstrated a strong connection between word reading and spelling (mean $r = .82$ across all tasks, and $r = .92$ when measured reliability is high) and a moderate relationship between reading comprehension and written composition ($r = .44$). My research expands on this existing knowledge by emphasizing the need for continuous improvement in literacy instruction and highlighting the challenges educators encounter when incorporating writing into literacy teaching. This could help advocate for literacy policies that equally prioritize both reading and writing.

Overview of Issues

Current literature on the science of reading highlights key skills essential for literacy development, emphasizing the need to integrate reading and writing activities to strengthen

overall literacy. Similarly, the science of writing stresses the importance of explicit, systematic writing instruction. To foster a comprehensive literacy approach, it is essential to apply the principles of the science of reading in ways that also support and enhance writing instruction. In Texas, many common resources and documents include information on writing, but this information appears to be more theoretical than reflective of actual classroom practice.

A literacy achievement academy was enacted and mandated by the 86th Texas Legislature in June 2019 (House Bill 3, 2019) for all kindergarten through third-grade educators and principals. The Texas Reading Academies' comprehensive model consists of various pathways which could include a blended learning experience, combining online modules, in-person literacy community sessions, and coaching support to facilitate the application of instructional practices in the classroom. Participants were required to complete online assignments and submit artifacts through the Canvas Learning Management System (LMS), attend in-person sessions, and demonstrate mastery of the content through classroom observations and coaching. This commitment was estimated by TEA to involve 42-60 hours of instructional practice, professional development, and ongoing support to help educators enhance their skills and deepen their knowledge of best practices for teaching both reading and writing.

Further research has shown that standardized testing policies, which prioritize reading and math, have resulted in reduced instructional time for writing as teachers face pressure to achieve short-term results in these subjects. Additionally, the absence of standardized writing assessments weakens accountability for writing instruction, making it challenging to track student progress. Consequently, the literacy block often becomes dominated by reading instruction and test-taking strategies, leaving limited time for writing development.

Writing is a complex skill that demands clear instruction and consistent practice. Many teachers struggle with both confidence and competence, often due to inadequate preparation during pre-service training and a lack of ongoing professional development once they enter the classroom. To enhance teacher effectiveness, it is vital to offer targeted professional development and create the necessary infrastructure to support high-quality literacy instruction.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking theory is a concept that has been widely explored in organizational studies, mainly through the work of Weick (1995). The theory involves understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences, especially in complex and changing environments (Weick et al., 2005). Because this study aimed to explore third-grade teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas, sensemaking theory is an appropriate lens to analyze how they interpreted these changes and integrated them into their practices. This theory aligns with my research goal to gain valuable insight into how teachers interpret their educational experiences and construct meaning from their interactions with educational practices, policies, and challenges.

Methodology

Researchers employ phenomenology to explore how individuals perceive and interpret their experiences (Paley, 2017). The aim is to understand participants' subjective realities, which are influenced by their personal context, beliefs, and interactions. Phenomenological research involves gathering rich, qualitative data and offers flexibility, adapting to participants' responses and insights (Peoples, 2021). As such, phenomenology aligns well with the goal of examining teachers' experiences and perspectives on navigating literacy initiatives, providing valuable insights to enhance educational policies and practices (DeHart, 2020).

This phenomenological study focused on third-grade teachers in Texas public schools because third grade is a critical transitional year for developing foundational literacy skills. Also, these teachers were directly affected by the HB3 Reading Academies, making them ideal participants to assess the effectiveness of these policies. The shift to including extended constructed responses (or essays) in the STAAR Reading Language Arts assessments for all grade levels, along with the emphasis on evidence-based writing across all STAAR assessments, created a unique opportunity to examine the impact of teachers' beliefs and practices on writing instruction.

The sample consisted of three participants who participated in the focus group and one-on-one follow-up interviews. The participants had diverse teaching experiences, ranging from 1 to 10 years of teaching third grade, and 5 to 20 years of total teaching experience. The study was conducted during the Fall 2024 semester (October to December) and concluded before the Spring 2025 semester (January 2025). Data collection was conducted in two phases: Phase 1 involved an online focus group to encourage collaborative discussions among teachers, followed by Phase 2, which consisted of individual follow-up interviews with the same research volunteers from the focus group to gather more personalized insights.

As a phenomenological study, the small sample size enabled me to explore each participant's individual experiences, perspectives, and insights in depth, providing rich, detailed data rather than broad generalizations. The three participants were selected for their specific expertise and unique viewpoints, which made them especially valuable for addressing the research questions. Data saturation was achieved through the focus group and follow-up interviews, rendering additional data collection unnecessary.

Sensemaking theory focuses on how individuals create meaning from their experiences, particularly in complex and evolving contexts (Weick et al., 2005). Given that this study explored third-grade teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas, sensemaking theory provided a fitting framework to gain insight into how participants interpreted their teaching experiences and constructed meaning from their interactions with educational practices, policies, and challenges. The analysis through this theoretical lens influenced the coding process by helping to define and refine codes that captured the depth and complexity of the conversations, enhancing the understanding of the teachers' experiences. A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding allowed for the exploration of new themes while anchoring findings in established knowledge.

Limitations

Due to the specified sample for the study, third-grade ELAR teachers in Texas public schools, the results do not apply to populations outside of this specific group. As of the latest available data, 1,026 public school districts in Texas, including traditional independent school districts, charter schools, and special districts, operate public schools. Because of the large number of districts within the state of Texas and newly revised definitions of what constitutes a public school, the results might not accurately reflect the opinions of all members of the included population (Chen, 2022).

While participants are from various regions of the state and possess a range of experiences and backgrounds, the limited sample size could introduce bias or diminish their transferability to other groups with potentially differing demographics and settings. Additionally, since participants chose to volunteer, they could have specific characteristics, interests, or motivations that differ from those who did not volunteer. This can introduce selection bias,

where the sample may not accurately reflect the diversity or range of perspectives within the larger group. As such, this limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings. Future studies could benefit from a more extensive, varied sample, strengthening the external validity and overall robustness of the results.

Delimitations

The following delimitations clarified the focus of the research and provided context for interpreting the findings. Teachers must currently be employed as third-grade ELAR teachers in a Texas public school. Participants were grouped into three categories: 0 to 3 years (*new teacher*), 4 to 19 years (*experienced teacher*), and 20+ years (*very experienced teacher*). The study occurred in the Fall 2024 semester (October-December 2024) and concluded by the beginning of the Spring 2025 semester (January 2025).

Researcher's Stance

Why Third-Grade Teachers?

Third grade is regarded as transitional due to the many academic, cognitive, and social development milestones. The shift in expectations for this age group reflects moving from a foundational skill-building approach to more advanced and independent learning strategies to prepare students for the academic challenges of upper elementary school and beyond (Felton & Akos, 2011). Cognitive growth of children aged 8 and 9 is substantial; findings have shown these students improve problem-solving skills, memory, and comprehension of abstract concepts (Felton & Akos, 2011; LaParo, 2000). As children move through these ages, curriculum standards change from basic reading skills to using reading as a tool for learning and comprehension. High-stakes standardized testing is also introduced to them.

Grade 3 reading proficiency is often a predictor of academic and personal success. By the end of third grade, students who lacked proficiency in reading were 4 times more likely than their proficient peers to drop out of high school and more prone to facing long-term behavioral and mental health challenges (Auray & Lazar, 2020; Fiester, 2010). The urgency to stem these outcomes related to third-grade literacy instruction focuses primarily on reading, although writing is also a critical component of foundational literacy skills. If educators can impact writing practices during this developmental stage, they can help to overcome a significant obstacle to student growth and achievement. If this learning phase is a key predictor of future academic and life success, the interventions should encompass all literacy components, including writing instruction.

State and District-Mandated Professional Learning

The Texas Legislature enacted HB3 to require kindergarten through third-grade teachers to participate in the Texas Reading Academies, meaning they completed either the English Language Arts or Biliteracy pathway (HB3). The English Language Arts path was designated for general and special education teachers who provide instruction predominantly in English, while the Biliteracy path was authorized for bilingual, dual language, and Spanish language arts teachers who provided instruction predominantly in Spanish. Although reading and writing are woven throughout both pathways, module 11 specifically addresses writing instruction. Module 11 builds connections between foundational writing, composition, and convention skills while providing examples of opportunities to support students' daily writing across content areas and offers best practices for instruction in multiple writing genres. This statewide mandated professional learning focused on providing teachers with the foundational knowledge to teach

reading and writing effectively and provided a common language and a shared understanding of professional learning expectations and experiences.

Why Texas?

I have operated within the Texas public education system for over 45 years. I have navigated the system as a student (K–20), a parent (K–16), and over 18 years as a practitioner (K–12); thus, I have first-hand knowledge of teaching and learning practices from multiple perspectives. I have served as a teacher, data analyst/testing coordinator, elementary literacy specialist, assistant principal, principal, and K–12 district literacy coordinator. During my tenure, my team led a seismic shift in the pedagogical approach to literacy (starting mid-pandemic through Spring 2023). This change required reframing the district literacy, biliteracy, and instructional frameworks, large-scale retooling of core and supplemental instructional materials, and empowering instructional leaders with the knowledge, language, and skills to move to evidence-based literacy practices. I chose Texas because I have prior knowledge and experience that allows me to engage in sensemaking within this educational context. Being part of the system also allows me to contribute to its insight and growth.

My True North

Kofi Atta Annan is the 70th secretary-general of the United Nations. Kōichirō Matsuura was a former Director-General of UNESCO. These two world leaders' positions and statements on literacy re-ignited my passion for learning and advocacy about 5 years ago. Annan (1998) described:

Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope. It is a tool for daily life in modern society. It is a bulwark against poverty and a building block of development.... For everyone,

everywhere, literacy is, along with education in general, a basic human right.....Literacy is, finally, the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman, and child can realize his or her full potential. (para. 3)

Matsuura (2009) expressed:

Literacy is inseparable from opportunity, and opportunity is inseparable from freedom.

The freedom promised by literacy is both freedom from—from ignorance, oppression, poverty— and freedom to—to do new things, to make choices, to learn. (para. 1)

Literacy can powerfully transform lives by opening the door to lifelong learning, and this belief is my true north, guiding my passion and purpose in my academic and professional journey.

Academic and Professional Implications

I am pursuing my doctorate in curriculum and instruction to address specific literacy challenges and inform evidence-based practices that support teaching and learning. In my professional role, I provide subject matter expertise and thought partnership to address literacy initiatives and large-scale implementation of structured literacy practices. I actively support various organizations focused on establishing and sustaining equitable literacy practices. The sentiments expressed by Annan and Matsuura also affirmed my decision to support pre-service teachers as a graduate teaching fellow. Strong instructional leadership aimed at building teacher capacity is an effective way to remove barriers that impede student growth and achievement (Cobb et al., 2018).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduces the study and addresses the issue of federal, state, and local policies increasingly prioritizing reading proficiency while writing instruction remains undervalued and lacks sufficient awareness and accountability. Third grade is particularly crucial, as literacy

proficiency at this stage significantly impacts students' lives (Fiester, 2010). The chapter includes an overview of the issues, the problem statement, research questions, the definition of key terms, the purpose of the study, the significance of the problem, the researcher's stance, and the organization of the study.

Chapter 2 is a comprehensive literature review that synthesizes existing knowledge and provides a framework for the current study. This chapter details how phenomenological research and sensemaking theory can be effectively utilized to develop a research agenda that provides a deep understanding of third-grade teachers' perceptions and lived experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas. It also explores relevant studies and theoretical perspectives, highlighting teachers' challenges and opportunities and offering a nuanced lens to examine their instructional practices and beliefs.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology and research design, providing a detailed plan for conducting the research, including the selection of participants, data collection methods, and the data analysis process. This chapter explains the phenomenological approach used to capture the lived experiences of elementary teachers as they navigated the new literacy initiatives in Texas. The chapter also details the data collection methods and highlights the use of thematic coding to identify key patterns and commonalities across the participants' experiences. Additionally, this chapter discusses the role of the researcher, emphasizing the importance of reflexivity and the commitment to minimizing bias throughout the research process. Ethical considerations are carefully considered, with robust measures in place to ensure participant confidentiality and obtain informed consent, thereby safeguarding the integrity of the research and ensuring that the findings are valid, credible, and truly reflective of the teachers' authentic experiences with the new Texas literacy initiatives.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings on teachers' perspectives and experiences as they engaged with the policies and practices associated with the Texas literacy reforms. Organized around the primary themes and subthemes that emerged from the data, the chapter offers a thorough account of the teachers' experiences, highlighting how these themes and subthemes are connected to the primary research questions. A concept map at the beginning of the chapter provides a clear overview of the primary themes and their respective subthemes, allowing readers to easily track the key components of the findings. This structure facilitates a systematic exploration of how the Texas literacy policies have influenced teachers' views and practices, laying the foundation for the detailed discussion in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 offers a thorough analysis and interpretation of the study's findings, providing a deeper examination of the results discussed in Chapter 4. In this chapter, the findings are not only contextualized within the study's objectives but also analyzed in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The chapter then delves into the implications of the findings for both theory and research, highlighting how the study contributes to expanding current knowledge and pointing out emerging questions for future exploration. Following this, the chapter explores the practical implications, offering concrete recommendations and actionable insights that can be applied in real-world educational contexts. The chapter also critically examines the study's limitations, offering a balanced perspective on the findings and identifying areas for improvement in future research. In the final section, the chapter outlines potential avenues for further investigation that could expand on the study's conclusions and address any remaining questions.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter 2 is a thorough review of the literature, synthesizing existing research to build a conceptual foundation for the study. Additionally, it will offer a framework for understanding the study's context by highlighting significant studies, linking theoretical concepts to practical applications, and setting the stage for the research questions and methodology used to develop in-depth insights into third-grade teachers' perceptions and lived experiences teaching writing in the context of Texas' new literacy initiatives.

The literature review is divided into four sections, each focusing on different aspects of literacy and education policy. Section 1: The Science of Reading explores the integration of reading and writing, trends in data related to the science of reading, and national platforms advocating for these approaches. It also examines the effectiveness of literacy instruction, governing guidance, and key assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Texas Writing Pilot Program, Texas House Bill 3, and the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and its redesign. Section 2: The Science of Writing delves into important aspects of writing development, including orthographic knowledge, the role of handwriting, the writing process approach, and the need for direct, explicit instruction in writing. Section 3: Policy and Curriculum Focus highlights the influence of standardized testing policies, the impact of what is tested on what is taught, and the challenge of balancing instructional demands. Finally, Section 4: Teacher Confidence and Competence addresses issues such as the lack of preparation and instructional support for teachers, the challenges of teaching writing, teacher disposition, and the availability of professional resources to support teachers in their practice.

Science of Reading

The science of reading encompasses a broad, interdisciplinary collection of research grounded in scientific evidence addressing various aspects of reading and writing (The Reading League, 2022). The expanding body of research spans over 50 years and includes cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and education to understand how people learn to read and the most effective methods for teaching reading (Petscher et al., 2020). This research focuses on the components of reading development, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The science of reading emphasizes evidence-based practices and instructional approaches shown as effective through rigorous scientific studies. The goal is to ensure that all children, regardless of background, can achieve reading proficiency as assessed by the National Reading Panel (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; The Reading League, 2022).

Some researchers have suggested that reading and writing are reciprocal processes because the skills and knowledge required for reading overlap significantly with those required for writing (Graham, 2020; Sawchuk, 2023; Kim et al., 2025). Explicit writing instruction, including the writing process, sentence and paragraph construction, and spelling, is inextricably linked to reading; and, writing can help foster and deepen comprehension (Graham, 2020).

A discussion evolved across the nation concerning the science of reading research that led to a growing number of states banning the three-cueing system or the Meaning, Syntax, Visual (MSV) in which strategic guessing is done using semantic, syntactical, and grapho-phonetic cues (Goodman, 1989; Smith, 1973), and the emphasis on structured literacy as a conduit for equitable instruction (Schwartz, 2022). However, the United States also has a critical problem

with writing instruction. The mounting lack of writing skills for scholars of all ages and the inadequate writing instruction and practice in elementary schools is concerning (Osborn, 2018). National writing scores have remained essentially unchanged for over 20 years, reflecting the consistency of policies and practices over that period, and is not, as suggested by some, a new issue emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic (Assessments - Writing NAEP, n.d; Mo & Troia, 2017; Tyre & Weinberg, 2020). The pandemic undoubtedly disrupted language and literacy development, but writing achievement issues existed before COVID-19's impact on foundational literacy skills (Sun et al., 2023; Totten, 2004).

Recently, Ahmed et al. (2022) found that early instruction in writing equips students with a valuable asset for learning, communicating effectively, and expressing themselves. Lack of consistent, direct, and explicit writing instruction in kindergarten through fifth grade impeded students from becoming proficient and flexible writers, crucial to academic success and fully engaging in lifelong learning (Rietdijk et al., 2018). This gap in foundational writing instruction underscores the importance of targeted interventions and policy changes, such as those introduced by Texas' new literacy initiatives, to support and improve writing outcomes early in education.

Literacy is the Integration of Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are intimately connected, even in early emergent learning (Graham & Hebert, 2011). For example, decoding entails converting printed words into sounds when reading, while encoding involves the reverse process—using individual sounds to construct and write words when spelling and writing (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2015). In a review, Graham showed that teaching children to write complex sentences and compose various types of texts

enhances their ability to read and comprehend a broader range of written material (Graham, 2020). However, when teaching reading, teachers are not simultaneously teaching writing.

Reading and writing are distinct skills with unique and overlapping aspects (Kim et al., 2025; Shanahan, 2015). The reciprocal and recursive nature of the subskills correlate, but making sense of and explicitly teaching the parts that do not is critical. A lack of understanding and pedagogical content knowledge has created an imbalance in literacy instruction (Higgs-Coulthard & DeFauw, 2022; Kim et al., 2025). A bifurcation in learning reading and writing exists because they are often taught as separate subjects by different teachers, or, even more often, writing instruction is omitted altogether (Graham et al., 2023).

This work is being explored by a growing number of educators and researchers. Wasowicz (2021) expanded on the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and Scarborough's reading rope (2001) by creating the Language Literacy Network to illustrate how language comprehension, language expression, written word recognition, and written word production subskills combine to produce skillful reading and writing. The information also aligns with Sedita's (2019) writing rope, a framework for understanding the complex skills and strategies contributing to proficient writing. These examples have reinforced the knowledge that reading and writing are essential for effective literacy development.

The Simple View of Reading (SVR) is a well-known theoretical framework that breaks down reading comprehension into two main components: decoding and language comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). It suggests that reading comprehension is the product of these two abilities working together. The equation is typically represented as:

Reading Comprehension = Decoding × Language Comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986)

Scarborough's Reading Rope (2001) is a visual model that illustrates the different skills involved in reading and how they weave together to support fluent reading. It is often represented as a rope made up of multiple strands, with each strand symbolizing a key component of reading development. The rope metaphor emphasizes that just as a strong rope is created by the combination of many threads, effective reading relies on the integration of various skills. The model has two primary strands: word recognition and language comprehension, each of which is broken down into smaller elements. As these strands intertwine, they form a strong "rope" that underpins fluent reading. Scarborough's model demonstrates that skilled reading is not merely about decoding words or understanding isolated pieces of language, but about combining these skills to fully comprehend the text. It underscores how word recognition and language comprehension work together to enable fluent and meaningful reading.

Sedita's Writing Rope (2019) is a visual model that highlights the interconnected skills essential for effective writing development. Much like Scarborough's Reading Rope, it underscores that writing proficiency relies on multiple strands that work in unison to create skilled writing. The model consists of several key elements, each representing a vital component of writing. When these strands are woven together, they form a cohesive structure for writing success. The model emphasizes that effective writing involves not just mechanical skills like spelling and handwriting, but also cognitive and organizational abilities necessary for crafting clear, purposeful, and well-structured work. Similar to the Reading Rope, Sedita's Writing Rope illustrates the crucial role of integrating these diverse skills to achieve writing proficiency.

The Wasowicz Language and Literacy Network (2021) is a framework designed to enhance language and literacy development across diverse educational environments. It incorporates key elements of language and literacy instruction to ensure students acquire the

essential skills for effective communication, reading, and writing. The model focuses on several core components that work in tandem to promote holistic literacy development. Emphasizing the interconnectedness of these elements, the network views language and literacy growth as a dynamic, multifaceted process. The Simple View of Reading, Scarborough's Rope, Writing Rope, and Language Literacy Network are comprehensive models for understanding the complex interplay of skills and processes involved in literacy development, offering valuable insights into how reading, writing, and language skills interconnect and support one another in the development of proficient literacy. These are models that can be referenced when considering practices for literacy planning, preparation, and instruction.

Data and Science of Reading Trends

In 2023, over 50% of the United States passed laws mandating a science of reading approach for teaching literacy, indicating renewed momentum and an acknowledgment of the value of evidence-based instructional practices (Hollingsworth, 2023; Schwartz, 2022). These policies often focused on teacher training and licensure, early literacy screening, dyslexia laws, reading intervention, and classroom literacy instruction, which were aligned with what is known to be effective, according to the research. The Teachers College Reading and Writing Center dissolved the long-standing Reading and Writing Project, which started in 1981 and pivoted to the Advancing Literacy unit to offer updated professional development on reading and writing (Schwartz, 2023). The expanded national policy regarding the science of reading and the shift in focus by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Center suggested a widespread movement to change the landscape of literacy instruction.

Literacy National Platforms and Messaging

Online platforms were flooded with podcasts, webinars, and blogs devoted to deepening content and revealing the details of structured literacy. Nationwide literacy and equity events around documentaries such as *Sold a Story*, *Right to Read*, and *The Truth About Reading* were prolific (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021). As the surge in engagement and discussion around the science of reading increased, it quickly became erroneously limited to and used synonymously with phonics (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021). The science of reading extends far beyond phonics to other critical foundational skills and best practices for comprehending and communicating ideas (The Reading League, 2022).

Heightened awareness and a renewed sense of urgency related to a socially just science of reading (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021) catalyzed thought partnership and roundtable discussions about equitable instructional practices linked to curriculum and standards, assessment, and teacher preparation. Again, however, the primary focus was on reading, and writing was disregarded as a critical component of foundational literacy skills.

Effective Literacy Instruction

Listening and reading are receptive skills, and speaking and writing are generative skills. Effective literacy instruction should integrate all four skills, providing a balanced and comprehensive approach to language acquisition. By engaging students in activities that develop receptive and generative skills, educators can help them become proficient and confident communicators (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; The Center for Literacy & Learning, n.d.).

Governing Guidance for Literacy Achievement

Empirically validated research, federal and state policies, and national and local literacy initiatives consistently support that the ability to write is as essential to learning as the ability to read (Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2022). The ESSA (2015) emphasized a focused and ongoing effort to enhance literacy achievement. This law provided states with resources to establish top-tier literacy instruction and a range of interventions and support for students who faced challenges in reading and writing (ESSA, 2015). In 2022, approximately 75% of children and adolescents nationwide could not create texts that met the standards expected for their grade level. The 2022–23 NAEP long-term trend results show a 4-point decline in reading scores for 13-year-olds since 2019–20 and a 7-point decline compared to 2011–12 (Irwin et al., 2024).

National Assessment of Educational Progress

Since its inception in 1969, the NAEP has delivered results that enhance education policy and practices. Mandated by Congress, the NAEP has provided crucial insights into student academic achievement and learning experiences across different subjects and grade levels (Bourque, 1999; NAEP, n.d.). NAEP is the nation’s report card and is managed by NCES under the U.S. Department of Education and the IES. The independent National Assessment Governing Board, appointed by the Secretary of Education, provides oversight of the NAEP. NAEP results are accessible nationwide, to individual states, and 27 urban districts.

Finn (2022) stated:

NAEP subtly causes education in the United States to improve by providing educators with feedback on what groups of their pupils can and cannot do in the subjects that matter most, and it provides this in ways that illustrate how many are good (or not) at various elements of those subjects. (p. 3)

Nevertheless, NAEP has had a 21-year gap in assessing writing for fourth graders, whose last reported results were in 2002. In 2017, fourth and eighth graders took NAEP writing tests; however, NAEP did not release the results due to the new mode of testing (i.e., laptops) and were deemed incomparable to data from 2011 (Assessments - Writing | NAEP, n.d.; Mo & Troia, 2017). Therefore, it is reasonable to question the state of writing achievement in the United States over time, as the lack of a national writing assessment suggests that writing is not considered a priority.

In 2024, the NAEP evaluated the reading comprehension abilities of fourth- and eighth-grade students nationwide, including those in 26 large urban districts. The assessment measured student performance in both literary and informational texts and featured survey questions on reading engagement. Declines were seen across most percentiles, and the 2024 average score showed no significant change compared to the initial reading assessment in 1992. Notably, the NAEP continues to mandate that reading and math data be reported for elementary grades every 2 years, but as of 2024, they have issued no information regarding future writing assessments or writing data.

Texas Writing Pilot Program

The Texas Education Agency committed to ensuring the delivery of effective writing instruction. The Texas Writing Pilot Program (TEA, 2016) resulted from House Bill 1164 in 2015, and its purpose was to “explore alternative, authentic methods of assessing writing in the state of Texas” (TEA, 2022b p. 21). During the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years, school districts across 16 regions participated in state-initiated pilot activities in Grades 4 and 7, and in English I and II classrooms. The pilot study collected and scored student writing samples generated during the academic year. Throughout the school year, students engaged in writing

activities integrated seamlessly into classroom instruction, encompassing the full scope of the TEKS writing standards (TEA, 2016). Over time, students compiled their work into digital portfolios to demonstrate their involvement in writing and proficiency across various genres. The outcomes from the program were shared, but the pilot was never scaled or expanded to the rest of the state (TEA, 2016).

Texas House Bill 3

The Texas Legislature enacted Texas HB 3 in 2019; the bill mandated that kindergarten through third-grade teachers, including those in special education and principals, attend a teacher literacy achievement academy by the conclusion of the 2022–2023 school year. Educators enrolled in the HB3 Reading Academies completed the Science of Teaching Reading pathway and either the ELAR or Biliteracy Pathway for teachers of multilingual and emergent bilingual students. Although reading and writing are woven throughout, module 11 of the Reading Academies is exceptionally robust and specifically designed to address all aspects of writing instruction (i.e., purpose, product, and process). However, none of the instructional materials approved by the State Board of Education Review and Adoption Process contained tested instructional practices for high-quality writing instruction (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2020).

State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) is a standardized test to assess students' proficiency in applying the knowledge and skills outlined in the TEKS for each tested grade level, subject, and course. Following the passage of House Bill (HB) 3906 by the 86th Texas Legislature in 2019, the STAAR test was redesigned to reflect the classroom learning experience (TEA, 2024). Part of this change was eliminating the separate writing tests designated for 4th, 7th, English I, and English II to include an extended-constructed response

(i.e., essay) and short-constructed response questions at every grade level and across content areas (math, science, and social studies) instead. In the essay task, students were prompted to write in either informational or argumentative modes in response to a designated reading selection (TEA, 2024).

Texas STAAR Redesign

In 2022, TEA stated:

Beginning with the 2022–2023 school year, Reading Language Arts assessments will assess both reading and writing (Grades 3–8 English, Grades 3–5 Spanish, and English I and II End-of-Course) and will include new question types and an extended constructed response, or essay, at every grade (TEA, 2024b, para. 4).

This required evidence-based writing—on all tests at all grade levels—provided an opportunity to examine the implications and impact of beliefs and behaviors on writing instruction.

In Texas, until 2022, fourth grade was the only state-tested writing grade in elementary. Although elementary is typically self-contained, many campuses departmentalized and separated fourth-grade literacy into two subjects—fourth-grade reading and fourth-grade writing. The purpose of having two teachers in English reading language arts was to ease the burden of teachers being responsible for preparing students for more than one tested subject.

Unfortunately, the standing practice has placed adult preferences above student needs and research-based best practices (Jerrim et al., 2023). Reading and writing are intimately connected (Graham & Hebert, 2011) in the fundamental findings of research and the state standards and strands. Deconstructing and unraveling the reading and writing components into individual courses may seem efficient but ineffective (Graham, 2020).

The Science of Writing

Orthographic Knowledge

Orthographic knowledge, derived from extensive and cumulative research, encompasses understanding a language's writing system, including the rules and patterns that dictate how letters and letter combinations represent sounds and form words. Orthographic mapping is a method to show how readers form connections between written letters and sounds, facilitating the recognition of words as whole units, which is critical for reading and writing proficiency as it allows individuals to decode (read) and encode (spell) text accurately and efficiently (Ehri, 2014). Orthographic knowledge consists of 5 key components (alphabetic principle, spelling patterns, morphology, orthographic rules, and word recognition), which impact reading development, spelling proficiency, fluency, writing, and composition.

Graham and Santangelo conducted a meta-analysis that indicates that spelling instruction, which includes teaching orthographic rules and patterns, improves spelling, reading, and writing performance (Graham et al., 2014). Teachers should provide explicit instruction in orthographic rules and patterns, such as teaching common letter-sound correspondences, spelling patterns, and morphological rules, and integrate orthographic knowledge instruction with literacy activities, for example, incorporating spelling activities into writing assignments to help students apply what they learn in meaningful contexts. By understanding and teaching the rules and patterns of the writing system, educators can help students develop the skills necessary for fluent and accurate reading and writing (Ehri, 2014).

Teachers often attribute this instruction to early childhood or foundational grades (PK–2). Third graders also exhibited a need for explicit instruction as they progress through the stages of writing development to deepen their understanding of grammar, spelling, and mechanics while

simultaneously learning to assess writing and conduct research (Asberg Johnels et al., 2024). This information suggests that writing instruction must be scaffolded over time, with ongoing support to meet the evolving needs of students as they move into more complex writing tasks.

Handwriting and Literacy Development

Handwriting is a critical skill with significant implications for cognitive development, literacy, and academic achievement (Dinehart, 2015). Despite the rise of digital technology, the benefits of handwriting instruction are well-documented, emphasizing the need for its continued emphasis in educational curricula. Effective handwriting instruction involves systematic and explicit letter formation, practice, and feedback teaching. Some educators enhanced students' overall literacy skills and academic success by integrating handwriting with other literacy activities and utilizing supportive technology (Dinehart, 2015). Students who wrote more fluently produced better-quality written texts (Berninger et al., 2006), and those who received regular handwriting instruction performed better in spelling, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and writing composition tasks (Graham et al., 2002).

In 2017, several debates took place regarding the handwriting curriculum in Texas. The State Board of Education considered the relevance of handwriting curriculum in digital society while preparing to modify the ELAR standards (Wallace, 2019); for example, topics such as whether instruction should include making penmanship/cursive handwriting purposeful and intentional and the lack of time to teach it in the already too short school day (Prior, 2019). In 2019, Texas reintroduced cursive writing in the TEKS for elementary students beginning in the 2019-2020 school year (Wallace, 2019). Shortly after, the pandemic and abrupt school closures catapulted students and teachers into virtual learning, and educational technology and keyboarding skills have been emphasized over penmanship/cursive handwriting.

The Writing Process Approach

Some researchers described the writing process as a series of recursive stages (prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) that writers undergo to produce coherent and polished pieces of writing (Atwell, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1981). When teachers and students comprehensively understand the writing process, it significantly improves the efficiency of writing instruction and students' writing skills and attitudes toward writing (Kellogg et al., 2013).

In a study of the writing development of elementary students, Abbott et al. (2010) demonstrated that an interplay occurs among different levels of language: phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, and discourse. Therefore, teachers must provide explicit teaching and modeling of each stage. Moreover, this instruction could include scaffolding to support students at different writing proficiency levels and help them brainstorm, plan, draft, revise, and edit their writing while receiving constructive and actionable feedback from teachers and peers (Cho & MacArthur, 2011).

The Lead4ward Snapshot tool provides educators with a summary of specific academic standards and skills in various content areas. Many Texas school districts use these snapshots and other resources, such as scaffolds, academic vocabulary, and teacher-student learning reports, to adjust teaching strategies, target interventions, and support student learning. As with anything, the process and not solely the tools help educators assess student learning and adjust their instructional practices to improve outcomes. The Lead4ward Snapshot standard 3.11 corresponds to the writing process and states, "The student uses the writing process recursively to compose multiple texts that are legible and uses appropriate conventions" (Ball, 2024, p. 4). If this tool is being used to inform instructional decisions, identify areas of strength and weakness,

and track progress over time, these specifications should be reflected in the expectations of teachers.

Direct, Explicit Instruction in Writing

Similar to reading, writing achievement increased when taught explicitly. Both are complex and require flexible and critical thinking, genre knowledge, and proper application of multiple skills and strategies (Laminack & Wadsworth, 2015). Becoming skilled at writing is a developmental journey that unfolds gradually. Teachers begin with oral language development in early childhood and continue K–20 in terms of grade levels. Research from correlational and experimental studies suggested that allocating ample time for writing leads to improved writing abilities for students (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

Students thrive with explicit instruction in both reading and writing, benefiting greatly from learning to integrate these skills. This instruction included techniques such as summarizing text ideas in writing, synthesizing ideas from multiple texts, and using texts as models and sources for their writing (Hochman et al., 2017). Collaborative writing supports students in learning how to write and spell under teachers' guidance. Shared writing is when teachers and students collaborate to create a piece that translates students' spoken words into written text. Additionally, interactive writing involves students in a structured collaboration where they take turns contributing to the writing process. When teachers wrote and thought aloud when leading discussions, they encouraged students to contribute, expand, and sequence ideas (Roth & Guinee, 2011; Storch, 2005; Troia, 2006).

Policy and Curriculum Focus

Standardized Testing Policies

Standardized testing policies have led to reduced instructional time for writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010) because these tests heavily emphasize and create pressure to ensure short-term results in reading and math (Applebee & Langer, 2011). The absence of standardized writing assessments reduces accountability for writing instruction and makes measuring student learning and outcomes difficult (Kiuvara et al., 2009). For this reason, education leaders must advocate and support prioritizing writing instruction. Strong administrative support of writing instruction correlated with emphasis on writing (Brindle et al., 2016).

What is Tested is Taught

Although writing is a critical skill, it is often neglected due to beliefs concerning principles and practices at the state, district, campus, and classroom levels (Coker et al., 2018). Writing standards appear in every state curriculum; however, in 2002, the NCLB only mandated that math and reading be tested in grades 3–8 and at least once in grades 10–12. Typically, in the classroom, what is tested is taught, which means that in Texas, writing was considered a task for fourth- and seventh-grade teachers for many years. The 2022-2023 STAAR redesign boasted alignment to the classroom experience and, more recently, required evidence-based writing instruction in informational, argumentative, or correspondence with a 5-point rubric assessment based on the development of ideas and language conventions for all tested elementary grade levels (third to fifth grades; TEA, 2002.). The impact of this instruction and assessment on student writing in classrooms is currently unknown.

Balancing the Load

Prioritizing topics is determined by the instructional minutes allotted in the literacy block. Sometimes, adult preferences override student needs, and the departmentalizing or separating of reading and writing in elementary school occurs to make content loads fair and equitable for teachers (Nadelson et al., 2021). To refocus writing, some researchers suggest that educators examine the touchstones of effective writing instruction and engage in classroom practices that support diverse student writers to bring back joy to writing experiences (David & Jansky, 2018).

Teacher Confidence and Competence

When reviewing seminal and current research, several issues emerge consistently. The hidden curriculum, which consists of the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, and norms embedded within the educational environment (Alsubaie, 2015), suggests that writing instruction is not a priority, teaching writing is challenging, and teachers lack the skill and will (Hall & White, 2019; Harward et al., 2014). As a result, students often received insufficient guidance, leading to gaps in their writing proficiency. This challenge contributed to teachers feeling less competent in their writing instruction abilities, undermining their confidence and creating a cycle of reluctance to engage with writing pedagogy. Over time, this lack of confidence resulted in diminished motivation to improve instructional practices or seek professional development in writing (Glass & Marzano, 2018; Mathew, 2018).

Lack of Preparation and Instructional Supports

Teachers lacked the confidence and competence to teach writing due to poor preparation in pre-service programs and the lack of quality professional development after officially entering the classroom (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Pressley, 2007). Teachers lacked pedagogical content knowledge and attempted to teach writing without context (process/purpose/product) (Moats et

al., 2006). This knowledge gap was compounded by insufficient high-quality instructional materials to support writing instruction. Deficiency in the pragmatic support of the implementation of writing practices also made it difficult for educators to identify quality aligned writing curricula for Tier 1 core instruction (Moody & Holtz, 2024).

Teaching Writing is Hard!

Writing instruction is challenging; inexperienced writers, including teachers and students, may struggle with letter formation, spelling, word choice, organization, content, syntax, and vocabulary (Ahmed et al., 2022). Writing is a cognitively demanding task that does not develop innately, requiring substantial instruction and practice for students to attain proficiency (Graham & Herbert, 2011). Additionally, assessment and feedback are not provided consistently, and the development of a supportive writing environment is lacking (Coker et al., 2018). Teachers without a strong literacy background assumed that if they focused on reading, the writing would develop through activities such as reader response and journaling (Bingham & Gerde, 2023; Hochman et al., 2017). Teachers sometimes expected that when children struggled to read, forcing them to learn to write was too frustrating and stressful (Bingham & Gerde, 2023; Hall & White, 2019).

Teacher Disposition

Administrators often use teachers' philosophical beliefs and dispositions to place them in specific grade levels and content (Paris, 2012). An enthusiastic, organized, and patient individual might be moved into a kindergarten position based solely on those characteristics rather than demonstrated instructional capability. A similar logic can be used when determining who should teach tested grades or dreaded subjects, such as writing. This mindset leads to teaching and learning practices that are unreliable and ineffective. To help teachers gain confidence and

proficiency, professional learning combined with the infrastructure needed for high-quality literacy instruction should be in place (Paris, 2012).

Professional Resources

The Reading League supports a variety of stakeholders seeking guidance and support for evidence-based, equitable practices (The Reading League, 2022). ILA's (2018) *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals* outlines the criteria for developing and evaluating preparation programs for literacy professionals. As literacy professionals, teachers should have strong ELAR pedagogical content knowledge, which will allow them to “deeply, flexibly, and skillfully” represent this knowledge “in intellectually honest ways to a wide range of students” (Ball, 2011, p. 4).

Theoretical Framework

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking theory has been most notably and extensively explored in organizational studies. This theory rests on eight key tenets that allow researchers to examine how individuals interpret and construct meaning from their experiences, especially in complex and evolving situations (Weick, 1995). The act of sensemaking organizes flux to structure and makes sense of changes, beginning with noticing, bracketing, and isolating significant elements. This process involves labeling, where meaning is assigned through categorization. Sensemaking is also retrospective, relying on past events to understand their significance, and it includes making assumptions to guide interpretation. Sensemaking is social and systemic, occurring within social contexts and frameworks, and it drives action, as decision-making is based on interpreted meaning. Moreover, sensemaking is organized through communication, creating shared understanding through dialogue (Weick et al., 2005).

Essentially, sensemaking transforms circumstances into a clear, verbalized understanding that drives action by constructing meaning through the continuous interaction of information and interpretation (Weick et al., 2005). For understanding teachers' perceptions and responses to state and district mandates, sensemaking theory provided a lens to analyze how they interpreted these changes and integrated them into their practices. This framework illuminates how teachers negotiated, adapted, and responded to external pressures while shaping their instructional approaches.

This theory is critical because, in the past decade, we have seen extraordinary efforts to reform the content and quality of instruction in American classrooms (Spillane et al., 2002). If skillful fidelity, as opposed to compliance, is the policy goal, then understanding the conditions necessary to make sustainable change possible is essential. This process begins with understanding how teachers at the local level make meaning of the demands and directives. Applying sensemaking to the field of education allows exploration regarding how educators interpret and enact policies by providing insight into how teachers' cognition and interpretation of policies affect their implementation in the classroom (Spillane et al., 2002)

Because research on school reform has often centered on how initiatives impacted school improvement or how teachers implemented specific policies, Coburn (2001) used sensemaking theory to explore how teachers adapted, adopted, combined, and ignored messages and pressures about reading instruction in their professional communities. Coburn surmised that the influence might run the other way: rather than policies strictly determining teachers' practices, teachers interpreted, adapted, and sometimes even reshaped reforms as they applied them in their classrooms (Coburn, 2001). Action was driven by micro-momentary decisions in which individuals perceived and selected information from their environment, interpreted it, and then

acted upon their interpretations. These actions, repeated over time, contributed to developing culture, social structures, and routines. (Coburn, 2001; Weick et al., 2005).

Chapter 2 Summary

Recent educational policies have emphasized literacy initiatives at the state, district, and campus levels to shape instructional practices (Schwartz, 2022). However, there is growing concern about how these policies are perceived and implemented by teachers (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2020). While reading instruction is prioritized, writing is often neglected, negatively affecting overall literacy outcomes (Coker et al., 2018). These initiatives, while aiming to improve literacy, may also create challenges in teachers' writing instruction (Ahmed et al., 2022). This research examines teachers' perceptions of literacy initiatives and the challenges they face in writing instruction, offering insights into potential areas for improvement in literacy education.

The science of reading is a body of evidence that integrates findings from cognitive science, psychology, linguistics, and education to improve reading instruction, especially for struggling readers (The Reading League, 2022). It emphasizes the need for explicit, systematic instruction and highlights the reciprocal benefits of reading and writing for literacy development (Graham, 2020; Kim et al., 2025). However, writing instruction often receives less attention than reading in education, and there is a need for systemic change, better professional learning, and improved assessment practices to elevate writing's importance (Higgs-Coulthard & DeFauw, 2022).

Despite ongoing research into literacy instruction, a gap remains between evidence-based practices and classroom application (Pressley, 2007; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Current research reveals that U.S. classroom writing instruction does not align with best practices (NCES, n.d.),

and a significant gap exists in understanding teachers' lived experiences with writing instruction. This study explored how third-grade teachers in Texas engaged with literacy initiatives and writing instruction, offering insights into their priorities and unmet needs, which could inform further research and improvements in literacy education.

The goals of teaching literacy should include striving to create an engaged community of writers who practice daily, employ the writing process for diverse purposes, and demonstrate fluency in handwriting, spelling, and constructing sentences (WWC | Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers, n.d.). Research supports early childhood instruction and systematic teaching of writing skills throughout elementary school, including handwriting, spelling, grammar, and composition. Incorporating writing activities into reading reinforces learning and supports overall literacy development. This outcome suggests that teachers should regularly assess students' writing skills and provide constructive feedback to guide improvement and address individual needs. As needed, targeted interventions for students with writing difficulties, such as dysgraphia, could be implemented to support their learning and continued development.

An important goal to consider is operationalizing how the science of reading lays the foundation for a quality system of writing instruction. To do this, fully grasping the significance of pedagogical content knowledge and the complexities of bridging theory to practice becomes essential (Higgs-Coulthard & DeFauw, 2022). Critically revisiting this discussion and engaging in a continuous improvement cycle makes writing instruction a priority while guiding practitioners' work in supporting students' writing development.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore third-grade teachers' perceptions and experiences in teaching writing amidst the new literacy initiatives implemented in Texas. This investigation uncovered the factors that shaped their instructional decision-making processes and teaching practices. A thorough examination of the teachers' insights and experiences focused on how these new initiatives impacted their approach to writing instruction. Chapter 3 provides a detailed overview of the methodology designed to address the research questions and provides a clear framework for understanding the influences on teachers' perceptions and practices.

This chapter presents the core research questions and describes the alignment of the methodological principle and theoretical framework, phenomenology and sensemaking theory. Chapter 3 also details the methodology by describing the study's research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques. The chapter details the systematic and transparent procedures followed in conducting the research, including the measures taken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings and analysis. Lastly, the chapter addresses my role as the researcher, including strategies for managing personal biases to uphold objectivity and integrity throughout the study.

Research Questions

This study was designed to explore third-grade teachers' lived experiences of teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas by examining two key questions: How do teachers perceive their experiences with literacy initiatives as mandated at various levels of the education system? And what do teachers identify as the challenges and tensions in their writing instructional practices? The goal was to uncover challenges and the contextual factors

influencing their instructional decision-making process and teaching practices. This information can aid in thought partnership discussions with decision-makers on writing policy and practices to illuminate possible shifts to prioritize evidence-based writing instruction.

Methodological Foundations

Current Body of Research

Researchers have emphasized the strong connection between reading and writing and that evidence-based instructional methods can support students to become proficient at literacy in the foundational grades (Graham & Hebert, 2011). Third grade is particularly interesting because literacy proficiency is linked to profound effects on a student's quality of life beyond graduation (Fiester, 2010). Federal, state, and local policy has been enacted to endorse, mandate, assess, and monitor literacy proficiency. The research and policy mandates have created a renewed urgency concerning reading instruction; however, writing instruction has not been a priority and suffers from a lack of awareness and accountability.

The current data on teacher writing practices in the United States indicates that classroom instruction does not align with research-based instructional methods that support students to become proficient writers (NCES, n.d2022.; Sedita, 2023). A considerable gap in research exists concerning the details of teachers' lived experiences, which can provide an in-depth view of how this lack of best practices manifests for them and potentially be an essential lever for shifting the paradigm. This study aimed to understand how teachers experience literacy initiatives and writing instruction while exploring priorities and examining unmet needs among a target population, third-grade teachers in Texas public schools. The findings could serve as a call to action for other stakeholders in the educational system to examine this phenomenon within their

context, such as state and grade level, and inform possible changes that could make evidence-based writing instruction a priority.

Why Phenomenology?

Researchers use phenomenology to investigate how people perceive and make sense of their experiences (Paley, 2017). The goal was to understand participants' subjective reality, uniquely shaped by their personal context, beliefs, and interactions. Using this method, researchers can obtain rich, detailed accounts that reveal more profound insights into participants' experiences. Phenomenological research involves collecting detailed, qualitative data and allows for flexibility and adaptation based on the participants' responses and insights (Peoples, 2021). Because this research aimed to explore how teachers perceived their experiences with literacy initiatives, it was essential to understand their experiences and the complexities they face under the new literacy initiatives.

This approach is appropriate because I focused on teachers' perspectives to address the gap in existing research regarding the misalignment of research, policy, and practice. Rather than add to existing theories of why writing instruction has been abandoned, the goal was to amplify the voices of those directly responsible for writing instruction. Thus, phenomenology aligned with the goals of exploring teachers' experiences and perspectives on navigating the literacy initiatives to provide valuable insights to improve educational policies and practices (DeHart, 2020).

Deciphering the Data: Sensemaking Theory

To gain insight into teachers' perceptions and experiences, I selected sensemaking theory as it provides a framework for understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences, especially when navigating complex and uncertain situations (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking theory is particularly relevant for understanding how teachers made sense of literacy initiatives because it emphasizes the importance of personal experience, context, and interaction in the process of decision-making. Teachers did not simply adopt policies in a straightforward manner; instead, they interpreted and adapted them based on their professional judgment, classroom realities, and the particular needs of their students. As DeHart (2020) suggests, this process of sensemaking is critical in shaping how teachers understand and engage with literacy initiatives, and it can reveal insights into the challenges, tensions, and contradictions they may experience in aligning these initiatives with their own practices and beliefs. By using sensemaking theory, we can better grasp how teachers navigated the complexities of educational reforms and how their individual and collective interpretations influenced the effectiveness of literacy instruction.

Research Design

This study aimed to capture participants' perceptions and experiences and the meanings they attribute to those happenings, events, and practices to better understand how teachers perceive and make sense of their educational experiences in writing instruction. Thus, in both data collection and analysis, I employed phenomenology to understand the core of participants' lived experiences (Dowling, 2007) and the lens of sensemaking theory to explore how individuals interpret and navigate complex situations (Weick, 1995). By integrating these approaches, I gained a deeper understanding of the processes through which teachers shaped their instructional practices and responses to writing instruction.

Site Selection

For this research study, participants were recruited across Texas through social media education platforms. As this was a virtual study, with the focus group and interviews conducted

via Zoom, traditional site selection was not applicable. Instead, the focus was on ensuring that the digital environment and participants' online experiences aligned with the research objectives (Murukutla & Puri, 2020). This approach proved highly effective, as in-person meetings were not feasible due to geographical constraints, time limitations, and other logistical factors.

Participant Selection

In phenomenological research, participant selection focuses on identifying individuals with firsthand, meaningful experiences related to the studied phenomenon (Peoples, 2021). For this study, which aimed to explore third-grade teachers' perceptions and experiences, both purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to intentionally select teachers able to provide rich, detailed insights into their experiences with teaching writing under the new Texas literacy initiatives. A self-selected convenience sample consists of participants who chose to participate based on their interests or availability, making the sampling process voluntary and convenient for the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016). Recruitment was facilitated through weekly social media posts featuring a research volunteer flyer with an embedded QR code and link to the study information, research volunteer criteria, and researcher information.

The focus group consisted of three participants who also participated in the one-on-one follow-up interviews. This group size was small enough to allow meaningful contributions from each participant while being large enough, based on stratified sampling, to capture diverse perspectives and a range of viewpoints (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The teachers were in various regions of Texas and had diverse backgrounds and pathways that led them to teach 3rd grade ELAR in public school.

Research Volunteers

All research volunteers were third-grade teachers in various public schools throughout different regions in Texas. The participants consisted of educators with diverse routes to teaching, including traditional university programs and alternative certification. The range of classroom experience was from 5 to 20 years, with 1 to 10 years of teaching third grade. Each participant's unique background and perspective provided valuable insights into implementing literacy initiatives and their impact on third-grade teaching practices.

Table 3-1- Research Volunteer Profiles

Name	Years Experience	Years in 3 rd Grade	Pathway
Elena	20	5	alternatively certified and advanced degree
Sam	10	5	traditional route
Chris	5	1	alternatively certified

Research Procedures

This study used a two-phase procedure to collect insights from third-grade public school teachers in Texas. In the first step, data was gathered through an online focus group, facilitating a collaborative discussion among teachers about their experiences and perceptions of literacy initiatives. The focus group questions addressed various aspects of the new literacy initiatives in teaching writing. Participants were asked to share their overall thoughts on the initiative's effectiveness, identify strengths and beneficial aspects for students, and discuss any challenges they encountered in implementation. They were also asked about additional support or resources that could enhance their teaching, suggestions for changes to improve writing instruction, and recommendations for better supporting teachers under these initiatives. This group setting allowed participants to share their views, respond to one another, and explore common themes.

Individual follow-up interviews were conducted after the focus group to gain more profound, personalized insights. During the interviews, participants elaborated on their experiences, clarified points discussed in the focus group, and addressed specific issues or concerns. The individual interview questions focused on teachers' confidence, teaching practices, and experiences with the new literacy initiatives in writing instruction. Teachers were asked to rate their confidence in teaching writing, describe the time spent on writing instruction, and identify the frameworks, approaches, and resources they used. They were also asked if the initiatives had changed their teaching approach, the challenges they faced, and the strategies or resources that were most effective. Additionally, the questions explored student responses to the curriculum and the level of support teachers felt from their school or district, with an open-ended prompt for any additional thoughts. Combining these methods supported a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' perspectives and experiences, enabling a robust analysis of the factors influencing their instructional practices under the new literacy initiatives.

Phase 1: Focus Group

In Phase 1, a focus group was conducted to gather qualitative data from three teachers with shared experiences and backgrounds (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Participants self-selected and were approved based on their interest and familiarity with the topic and demographic characteristics that reflected particular perspectives, life situations, or backgrounds (Freeman, 2013) which in this case was currently teaching 3rd grade English Language Arts and Reading in a Texas public school. The focus group method fostered a socially interactive environment where participants engaged in open discussion, building on each other's ideas and collaboratively sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Billups, 2023; Smit & Cillers, 2015). This

approach was particularly effective for exploring teachers' views on writing instruction, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their insights and perceptions.

Phase 2: Interviews

I conducted follow-up individual interviews with the same three teachers from the focus group, which enriched the study by providing a deeper, more detailed understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences, enhancing the depth, clarity, and comprehensiveness (Billups, 2021). At times, participants felt more at ease sharing personal insights in a one-on-one setting, rather than expressing their reflections in a group discussion. Combining the data from the focus group and individual interviews provided a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Patton, 2015) because the focus group revealed general trends and themes, while the individual interviews provided in-depth insights and personal context and an opportunity to address ambiguities that arose during the group discussion. Individual interviews also helped to verify (and contrast) findings from the focus group, adding validity to the research by corroborating or challenging the data.

Trustworthiness

The original trustworthiness framework for reliability and validity in qualitative research is yoked to the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who proposed the four criteria to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). Credibility or internal validity concerns confidence in the accurate representation of the findings and can be facilitated through prolonged engagement with participants and triangulation of data sources. Transferability or external validity is linked to generalizing findings to other contexts or settings. Dependability or reliability refers to the consistency of research findings over time (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Confirmability regards the neutrality of the findings, indicating that they are grounded in the data and not influenced by the researcher's biases (Shenton, 2004). Creswell (2017) outlined several strategies to ensure trustworthiness that I have incorporated into the study. To strengthen the trustworthiness of this study, I employed these strategies to ensure that the findings are credible and reflect the participants' authentic experiences while minimizing researcher bias and maintaining consistency across data collection and analysis.

To establish trustworthiness, I consistently acknowledged and explicitly articulated how my educational background, experiences, and perspectives intersected with the research process. This approach was intended to promote transparency and minimize potential biases that might influence the findings. The analysis employed in the study aimed to provide thick, rich descriptions derived from data gathered through focus groups and follow-up interviews. By utilizing in vivo coding—using participants' words and phrases as codes—I ensured that key concepts and themes emerged directly from their data, preserving the authenticity and context of their expressions. This method reinforced the belief that the results closely reflect the participants' perspectives.

I also maintained a comprehensive audit trail, starting with an informed consent document and captured each research phase to ensure transparency and enable others to understand, assess, and replicate the study. Additionally, I gave participants the option to review the preliminary findings, fostering trust and ensuring their input in interpreting the data. This approach strengthened the study's credibility and upheld its ethical integrity by ensuring participants had a voice in the research process.

Researcher's Role

Qualitative researchers are often considered the primary instrument in qualitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). As noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), researchers act as the key agents of data collection, connecting the instrument and the data (Billups, 2021). I served as the focus group facilitator in this study and conducted the follow-up interviews. Using semi-structured questions to guide the discussions, I actively listened to participants' accounts to understand their perspectives and experiences.

Data Collection

The focus group, conducted via the Zoom video conferencing platform, lasted approximately 150 minutes. The discussion was audio- and video-recorded, and detailed notes were taken to document the dialogue for analysis. Following the focus group, participants were invited to individual follow-up interviews to explore themes that emerged during the initial discussion. These interviews, also conducted online via Zoom, lasted around 60 minutes and were audio- and video-recorded, with additional notes taken to capture the conversation for research purposes.

Pre-Focus Group Profile Questionnaire

A pre-focus group profile questionnaire via Qualtrics was used to collect demographic information and create participant profiles. This approach ensured that those selected for the focus group represented the target population and possessed characteristics aligned with the research objectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The questionnaire included questions about years of overall teaching experience, years spent teaching third grade, teaching pathways, and other relevant factors that helped provide a comprehensive understanding of each participant's background.

Focus Group Moderator's Guide & Protocol

I used a focus group guide and a protocol with eight open-ended questions to facilitate the session (Appendix A). This structured approach ensured that all key topics were covered while allowing for organic, open dialogue among participants. I also encouraged participants to share various perspectives, fostering a collaborative environment that promoted rich discussion and deeper insights.

I also utilized a focus group note-taking sheet to systematically document key observations, participant responses, and interactions while recording the session to capture the questions and answers. This dual approach enhanced accuracy, supported transparency and facilitated analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The note-taking sheet allowed me to capture responses and behaviors in real-time, providing an additional source of qualitative data. These notes were subsequently coded to identify emerging themes, patterns, and insights from the focus group discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Saldaña, 2021).

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview protocol with 10 questions (Appendix B) guided the individual follow-up interviews via Zoom. The flexibility of the semi-structured format fostered participant engagement and encouraged open dialogue. This approach respected participants' autonomy by allowing them to express their perspectives in their own words, resulting in rich, nuanced data that deepened the understanding of complex phenomena (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Schedule

The data collection process followed a structured schedule to ensure thorough and organized engagement with participants. This timeline facilitated a smooth progression through recruitment, data collection, and the beginning of data analysis, ensuring all stages were

completed within a clear, transparent, and manageable timeframe. By adhering to this schedule, I maintained consistency across all research phases and provided myself with extended time for multiple rounds of coding and reflection.

Table 3-2 Data Collection Schedule

Week	Dates	Tasks
Week 1–3	September 23– October 11	Research volunteer flyer/email posted to social media Collect signed informed consent Collect pre-focus group questionnaire
Week 4	October 14–20	Online focus group
Week 5	October 21–25	Individual interviews
Week 6	October 28– November 1	Data analysis begins

Data Analysis

The analysis for this phenomenological study involved several key steps designed to ensure a comprehensive and structured approach to understanding the perceptions and experiences of third-grade teachers. Data collection began with Zoom Focus Groups and Zoom Individual Interviews, where research volunteers shared their experiences and perceptions regarding the new literacy initiatives in Texas. The focus group provided a collaborative environment for teachers to discuss common challenges, insights, and reactions to the literacy reforms, while the individual interviews allowed for more in-depth, personal reflections on how these policies influenced their daily practices and lesson planning and preparation. Both collection methods allowed participants to speak freely and honestly, providing detailed data that I analyzed for emerging themes.

After completing the focus group and individual interviews, the audio recordings of these sessions were sent to Rev, a human transcription service. The transcriptions provided a verbatim account of the teachers' voices, experiences, and context-specific details crucial for in-depth

analysis. In addition to the transcriptions, participant profiles were created using data from the initial survey and notes taken during the focus group and interviews. These profiles included demographic information, professional backgrounds, and other relevant contexts that would enrich the analysis of the teachers' perspectives. The profiles provided a more holistic view of each participant, allowing for the consideration of how their individual experiences might shape their perceptions of the literacy initiatives. Personal identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to each teacher to protect participant confidentiality.

Once the transcriptions were complete, I imported the data into Delve, a qualitative data analysis software tool. Delve was used to organize and manage the data to thoroughly examine the teachers' responses and experiences to code themes and identify patterns and key insights. This tool supported a hybrid coding approach, combining both inductive and deductive methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the data.

Hybrid Coding Approach

A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding was employed to leverage the strengths of both methods. This approach allowed for a flexible and comprehensive analysis by exploring new themes while grounding the findings in existing knowledge for richer and more meaningful conclusions. Combining inductive and deductive coding makes the analysis theory-driven and data-driven, enhancing the credibility and rigor of the research findings through data triangulation. Additionally, using both methods enabled me to address the research questions at varying levels of specificity, providing a more thorough and well-rounded analysis of the data (Delve, 2024; Saldaña, 2021).

Sensemaking theory involves interpreting and making sense of the complexities of a situation by identifying patterns, reflecting on experiences, and constructing meaning

collectively. This hybrid coding approach systematically surfaced shared themes across conversations to build understanding. By applying this framework, I could identify common themes and narratives across participants' conversations, revealing how they collectively made sense of their experiences with the Texas literacy initiatives (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking theory guided the coding process by helping define and refine codes that summarize the multifaceted layers of the conversations. This theoretical framework provided a structured yet flexible approach to interpreting the data, allowing a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions and shaping their decision-making regarding writing instructional practices.

Iterative Process for Refining Codes

Data analysis is an iterative process. I began with inductive coding to identify initial themes, followed by deductive coding to apply theoretical constructs and refine those themes. This cyclical approach enabled continuous refinement of codes, allowing new themes to be integrated with existing frameworks. As a result, the coding process remained dynamic and responsive to the evolving data, ensuring a more comprehensive and nuanced analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019).

Deductive Coding (Set themes)

Deductive coding begins with predefined codes drawn from existing theories or frameworks. I started by focusing on specific patterns aligned with the research questions to ensure the analysis remained systematic and focused. The Apriori coding process involved sorting the data into categories based on 12 predefined codes directly tied to the study's objectives. While this structured approach helped maintain consistency, it also posed the risk of overlooking important patterns that did not fit within the initial framework. I used an iterative

coding process combining inductive and deductive approaches to mitigate this. I also constantly compared the data and regularly reflected on the coding framework. Additionally, I consulted with my major professor to review the coding process, identify any overlooked patterns, and explore alternative interpretations, ensuring a more complete analysis.

Table 3-3 Apriori Codes

Order of Code in List	Apriori Codes
1	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS
2	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING
3	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES
4	CHALLENGES
5	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES
6	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT
7	EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION
8	POLICY AND ADVOCACY
9	TEACHER LEARNING AND GROWTH
10	THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION
11	TEACHER ADVOCACY AND VOICE
12	COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS

Inductive Coding: Exploration

Inductive coding involves generating codes directly from the data rather than relying on preset categories. I identified and coded meaningful patterns through careful analysis, uncovering unexpected insights. This approach demanded careful organization and data triangulation to ensure that analytical decisions were well-documented and justified. In the subsequent descriptive/open coding process, I grouped the data into patterns for deeper analysis, adding 21 new codes to the original 12 Apriori codes, bringing the total to 33.

Table 3-4 Open/Descriptive Coding

Order of Code in List	Open/Descriptive Coding
1	Teacher Collaborative Experiences
2	Online Communities
3	Decision-Making for Initiatives
4	Writing Prioritization
5	Challenges
6	Digital Tools/Ed Apps
7	Peers/Mentors/Coaches
8	Reflections on Professional Learning
9	Teacher Suggestions
10	Teacher Efforts
11	Inclusive Opportunities/Practices (All)
12	Support for EBs
13	Progress Monitoring
14	Writing Proficiency
15	Student Engagement
16	Sense of Efficacy
17	Frustration/Burnout
18	Intrinsic Motivation
19	Classroom Routines/Procedures for Writing
20	Assessment Pressure
21	Student Readiness/Differentiation
22	Time Constraints
23	Admin/Leadership Support
24	Colleague Collaboration
25	Instructional Materials
26	Professional Learning
27	Instructional Strategies
28	Curriculum Constraints
29	Prioritizing Content
30	Policy
31	Alignment
32	Effectiveness
33	Implementation

Analytical Scheme and Meta-Themes

During this round, I engaged in a process of constant comparison where I systematically examined data across participants to identify similarities, differences, and new trends. This process revealed how different elements of the data related to one another and allowed for integrating new insights into the existing framework. Additionally, I revisited the connections

between the codes to ensure consistency and to address any gaps or overlooked aspects from previous rounds.

This phase of the process also involved the development of higher-level codes into meta-themes, which synthesized the various individual codes into broader categories that encapsulated the core findings. This round was crucial for refining the final thematic structure and ensuring that the analysis accurately represented the data while remaining grounded in the research questions. By the end of round five, the coding framework had evolved into an organized and comprehensive structure, ready for the final stages of interpretation and narrative development.

Table 3-5 Combined Codes/Themes

Order of Code in List	Combined Codes/Themes
1	COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS - Teacher Collaborative Experiences
2	COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS - Online Communities
3	TEACHER ADVOCACY AND VOICE - Decision-Making for Initiatives
4	TEACHER ADVOCACY AND VOICE - Writing Prioritization
5	THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Challenges
6	THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Digital Tools/Ed Apps
7	TEACHER LEARNING AND GROWTH - Peers/Mentors/Coaches
8	TEACHER LEARNING AND GROWTH - Reflections on Professional Learning
9	POLICY AND ADVOCACY - Teacher Suggestions
10	POLICY AND ADVOCACY - Teacher Efforts
11	EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Inclusive Opportunities/Practices (All)
12	EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Support for EBs
13	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT - Progress Monitoring
14	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT - Writing Proficiency
15	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT - Student Engagement
16	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES - Sense of Efficacy
17	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES - Frustration/Burnout
18	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES - Intrinsic Motivation
19	CHALLENGES- Classroom Routines/Procedures for Writing
20	CHALLENGES - Assessment Pressure
21	CHALLENGES - Student Readiness/Differentiation
22	CHALLENGES - Time Constraints
23	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Admin/Leadership Support
24	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Colleague Collaboration
25	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Instructional Materials
26	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Professional Learning
27	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Instructional Strategies
28	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Curriculum Constraints
29	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Prioritizing Content
30	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Policy
31	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS - Alignment
32	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS - Effectiveness
33	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS - Implementation

Quantification

Meta-themes help organize and simplify complex qualitative data by grouping related findings under a single, unifying concept, making it easier to identify key insights and draw meaningful conclusions. Quantification in qualitative data analysis involves measuring the frequency or prevalence of specific themes, concepts, or keywords within a dataset. Correlating the quantification of meta-themes with their perceived importance requires understanding how

often a topic appears relative to its significance in the research context. Codes or topics that appear more frequently suggest that they are more important or central to the participants' experiences, opinions, or concerns. For example, if multiple respondents mention terms that code to a particular theme, the result indicates significance for the pattern underlying the theme and in understanding the phenomenon under study. Less frequently mentioned topics might still be important but could represent niche concerns, emerging issues, or less widely held perspectives.

Quantifying codes should be balanced with contextual analysis because a topic's importance may not always align with its frequency. For example, a topic might be mentioned only a few times but could be a salient response for the sample of participants or contain deep reflections that are more significant than others more frequently mentioned. I considered the context in which a topic appears—whether it was associated with critical decisions, turning points in the narrative, or cross-topic issues aligned with the research question.

I used the Delve software tool in an iterative process combining Apriori and open/descriptive coding to establish themes and subthemes and track the frequency of topics in the data. I focused on the emphasis, depth, and richness of discussions that elicited emphatic responses or deep reflections during the focus group and individual interviews to prevent overreliance on frequency counts. This approach allowed me to capture the quantity and impactfulness of key information.

Table 3-6 Quantification of Combined Codes

Order of Code in List	Quantification of Combined Codes	Number of Snippets
25	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Instructional Materials	37
27	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Instructional Strategies	30
20	CHALLENGES - Assessment Pressure	18
16	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES - Sense of Efficacy	14
21	CHALLENGES - Student Readiness/Differentiation	14
17	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES - Frustration/Burnout	13
32	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS - Effectiveness	13
33	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS - Implementation	12
14	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT - Writing Proficiency	11
22	CHALLENGES - Time Constraints	11
29	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Prioritizing Content	10
28	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Curriculum Constraints	9
9	POLICY AND ADVOCACY - Teacher Suggestions	7
11	EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Inclusive Opportunities/Practices (All)	7
13	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT - Progress Monitoring	7
15	STUDENT OUTCOMES AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT - Student Engagement	7
23	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Admin/Leadership Support	7
6	THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Digital Tools/Ed Apps	6
31	TEACHER PERCEPTIONS - Alignment	6
1	COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS - Teacher Collaborative Experiences	5
19	CHALLENGES - Classroom Routines/Procedures for Writing	5
26	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Professional Learning	5
24	TEACHER SUPPORT/RESOURCES - Colleague Collaboration	3
3	TEACHER ADVOCACY AND VOICE - Decision-Making for Initiatives	2
5	THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Challenges	2
10	POLICY AND ADVOCACY - Teacher Efforts	2
12	EQUITY AND ACCESSIBILITY IN WRITING INSTRUCTION - Support for EBs	2
2	COLLABORATION AND PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS - Online Communities	1
4	TEACHER ADVOCACY AND VOICE - Writing Prioritization	1
8	TEACHER LEARNING AND GROWTH - Reflections on Professional Learning	1
18	TEACHER MOTIVATION/ATTITUDES - Intrinsic Motivation	1
7	TEACHER LEARNING AND GROWTH - Peers/Mentors/Coaches	0
30	INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION-MAKING - Policy	0

Chapter 3 Summary

Through phenomenological methods, this study elucidated the lived experiences of elementary educators navigating the new Texas literacy initiatives, establishing a robust framework for understanding the complex dynamics of instructional practices in this shifting educational landscape. Sensemaking theory provided a lens to explore how teachers interpret and navigate literacy initiatives in complex and ambiguous contexts (DeHart, 2020; Weick et al., 2005). This theoretical approach ensured that the findings captured teachers' individual experiences and the broader systemic and contextual factors shaping their instructional practices (Patton, 2015) to see how teachers' personal beliefs intersect with institutional mandates. Building on this methodological and theoretical foundation, Chapter 4 presents the findings from the focus group and interviews, offering a detailed account of the participants' perspectives and the impact of the new Texas literacy initiatives on their writing instructional practices.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Two central research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How do teachers perceive their experiences with state and district-mandated literacy initiatives?

RQ2: What challenges and tensions do teachers encounter in their writing instruction practices? This chapter presents the findings from the focus group discussion and individual interviews. The analysis revealed five major themes that reflect key areas of focus in the study: teacher support and resources, instructional decision-making, challenges, teacher motivation and attitudes, and teacher perceptions. Within these overarching themes, eight subthemes emerged, providing further insight into specific aspects of the teaching experience. These subthemes include instructional materials, instructional strategies, assessment pressure, sense of efficacy, student readiness/differentiation, frustration/burnout, effectiveness, and implementation. These themes and subthemes represent a comprehensive analysis of participants' lived experiences while implementing the Texas literacy initiatives. The focus group and interview data were integrated, as many of the topics discussed in both sessions overlapped, as reflected in the coding details presented in Chapter 3.

Participant Profiles

Elena

Elena was a dedicated third-grade teacher with 20 years of experience in education, including five years in third grade. Holding an alternative certification and an advanced degree, Elena felt confident (8/10) in her ability to teach writing under Texas' new literacy initiatives. Her confidence was rooted in her extensive experience teaching across various grade levels, which provided her with a solid foundation in educational practices.

Each day, Elena spent about one hour of her 2.5-hour ELA block on writing instruction. She employed a variety of instructional methods, such as the writing process, rubrics, and digital tools like Google Classroom, to engage students and foster their writing development. The new literacy initiatives shifted the focus toward short constructed responses (SCRs) and extended constructed responses (ECRs), prompting Elena to adapt and incorporate these components into her teaching routine.

Elena felt well-supported by her school district, which provided dedicated time for planning and allowed for the internalization of the new curriculum. However, she found the state-mandated Texas Reading Academy training to be overly time-consuming, requiring around 90-100 hours, and not entirely relevant to real-world classroom application. Despite this, Elena remained committed to her students' success, continuously refining her teaching methods to align with the evolving literacy initiatives.

Sam

Sam was an experienced educator with 10 years in the field, including five years teaching third grade through a traditional certification route. While she felt confident in her ability to teach writing, she acknowledged a learning curve with new curricula. One of the main challenges she faced was the advanced academic writing style being introduced at the elementary level, as well as the lack of resources that aligned with state standards.

To support her students' writing development, Sam employed a variety of writing frameworks and strategies. These frameworks helped her teach both short constructed responses (SCRs) and extended constructed responses (ECRs), which are central to the new literacy initiatives. The shift in these initiatives moved the focus of writing instruction from creative writing to more academic, text-based writing. While Sam acknowledged the importance of this

shift in preparing students for higher grades, she felt it limited opportunities for creative expression.

Despite these challenges, Sam observed that, with ongoing practice and support, her students were producing strong academic writing by the middle of the year. However, she noted that significant scaffolding was still necessary, particularly for struggling writers, to help them meet the demands of the new initiatives.

Chris

Chris was a first-year third-grade teacher with five years of overall experience in education and an alternative certification. She felt unsure about teaching writing, as this was her first year taking on the subject and she did not receive specific training in writing instruction. In her self-contained classroom, someone else was responsible for creating the ELAR lesson plans that she delivered. Chris allocated about 40-60 minutes each day to writing instruction, including grammar lessons and writing prompts, and was beginning to implement the new "RACE" framework to guide student responses.

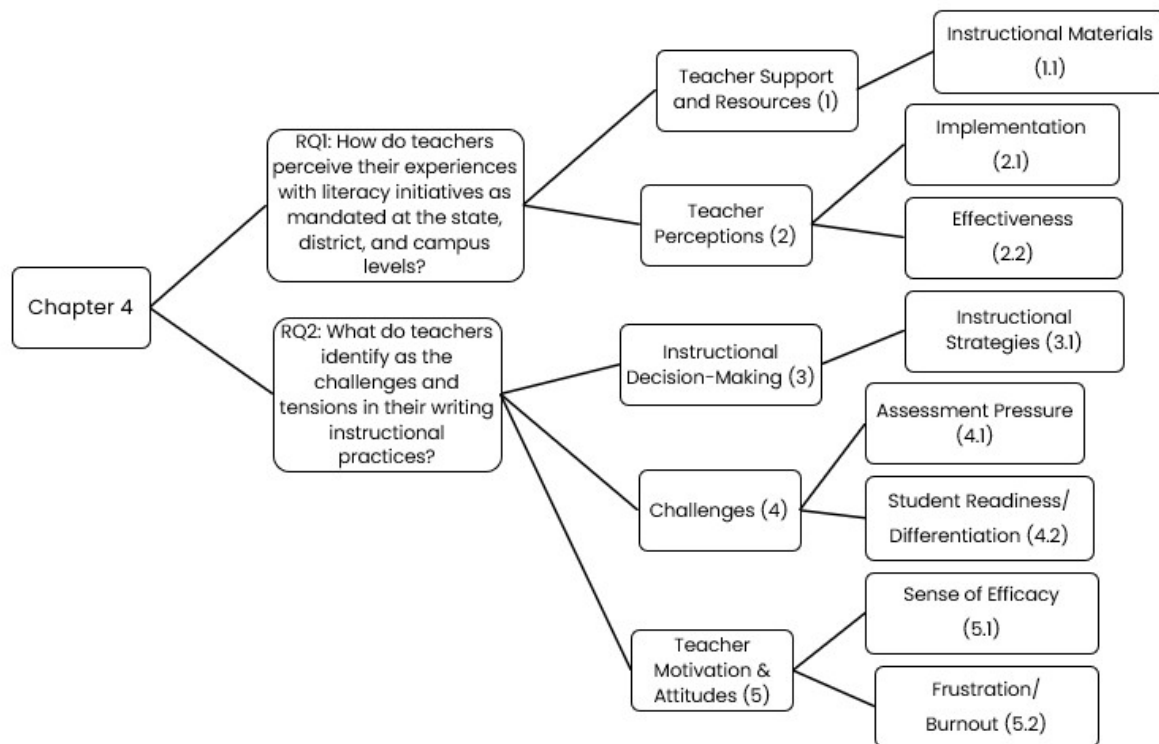
However, Chris faced challenges with students' orthographic knowledge, handwriting, and typing skills, which hindered their ability to express themselves effectively in writing. While the school provided resources like journals and the WICOR framework, Chris felt that the expectations for third-grade students to write eloquently was unrealistic for their developmental stage. She was concerned about the challenges of teaching writing to young learners and believed that writing expectations should be better aligned with their developmental capabilities.

Results

Figure 4.1 is a visual map of the research questions to their corresponding themes and subthemes. The first research question (RQ1) regarded how teachers perceive literacy initiatives

that the state mandates for the district and campus levels; the responses aligned with the themes of teacher support and resources (1), specifically instructional materials (1.1), and teacher perceptions (2) of implementation (2.1) and effectiveness (2.2). The second research question (RQ2) concerned what teachers identified as challenges and tensions in instructional practices, and the emerging themes were instructional decision-making (3) as centered on instructional strategies (3.1), challenges (4), particularly assessment pressure (4.1) and student readiness/differentiation (4.2), and teacher motivation and attitudes (5) linked to efficacy (5.1) and frustration/burnout (5.2). This mapping helps to clarify the connection between the research questions and the underlying themes in my study.

Figure 4.1 - Research Questions, Theme, and Subtheme Mapping



Teacher Support and Resources

In this study instructional materials were frequently highlighted in the focus group and interviews as a critical factor impacting the implementation of the Texas literacy initiatives.

Participants emphasized the importance of accessing high-quality, relevant, updated materials aligned with the state's literacy goals. While some schools provided essential resources, such as textbooks and digital tools, Elena, Sam, and Chris sometimes lacked the complete set of comprehensive and supplementary grade-appropriate materials needed to effectively support writing instruction.

Instructional Materials

The participants expressed interest in four types of resources: (a) textbooks and digital materials, such as comprehensive literacy resources in hybrid formats; (b) curriculum kits that integrate lesson plans, student materials, and multimedia content to support instruction; (c) supplemental resources for intervention, acceleration, and enrichment; and (d) assessment tools to evaluate student learning and monitor progress. The focus group revealed 16 district-acquired literacy programs, four social media platforms, and three websites for educator-made resources all claiming to support the new Texas literacy initiatives. While they aimed to use the resources to achieve consistency, support, and alignment in their teaching, there was a disconnect between their goals and the variety of sources available.

Sam explained [focus group]:

So, it's hard to figure out pacing because if you want to know what's going to be taught when, you genuinely have to dig through every lesson and every TE to find out when we are going to be hitting subject-verb agreement. For so long we were all scrambling and pulling from just whatever resources we could find and using [teacherspayteachers.com](https://www.teacherspayteachers.com) for examples of how to change regular singular nouns to plural nouns, and then trying to teach the irregular versions of that, and just you would almost be at a loss some days you

were trying to find resources that were rigorous enough. So, the good thing about our new core curriculum is that it's done for you.

Sam's sentiment underscores the value she placed in having structured, ready-to-use materials that streamline lesson planning and provide clear guidance on what should be taught and when. The challenge for her was to balance the benefits of readily available resources with an evidence-based instructional approach that ensured that the students received an accurate, high-quality lesson. Elena [focus group] reflected on this tension and stated:

As far as the push for HQIM across Texas, I think the state and the district were concerned about the children primarily, and so I see the why behind it. Last year, my teammate and I had to completely revamp our ELAR curriculum. We were pulling from whatever resources and books we had at the school, but we quickly realized the books were outdated. Any leftover textbooks were from previous years and didn't align with the current TEKS for third grade. I kept seeing first-grade TEKS in the margins and thought, why am I teaching first-grade standards when we're in third grade?

Elena's quote emphasized her difficulties aligning available resources with current educational standards. Both teachers looked to specific resources for planning and expressed how they were challenged to effectively integrate those materials with the broader pedagogical goals.

Sam [focus group] further reflected on this challenge:

As far as our core curriculum, there are a lot of writing opportunities. It's not perfect, though, because it doesn't explicitly state things like, this is a short constructed response, and this is what's required. So, you definitely have to supplement the writing curriculum. If you rely on one resource, you're not going to get where you need to with your kids. The struggle right now is that the third-grade curriculum is very time-consuming. We're

trying to fit in everything the district wants, which are valuable things, but at the same time, going back to teach rubrics for short constructed responses or extended constructed responses feels overwhelming. But my kids are already writing really comprehensive paragraphs with strong topic and conclusion sentences.

This quote reflects Sam's struggle to teach authentic writing and constructed responses with a curriculum that doesn't explicitly state how to do it, making it time consuming.

Elena [focus group] also noted:

I would just make the language TEKS and STAAR-specific. My biggest complaint with the writing instruction is that, while the prompts are good and we're definitely increasing their writing stamina, the students still need STAAR-friendly language. We'll supplement with rubrics and language to get them familiar with it, but it would be so much better if that were already embedded in the curriculum. For now, we're just trying to make time for it, which is really stressful.

While these two teachers indicated that district-acquired programs offered a foundation for instruction, they explained how they were left to navigate the complexities of adapting these resources to meet the diverse needs of their students and the specific demands of standardized assessments, often under the pressure of limited time and support.

As Chris [interview] explained:

Writing lessons can be daunting, but they're already prepared for you, and the students do seem to remember them. The activities help by incorporating additional spelling practice, which, I know, in certain times, was seen as somewhat outdated. I don't necessarily agree with the idea of memorizing 30 words every week, but I do recognize some value in learning certain spelling patterns to make writing more comprehensible.

This quote highlights Chris's recognition of outdated practices, while emphasizing the contrasting value of helping students master spelling patterns to improve their writing skills and comprehension.

Chris [focus group] also mentioned:

I think teacher training is essential. In education, we often put the cart before the horse.

We introduce new tests and requirements for students but don't adequately train teachers on how to teach them. Teacher training is something we need, and we're figuring it out, as teachers always do, but we often work in isolation when we should be collaborating.

Chris emphasized in this quote the disconnect between introducing new requirements and properly preparing teachers through training and collaboration to meet those needs. All three teachers expressed a desire for a more balanced approach that integrates high-quality instructional materials with an understanding of instructional strategies that support the expectations and goals of the new Texas literacy initiatives.

Instructional Decision-Making

These teachers were expected to make informed, data-driven decisions that encompassed a variety of instructional tasks, from selecting suitable texts and resources to adapting teaching methods in response to students' evolving needs. Despite their commitment, these teachers voiced concerns about the challenges of creating inclusive and engaging literacy experiences that not only built foundational skills but also supported students in becoming proficient and confident writers. In this study, Sam, Chris, and Elena highlighted a range of instructional strategies essential to effective writing instruction, emphasizing the need to blend traditional techniques with innovative approaches for optimal student development.

Instructional Strategies

During the focus group, the teachers emphasized incorporating elements of teacher craft into explicit instruction, utilizing rubrics, balancing writing instruction, and integrating digital tools and platforms. As Sam mentioned, relying solely on standardized resources, like workbooks, can lead to disengagement.

In agreement with the group, Chris [focus group] shared:

I've noticed that when I ask students to write about something—whether it's something simple like “What's your favorite animal and why? versus 'What does this animal do?’”

Provide text evidence—they used to struggle with providing details, often offering very brief answers. Now, I'm seeing students elaborate more. They're able to draw on their own interests and opinions, and they're also incorporating more text-based details. By fully investing myself into the process, I can see that we're moving toward something deeper and more meaningful than before.

In this quote Chris shares that students have improved in their ability to provide detailed and thoughtful responses with text-based evidence and emphasized how her commitment to the process facilitated student growth and created a more substantive learning experience.

The integration of her personal teaching style played a significant role in deepening students' engagement with writing. Elena [focus group] also noted that students seemed more willing to think critically, experiment with different writing styles, and connect more meaningfully when she incorporated her own style of teaching.

Writing rubrics sparked significant discussion as an effective tool for guiding and assessing the writing development of third-grade students. All three teachers emphasized the importance of setting clear expectations and ensured that students understood what was required in various aspects of their writing. By providing a structured framework, the rubrics clarified

expectations and supported their students' skill development, helping them track their progress and improve over time. Elena [interview] explained, “We always follow the writing process, adjusting our focus depending on the stage. I begin with the end in mind and present a rubric so students know what’s expected and how to achieve the highest score possible.” Elena, Chris, and Sam were confident that rubrics offered objective feedback, and concurred that when students were aware of the criteria, they were more likely to take ownership of their work and strived to meet the expectations. Chris [focus group], a newcomer to ELAR, shared:

In my previous math teaching experience, it was always clear—right or wrong. But with writing, it’s not so straightforward. I appreciate rubrics because they help guide my grading and remove any bias, giving me a clear structure to assess each component of their work.

In this quote Chris discussed the more subjective nature of grading writing, in contrast to the more objective answers in math, and the need for a tool that helped provide structure, reduce bias, and ensured a consistent way of evaluating students' writing.

Sam [focus group] noted:

We’ve become accustomed to using rubrics, as they highlight specific areas for improvement. This not only helps teachers identify what needs support but also makes it easier for parents to understand how they can assist at home. We’re still in the process of creating rubrics, but we recognize their value in pinpointing issues and finding effective solutions to support student progress.

Sam’s quote reveals how rubrics not only helped her identify areas of support, but also aided parents with assisting students at home. She also discussed the ongoing development of rubrics,

acknowledging their effectiveness in identifying challenges and offering clear solutions to support student growth.

Teachers in this study reported that much of their writing instruction focuses on preparing third graders for the STAAR test, often relying on formulaic methods designed to meet these specific expectations. However, they highlighted the importance of a more balanced approach to writing instruction. They advocated combining structured activities that align with curriculum standards with opportunities for students to express their creativity and individuality.

Sam [focus group] described:

I try to keep things positive and make them as exciting as possible. If you're only using workbooks and not spicing it up, some kids are going to get bored. But 99% of my kids love writing now. They're proud of how much they've written and the fact that "I didn't even know how to write a paragraph until third grade. This is crazy!" I tell them, "Yeah, it is crazy." And now, they're even incorporating technology into their writing and assessing each other's work, which they love. We spent most of the block on Friday doing this, and they said, "This is fun!" I replied, "It sure is!"

The quote reflects Sam's belief in making learning fun and motivating, resulting in students' increased enjoyment and confidence in their writing skills. By incorporating interactive elements, such as technology and peer assessments, Sam fostered a sense of pride and enthusiasm in her students about their writing progress.

Sam [focus group] further explained:

The district requires our core curriculum as my starting point, but from there, I love incorporating digital resources like CuriPod or Pear Deck. These allow students to type their written responses, which is important because they'll need to do that on the STAAR

test. Since many of these third graders aren't yet proficient at typing, it's great to give them as much practice as possible, especially since they're still hunting for keys and learning how to find the letters.

Sam also used digital resources to enhance her students' writing experiences while also preparing them for the STAAR test. Building on Sam's mention of incorporating digital responses, the group discussed how the growing familiarity with digital tools prepared students for standardized testing and supported their development as confident and capable writers.

Elena [focus group] shared:

I often have them respond digitally, and the great thing is it posts anonymously on the smart board. Students can go through and celebrate the strengths they see, while also discussing areas that need improvement. They might look at a piece of writing and say, "What would you fix about this?" One student might notice, "Oh, it doesn't have a complete sentence—it's missing a subject and predicate." It's a fun, anonymous way to fine-tune and improve their writing.

Elena's quote emphasized how using digital tools encourages discussion, nurtures critical thinking, and allows students to pinpoint areas for improvement, all while making the process fun and interactive. Sam and Elena stated during the group discussion how this method boosted student engagement and supported the development of writing skills, and Chris [interview] agreed that incorporating digital tools "strengthened writing skills and helped to create a positive, peer-driven learning culture where students felt more confident revising and improving their work." By blending the teacher's craft with explicit instruction, utilizing rubrics, balancing different components of writing instruction, and incorporating digital tools, these teachers aimed to cultivate a writing environment aligned to the literacy initiatives and expectations.

Challenges

A key challenge that emerged in both the focus group discussion and individual interviews, eliciting strong emotions, was the dual pressure of meeting assessment requirements while also addressing the varied readiness levels of students. The teachers described their struggles with striking a balance between preparing students for the STAAR test and providing individualized support to meet their unique learning needs. The teachers discussed this complex task at length and the group recounted how these pressures impacted the teaching and learning of writing in their classrooms.

Assessment Pressure

The pressure to cover all required TEKS within a limited timeframe created a heightened sense of urgency for Sam, Elena, and Chris, and pushed them to prioritize test prep over other aspects of literacy instruction. As a result, the curriculum narrowed, and more emphasis was placed on test prep activities to boost performance on standardized assessments. Sam [focus group] shared:

We used to publish stories in a book, but now, with the constraints of writing to respond to what we're reading, we don't have time for that anymore. It's a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, it's making them stronger writers, forcing them to write at a more rigorous level than before, and pushing them to respond in a more academic way. It's preparing them for middle and high school.

Sam's quote reflects the pressure she faced in balancing different aspects of writing instruction and her mixed feelings regarding the trade-off between the time spent on creative writing projects and the increased focus on writing responses tied to reading comprehension.

Elena [focus group] expressed similar concerns:

That part does scare me a little. I'm still trying to reconcile it. I trust the process and hope we'll get the data we need by the end of the year. Last year, during district assessments, I taught the GT cluster, and my students usually scored in the 80-90% range. But on our last district-mandated test, the overall score was just 56%. I'm worried that the HQIM materials aren't specific enough to the TEKS.

Elena's quote highlighted her uncertainty about the current approach and her struggle to fully trust the process. Her reference to disappointing assessment results revealed her concern that the materials may not be sufficiently aligned or effective in meeting the needs of her students. All three teachers admitted to dedicating less time to writing instruction, including process-oriented activities like drafting, revising, and peer reviewing to focus on preparing students for short, extended constructed-response prompts designed to mirror test conditions. Chris [focus group] shared:

We're assessing as we go—are they answering the question? Are they staying on topic? Are they using text evidence? That's a three. That's a three. The highest we'd rate on an SCR was a two . . . it's been since spring since we had to rate them, so we'll do activities like that. And as for ECRs, especially after the first semester, we'll probably have them write their first one by mid-November, because right now they're still building the stamina to write a paragraph. They can't write multiple paragraphs in one sitting yet. Once they get there, I make them write one every Friday. I'll present a text, give them a prompt, and explain my expectations. The key is constant exposure and getting them ready, so when the test comes around, they'll think, oh yeah, I've done this a million times.

This quote demonstrated Chris's approach to helping her students build the stamina and skills necessary for success on extended response questions (ECRs). She emphasized that her strategy of regular practice and exposure was designed to ensure students felt well-prepared for the actual test. While effective for test preparation, the teachers in the study observed that constant exposure to practice tests and test-taking strategies led students to view reading and writing as mere tasks to complete for exams, rather than as meaningful tools for communication and critical thinking.

Sam [interview] noted:

When they incorporated short constructed responses and extended constructed responses, it completely changed how we taught writing. Before, it was mostly about writing workshops, teaching personal narratives, and encouraging creative, entertaining writing. Now, it's much more academic—writing in response to what you're reading. Kids don't naturally know how to do that without specific instruction. You have to be very intentional and direct about what you want their writing to look like. It's disappointing, though, because I love the creativity of writing, and now, the campus-approved national contests have been discontinued for the time being. That part does make me sad.

This quote conveyed a sense of loss as Sam lamented the diminished focus on creative writing which was replaced by a greater emphasis on academic writing. It accentuates the tension between the shift toward standardized testing and academic requirements and the impact this had on her writing instruction, moving from creative expression to more structured, text-based responses.

Student Readiness and Differentiation

The teachers in this study discussed the considerable time and effort needed to create tasks that catered to the diverse needs of their students, accurately assess those needs, and offer personalized feedback to foster student growth.

Chris [focus group] explained:

What I was saying earlier about how writing is such a difficult skill for people to master—not just third-graders, but anyone learning any language, even in their native language—needs to be considered, especially at this age. It's a very young age to expect them to be able to put together thoughts and responses eloquently and in a cohesive format.

Chris emphasized that writing is a challenging skill for individuals of all ages, even in their native language, and stressed the developmental challenges students encounter. She also highlighted the importance of considering their age and abilities when teaching writing. Elena [focus group] agreed that teaching writing was hard because sometimes students didn't yet have the cognitive or linguistic readiness to plan and organize their writing effectively or lacked proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure.

Chris [focus group] continued:

Yeah. I would say, one of the things I didn't realize would be such a challenge—though I should have known, having seen kids write before—is their lack of orthographic knowledge. It's pretty bad. Their letters are all over the place when they're writing on paper. They don't align their words with the lines; I've got kids slanting their writing in weird directions, and I'm thinking, what's going on? There's also a lot of random capitalization, misspelling, and issues with handwriting that I'm noticing more than ever before.

Chris described the unexpected challenge of her students' lack of orthographic knowledge and handwriting skills. Issues such as disorganization, misaligned letters, random capitalization, and frequent misspellings highlighted the critical need to address foundational writing skills. Sam also emphasized the importance of offering targeted support to address the varying readiness levels students bring to writing instruction.

Sam [interview] explained:

Man, it's an advanced style of writing. You're asking elementary students to do something most people don't start until middle school or high school. While it's not impossible, it comes with its challenges, especially when students are still developing their writing skills. Some kids can't even write one line, let alone a paragraph in response to what they just read. You're constantly playing catch-up, reminding students of small grammar errors and basic paper norms, like where the left side of the paper is or that their paper is upside down. And up until recently, the resources were limited. We only had the rubrics released by TEA last year, and we were kind of left to create things on our own, hoping for the best.

Sam's quote underscored the gap between students' current skill levels and the expectations set for them, noting the struggle with basic writing mechanics and the lack of adequate resources for writing instruction. It conveyed the frustration of having to address fundamental writing issues while trying to push students toward more complex tasks, while working with limited support. Elena mentioned that some students required scaffolded writing prompts and graphic organizers to organize their ideas, while others were ready for more independent, open-ended writing tasks. She also emphasized the importance of "adult scaffolds," highlighting that teachers, too, need more targeted support to effectively guide students through the writing process.

Elena [interview] shared:

We always say, “clear is kind,” so if they could just make the expectations clearer for us. The rubrics for short constructed responses and extended constructed responses are very wordy, and they’re difficult for third-graders to understand. It would help if we had a more student-friendly, visual rubric. I’ve made some myself, but it would be nice to have a better one.

Elena's quote emphasized the need for clear, student-friendly rubrics that would enhance both teaching and learning by making expectations more understandable and accessible for students. During the focus group discussion all three teachers agreed that an important part of addressing student readiness and differentiation was ensuring that each student had the tools and practice they needed to succeed. During individual interviews they elaborated on this belief. Chris [interview] noted, “For me, the hardest part was getting them to write comprehensively on paper first then transferring that onto a computer within a set amount of time. They won’t have all day, and their brains won’t last that long.” This echoes Chris’s earlier statement regarding the need for thoughtful approaches that consider both students’ developmental stages (and the constraints of time and technology).

Teacher Motivation and Attitudes

In the individual interviews, Elena, Chris, and Sam shared varying degrees of frustration stemming from the lack of sufficient information, time, or resources to fully implement the new Texas literacy initiatives. A common theme was their anxiety when their efforts didn’t produce immediate results. Each teacher navigated the challenge of balancing new expectations with the limitations of their teaching environments and worked to set realistic goals that would help maintain their sense of efficacy. Despite these obstacles, they remained committed to preserving

their enthusiasm for teaching and actively sought ways to prevent burnout from becoming a long-term issue.

Sense of Efficacy

The teachers in this study offered varying self-assessments of their teaching efficacy. Sam rated herself an eight, noting that her rating would have been higher before implementing the new curriculum. She [interview] explained:

If you had asked me a year or two ago, I'd probably rate myself a nine, maybe even a ten on a good day. But with the new curriculum, it's been a learning curve. I'm adjusting my schedule to prioritize what's most important—whether that's language, reading, or writing. After years of teaching ELAR and completing the Reading Academy, I feel confident in my understanding of best practices. The curriculum is just the starting point. Sam's quote conveyed how her self-assessment has shifted due to the challenges of adapting to the new curriculum, despite her strong ELAR background and completion of the Texas Reading Academy.

Chris rated herself a three, acknowledging that this was her first year teaching writing and that she had not received specific training. She [interview] continued, "I've received reading training, but not much on teaching writing." Chris further explained, "My rating comes from my background in linguistics, which helps me teach language, but I'm still figuring out how to teach essay writing and short response answers." Elena rated herself an eight, reflecting on her decades of experience and how she draws from a broad range of teaching strategies. She [interview] stated, "I pull from my experience as a kindergarten and first-grade teacher, supporting students at different levels, as well as my background teaching fifth grade for GT students." She continued, "I'm confident, but I'm still learning, especially with the short and extended

constructed responses. It's a big shift, trying to make something developmentally appropriate for third graders, but I'm figuring it out." Despite the challenges and adjustments, each teacher voiced a commitment to continuous growth and adaptation after sharing their self-assessment. They were proactive in finding solutions, exploring alternative teaching methods, and soliciting additional support. Sam [focus group] expressed:

The only thing I'm not super confident in is that the mandated resource teaches things differently than the state of Texas assesses. For example, the unit teaches that theme and topic are essentially the same thing, whereas in Texas, the TEKS specify that they are two distinct concepts, and the STAAR test questions reflect this difference. So, that inconsistency makes me feel a bit less confident, especially since once students have learned one concept, it's tough to correct that misconception. Despite this, I believe that once you have effective strategies for teaching, you can adapt them to any curriculum.

Sam's quote calls attention to the disconnect between the mandated resource and the state's assessment standards and her concern that this inconsistency created a challenge in building student understanding and correcting misconceptions. Despite this, Sam remained confident in her ability to adapt effective teaching strategies to any curriculum. Elena [focus group] concurred, expressing optimism that feedback from the pilot and implementation process would be used to improve future resources and training across Texas. Chris then joined the conversation, highlighting the level of specificity she believed would be beneficial, drawing from her own self-assessment. Chris [focus group] explained:

Again, training on each aspect—here's how you answer the question, here's how you incorporate text evidence, here's the frequency you can teach these concepts, and ideas for improving teacher craft—would be helpful. Even if there was a digital PD library

from the state with strategies and activities to help implement these concepts, it would provide more clarity in how we approach this part of instruction.

Chris elucidated that bridging the gap between theory and classroom application was key to boosting her sense of agency and efficacy in writing instruction. She noted that when Sam and Elena experienced positive outcomes, their confidence in the process grew, reinforcing their belief in their ability to make a meaningful impact. Sam [focus group] shared:

So, I think, again, it's just having to tell myself, trust the process and see what happens, and just sprinkle in what you can when you can. It's not a perfect system by any means, but it is definitely exposing them to a lot more writing than most curriculums did before. So, I do see the benefit in it. I was grading paragraphs this past week and I was like, oh my gosh, these are good. I can read them. They make sense. They have a point. They're on topic and they're not usually at that point in the year yet. So that is a good silver lining.

In this quote Sam expresses a sense of trust in the process and the progress it is fostering in students' writing, despite initial doubts or challenges.

In contrast, Chris [interview] shared:

I mean, it's so much more teaching third grade than when I taught first grade. And I see the mechanics of writing and how it's developed. And so, I guess, with the new literacy approaches, I don't know what I could do differently. We use a lot of short response kind of tactics, like sentence starters, whether they're making a connection or telling the story of their thinking, or if you're looking at character feelings. I'm looking around my classroom, what all do I do different?

This quote reflects Chris's uncertainty as she contemplates how these new methods differ from her previous practices and which strategies are most effective in her current classroom.

Frustration/Burnout

Educators in the Texas Reading Academies were required to complete online module assignments, submit artifacts, attend in-person sessions, demonstrate mastery of literacy theories and practices during classroom observations, and participate in coaching cycles with a cohort leader. Elena and Sam reported that the program demanded approximately 90-100 hours of effort, much of which had to be completed during their personal time. Elena [interview] shared:

When I moved down to third grade and I saw, oh my gosh, some of my kids are still learning how to read, how the heck do I teach them to do that? I can teach comprehension all day, but how do I teach you to decode a word? I don't know. Sound it out? So, I did see some value in the reading academies. I will say it was a beating because we just had to do it on our own time. We didn't get district days to do it. We didn't get district compensation to do it, so there were some nights I was staying up till two in the morning trying to get these modules completed and get my videos turned in and everything. So that was hard.

In this quote Elena expressed the challenges she faced when she first realized she lacked the skills and knowledge to teach a crucial aspect of reading. She acknowledged the value she found in the reading academies, despite the training being demanding and time-consuming, as it was not supported by district resources or compensation.

Sam [interview] agreed that the demands on teacher time were unreasonable. She noted:

This is not practical. And then when they had the videos that you had to make, but they had to be in a very short amount of time, I'm like, I mean, I'm going to do it because that's the expectation. But at the same time, this is not what you would do in a real-life situation because you're going to work with that child in a much different way until they

get what they need, or you feel they have a good grasp of it. I didn't think it was what was best for kids. And so, I did it because I had to.

Sam's quote expressed that she followed the expectations out of compliance because she felt that the approach was not practical nor aligned with the best interests of students.

Elena [interview] expressed:

And so that was one thing that I don't feel like maybe was shared in the focus group, but that was a very big like, I've been teaching for this long and now you want me to go back and do a reading academy. I mean, teachers are the worst students. And so that was really, it was hard to get that done.

This quote underscores Elena's frustration with being required to participate in the reading academy despite her extensive teaching experience.

The intense demands of the training, coupled with their daily workload and heightened expectations, contributed to teacher angst. Teachers in the study shared that the Texas Reading Academies often failed to address the specific day-to-day challenges they faced in the classroom and, at times, required them to implement changes without providing the necessary tools or support to do so effectively. This gap between policy and classroom realities only deepened their frustration. Chris [interview] shared:

I saw a lot of disconnect, especially for English language learners. With this deeper push into literacy, I'm still learning the ropes. The science of teaching reading is there, and then we have the reading academies, which seem very similar. It feels redundant to go through all this extra training when it takes away from the energy we could spend actually teaching what we already know about reading.

In this quote, Chris raised concerns about the redundancy and inefficiency of the additional training, given teachers' existing knowledge and skills, as well as the failure to effectively address the needs of English language learners particularly in Texas, where this is a significant concern. Elena [interview] echoed this sentiment, "There's always been an issue with compliance because the connection between theory and practice doesn't always make sense in terms of timing and what authentic classroom instruction should look like." The lively discussion regarding the gap between professional learning and classroom practices steered the group back to the issue of insufficient writing resources.

High-quality instructional materials were in short supply while they implemented practices from the Texas Reading Academies. All three teachers in the study found themselves once again creating and adapting resources, further increasing their workload. The lack of resources also made it challenging to provide differentiated instruction, leaving teachers struggling to meet the diverse needs of their students. Chris [interview] highlighted this challenge:

At the beginning of the year, the writing prompts were so simple, but I expected the rigor to increase. The reading texts were on a first-grade level, and I was genuinely concerned about how they'd handle third-grade content. Thankfully, the rigor did pick up quickly, and I'm hopeful the writing prompts will follow suit.

This quote reveals Chris's initial concern about the lack of rigor in the instructional materials at the start of the year, her relief when the rigor increased, and her hope that the writing prompts would continue to align with the growing expectations.

Sam [interview] echoed these concerns:

My teammate and I had to create our own curriculum using whatever materials we could find, making sure it was aligned with TEKS. The core curriculum is great for exposing students to knowledge on topics like the human body and animals, but it's not specifically focused on the TEKS. The skills are spread out throughout the year, but my worry is that it doesn't dive deep enough into the specifics, like recognizing persuasive or informative texts, as we used to teach.

This quote highlights Sam's concerns about the core curriculum's inability to fully align with the breadth and depth of TEKS standards, prompting her and a teammate to create their own curriculum map and source resources to ensure alignment, as the existing materials fell short of meeting specific standards.

In addition to fostering academic success, these teachers were also tasked with supporting their students' social and emotional development, some of whom faced a range of academic and, at times, behavioral challenges. This responsibility led to feelings of exhaustion and a sense of insufficient support, which ultimately increased stress for both teachers and students.

Sam [interview] described:

It's a lot. I asked a kid today, "What's the matter? Why are we acting this way?" And he couldn't even verbalize. But I will say sometimes it is easier for kids to write than it is to verbalize because I gave him a paper and I said, "Here, do you want to write it down?" And he wrote it down.

This quote sheds a light on the challenge Sam faced in addressing a student's emotional and behavioral needs and illustrated how the student struggled to verbalize his feelings but was able to express them through writing. Sam also expressed a wish for more time dedicated to writing instruction, noting that a significant campus challenge was the need for more support staff, such

as those working in dyslexia or special education, to help address the wide range of student needs. She added:

Our schedule is just so booked this year. We've got kids getting pulled out during subjects they shouldn't be. We don't have the funds from a district standpoint to hire more people. And I know in a perfect world, sure, but it's public education, it's never going to be a perfect world.

The quote expressed Sam's frustration over the challenges in public education, highlighting a packed schedule, disruptions in students' learning due to insufficient staffing, and a lack of funding to hire more staff. Additionally, the increasing pressure of accountability measures created a high-stakes environment that fueled anxiety and frustration, particularly when teachers felt they had limited influence over factors that impacted student performance.

Chris [focus group] explained:

In our data meetings and PLCs, we have already started discussing feedback from walkthroughs. Right now, the main focus is making sure lesson objectives align with state standards and match the rigor of the STAAR test. Based on where my students are, I'm always happy when I see growth, but it's stressful and sometimes embarrassing when we study student work, especially the ECRs. I have a high percentage of struggling students. But man, if we could just get all of our kids pulled during one intervention time, then we could have more dedicated time for writing instruction. I could have them writing fluent ECRs by now. It's just all over the place, and ultimately, it will reflect on me as a teacher when they're missing a big chunk of that.

This quote reflected Chris's stress and embarrassment when evaluating student work, as she felt it reflected directly on her teaching effectiveness and emphasized her desire for more structured

intervention time to provide more focused writing instruction, particularly on tasks like writing ECRs (Extended Constructed Responses), which are a key part of the STAAR test. The other teachers nodded in agreement with Chris, and Elena wondered aloud what it would be like if the makeup of the Reading Academies was revised. Elena [focus group] noted, "I didn't feel like when we did the reading academies that it hit a lot on writing. I don't want a writing academy, so don't misunderstand that piece of it." However, the consensus was that frustration could be reduced if the implementation of the new Texas literacy initiatives focused more on addressing educators' specific, practical needs, providing actionable strategies and resources directly applicable to the classroom. All three teachers believed this approach would create a more sustainable and supportive environment for third-grade literacy educators, helping to reduce burnout and improve student outcomes.

Teacher Perceptions

All three teachers in this study expressed their belief that the Texas literacy initiatives were intended to improve literacy outcomes. Elena, Sam, and Chris shared their insights on how the new policies impacted their teaching practices and the support they received during the transition. However, they remained cautious and uncertain about the overall implementation and the effectiveness of the initiative.

Implementation

In the focus group the teachers discussed that for the initiatives to succeed, they must be seamlessly integrated into their daily routines. Without sufficient time to fully absorb and adapt to these changes, they were left to experiment and refine their methods which created a sense of apprehension about whether the initiatives would genuinely enhance students' literacy development. Chris [focus group] explained:

For reading, we've been using one particular resource, but for writing it's just been like writing journals. As for the lessons, I'm not the one planning them, somebody else in our team does. For writing, I'm not exactly sure what curriculum they're basing it on for grammar and such.

This quote conveyed Chris's uncertainty and the lack of clear direction and structure in the writing instruction she is providing. Additionally, Chris expressed a lack of involvement in planning the writing lessons, further emphasizing the disconnect and confusion around the writing instruction process.

Sam [focus group] described:

For our ELAR block, we get two hours in total, but the writing time changes according to core resource guidelines. Tomorrow, I only get 15 minutes for writing, which means my kids need at least 30 minutes. It's just unrealistic to expect them to finish a paragraph in that short time.

This quote stresses the time constraints placed on writing instruction within the ELAR block. Sam emphasized the unrealistic expectation of having only 15 minutes for writing, which she believed was insufficient for students to write a paragraph.

Elena [focus group] added:

In past years, we aimed for about an hour to an hour and a half for reading instruction, then about 40 minutes for writing. That included developing writing skills and teaching phonics and grammar. With the core curriculum, the time varies each day depending on the activity.

In this quote, Elena contrasted the more structured and consistent schedule of previous years, which allotted dedicated time for both reading and writing, with the current variability in daily

instruction time based on the activity. During the focus group discussion, Chris, Sam, and Elena all expressed concerns about the inconsistent time allocation and curriculum misalignment, which played a role in shaping their views on the (poor) quality of the implementation. Conversely, when their students actively participated in lessons, asked questions, and demonstrated interest in writing tasks, they identified student responses as evidence of successful implementation.

Sam [focus group] shared:

Initially, they were a little taken aback. Coming from second grade, they were like, ‘Oh, my.’ But then I showed them examples from last year, and said, this is where we’re headed, from August to May. We emphasized constructive criticism—it’s not about being mean but about getting better. Even I can improve, and I challenge them to identify things they can improve.

Sam’s quote describes how students initially struggled with the transition but were reassured by showing examples from the previous year, giving them a clear sense of progress from August to May. Elena [focus group] added, "When I’m grading their writing, I can understand most of it, which is a big improvement from this time last year. By the end of September, they were already writing in paragraphs, which is great progress." The group agreed that this was a positive reflection of the new initiatives and wanted to look for additional ways to provide students with opportunities to develop their writing skills.

Chris [interview] reflected:

I’d say the most beneficial aspect for my students has been the language focus, especially continued phonetic instruction, even though they’re in third grade. While reading comprehension is crucial at this stage, direct language instruction is still necessary. I

really appreciate that we get to focus on it almost every day with the core resource.

Previously, we were pulling from various sources, and while they were helpful, they often required more time. The core resource, though, is very direct. It gives you exactly what you need to know and is a quick practice, so we can move on. The frequency of it has definitely helped improve their skills overall.

This quote highlighted Chris's appreciation for the language focus in the core resource, especially the continued phonetic instruction for third-grade students. Chris emphasized that the consistency and frequency of this approach has played a key role in enhancing her students' language skills.

Sam [interview] shared:

So writing was my focus last year. My team took on more of the reading aspect, and I took on more of the writing aspect. We would meet and try to marry them together and create our curriculum. So, I like and dislike at the same time that the new reading test combines the writing because previously it was two separate tests, and nobody likes an extra STAAR test. So, it's nice that it is just embedded in there. Also, I think writing and reading definitely go together. I see the purpose behind testing them that way.

Sam's quote reflected her mixed feelings about the change from the previous testing format, where reading and writing were assessed separately. While she voiced concerns about its implementation, she also acknowledged the advantages of having a unified test rather than two separate ones.

Effectiveness

The participants noted that the emphasis on academic writing seemed to better prepare students for academic tasks. With consistent practice, students began producing writing that

exceeded expectations, demonstrating a clear improvement in their proficiency. Sam [focus group] shared, "The big thing about writing now under the new curriculum is that it's academic writing. While it's challenging and intimidating at first, by mid-year, the writing they're producing is just stellar." Elena [focus group] added, "It's a very different style of writing that kids are not used to, but it's amazing to see what they are capable of." Chris [focus group] echoed these sentiments by noting, "It is different, it is re-learning and kind of reinventing the wheel a little bit, but it's more of an academic style writing. It's genuinely getting them prepared for the essays they'll be expected to write in higher grades." All three teachers suggested that the new literacy initiatives did have the potential to cultivate stronger writing skills, but hoped that all types of writing were still prioritized. Chris, Sam, and Elena expressed concern that focusing on structured, academic writing over creative writing limited students' opportunities for creative expression.

Chris [focus group] mentioned:

Sometimes when I look at the question prompts, I think we could have gone deeper with this. But then I remember that, for standardized testing, the prompts are often phrased like, what is an animal of interest? Provide the facts you found. So, I adjust my language to say, use text evidence to support your answer.

Chris's quote reflects her tension between wanting to engage students in deeper, more meaningful exploration and the need to align with the direct, fact-based nature of standardized testing prompts. Sam [focus group] shared, "Sometimes, I use writing prompts on platforms like CuriPod or Peridot, and I might tweak some of the wording, but I'm still sticking to the core structure of the prompts." Elena agreed, saying, "The writing prompts aren't bad. They're decent." The purpose of these quotes was to illustrate that while Sam and Elena recognize the

functionality of the writing prompts they use, there is a shared concern that these prompts may not fully foster the depth of creativity that both desire.

They also all agreed that educators needed more focused training to effectively teach short-constructed responses (SCRs) and extended constructed responses (ECRs). The increased emphasis on these specific types of writing required adjustments to teaching practices, which they found demanding. Sam [focus group] explained:

When I first saw what students were expected to do—writing short and extended constructed responses—I thought, there’s no way we’re going to get eight-year-olds to do this. It’s not developmentally appropriate. But after spending an entire year practicing with the kids, it became second nature, and I had a few students scoring tens on their extended constructed responses.

This quote highlighted the initial challenge Sam and her students faced, but after a year of consistent practice, she observed considerable improvement, with some students even achieving high scores on their extended responses.

Elena [focus group] added, “Is it possible? Absolutely. Is it a lot of hard work? Definitely. They need to be taught—this is what an SCR is, this is what they're looking for, this is the criteria.”

Chris [focus group] agreed:

The same goes for extended constructed responses. Here’s the idea you need to state; each paragraph must include your ideas supported by evidence. You also need strong topic and conclusion sentences, along with clear transitions. This needs to be explicitly taught.

This quote emphasized Chris's belief that teaching extended constructed responses required a clear and structured approach and that those elements must be explicitly taught to students for

success. In the interviews teachers expressed that transitioning to these new writing expectations was challenging, but they also discussed how they found ways to adapt through the support of school and district leadership.

Sam [interview] remarked:

I'd say our district is doing the best they can. This is only our second year of implementation, and last year only a couple of campuses were involved. This year, they've required all campuses across the district to use the mandated HQIM resources. Honestly, they're doing everything they can to support us. If we have questions, they're responsive, and if you're feeling overwhelmed, they'll send someone to observe and help.

Sam's quote recognized the district's efforts to support teachers and expressed that the district was responsive to her needs and willing to aid through observation and guidance if she felt overwhelmed.

Elena [interview] stated:

At our campus, we're very fortunate to have a great principal and PLC time built into four out of five days. We get an extra 45-minute block before the kids go to specials, and our district has really embraced the new curriculum, giving us time for internalization. I feel very supported here.

In this quote, Elena emphasized the positive impact of strong leadership, collaborative PLC time, and an extra dedicated planning block. She also mentioned how the district's implementation of the new curriculum provided teachers with valuable time for internalization.

Chris [interview] asserted:

Our admin is always asking, "What can we do to make this easier? What do you need help with? This is not a gotcha." We're lucky to have that support, but I know that's not

the case at every campus. There are teachers, even in our own district, who are new to teaching and feel like they're drowning. They've asked for help, but haven't received the support they need. It's sad, but thankfully that hasn't been my experience.

In this quote, Chris emphasized the supportive and approachable nature of the administration, highlighting their commitment to helping teachers by asking how they can make things easier. She expresses gratitude for the support she personally receives, recognizing that not all educators share the same experience.

While all three teachers agreed that district and school support enhanced the success of the initiatives, Elena and Chris expressed additional perspectives. Elena [focus group] reminded the group that student struggles are a natural part of the developmental process of writing and doesn't always correlate to the success of the initiative, but should still be considered. Reflecting on the diverse levels of proficiency of the students in her classroom, Chris [focus group] agreed:

I understand that language acquisition, whether learning a new language or your native one, follows a step-by-step process. Writing, though, is much further down the road—it's a complex and integral part of language that requires a deep understanding to do well and do correctly.

In this quote, Chris acknowledged that language acquisition followed a gradual, step-by-step process, but she differentiated writing as a more advanced skill requiring a deeper understanding to master effectively.

She [focus group] also shared:

I feel like students are delving deeper into the writing process at an earlier age. I know with my first-grade daughter, some of the writing she brings home blows me away. I taught first grade years ago, and what she's doing now is very different. Back then, the

focus was mainly on teaching reading, and writing came much later in the year. But now, she's bringing home full paragraphs in October, and it's not just her—it's the whole class. So, I think the approach is working in getting students to write at an earlier age. Chris reflected on the noticeable shift in the writing process, and noted that students are now engaging in writing at a much earlier age and thus believed that the new approach was effective in encouraging earlier writing development for students.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the data revealed that the new literacy initiatives in Texas significantly influenced the instructional decision-making and writing practices of Elena, Sam, and Chris. The major themes that emerged were teacher support and resources, instructional decision-making, challenges, teacher motivation and attitudes, and teacher perceptions. The focus group discussion and individual interviews provided detailed accounts of the factors shaping teachers' experiences and perspectives on Texas' literacy initiatives, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

In recent years, educational policies at the state, district, and campus levels have increasingly emphasized the importance of literacy initiatives in shaping instructional practices (Schwartz, 2022). Despite the well-intentioned mandates, concerns are growing about how these policies are perceived and implemented by those directly affected: the teachers. Understanding teachers' perspectives and experiences with these literacy initiatives is crucial for evaluating the effectiveness and practicality of such mandates (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2020). As a part of sufficient student literacy, urgency surrounds reading instruction—yet writing is neglected—negatively impacting overall literacy outcomes (Coker et al., 2018). Additionally, while these initiatives aim to improve literacy proficiency, they may also introduce challenges and tensions in teachers' writing instructional practices (Ahmed et al., 2022).

This study aimed to explore third-grade teachers' perceptions and experiences with the new literacy initiatives in Texas, specifically examining how these initiatives influenced their writing instruction approach. The goal was to identify the challenges and contextual factors affecting teachers' instructional decision-making and teaching practices, providing insights to inform discussions with policymakers and advocating for shifts toward prioritizing evidence-based writing instruction. This research explored two central questions: How do teachers perceive their experiences with literacy initiatives as mandated at various levels of the education system? What do teachers identify as the challenges and tensions in their writing instructional practices?

Sensemaking theory was used to explore how teachers interpret and make sense of the literacy initiatives within their classrooms, helping to understand how they navigate complex, often ambiguous situations and adapt their practices based on their experiences and the context

of their teaching environment. Addressing these questions offered valuable insights into the intersection of policy and practice, highlighting areas for potential improvement in literacy education. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the answers to the research questions and explores the aligned themes from the data analysis. The implications for practice and potential directions for future research are also discussed, with consideration of the study's limitations.

The analysis revealed five primary themes from the results: teacher support and resources, instructional decision-making, challenges, teacher motivation and attitudes, and teacher perceptions. Within these overarching themes, eight subthemes emerged, providing further insight into specific aspects of the teaching experience (see figure 4.1). By examining these emergent themes and subthemes, I identified key areas for support, potential barriers to effective teaching, and strategies to enhance teacher efficacy and student outcomes. Additionally, the findings could inform policy discussions, help shape more effective, evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction, and address educators' challenges to implement these initiatives.

Some subthemes revealed unexpected insights into the teaching experience. While teacher support and resources were the most prominent themes based on coding quantification, instructional materials emerged as the key factor for success, with peers, mentors, and instructional coaches mentioned but deemed less critical. In instructional decision-making, the policy that drives the initiatives is ranked low, while instructional strategies are ranked second, just behind instructional materials and resources. Teachers' challenges in writing instruction were primarily related to instructional materials, instructional strategies, assessment pressure, sense of efficacy, student readiness/differentiation, frustration/burnout, effectiveness, and implementation.

The Answer

The teachers in this study perceived their experiences with literacy initiatives as mandated at various levels of the education system as difficult, yet necessary. While they recognized the importance of these initiatives in improving student outcomes, they felt overwhelmed by the pace of implementation, the complexity of the new expectations, and the lack of adequate resources and professional development to fully support them in adapting their teaching practices. The teachers in this study identified the challenges and tensions in their writing instructional practices as stemming from the increased demands of academic writing, the limited time and resources available for writing instruction, and balancing the diverse needs of their students with the pressure to meet standardized testing requirements.

Sensemaking theory facilitated discovery of the answers by providing a framework for understanding how the teachers in this study actively constructed meaning from the changes imposed by literacy mandates, helping to reveal how they adapted, resisted, or redefined their instructional practices in response to these shifts. Sensemaking theory also illuminated how teachers navigated the complexities of balancing their existing teaching strategies with the new requirements, providing valuable insights into their decision-making processes and efforts to make sense of the evolving educational landscape.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the findings seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the results in relation to the research objectives. This study aimed to explore how third-grade ELAR teachers in Texas perceived the effectiveness and impact of the new literacy initiatives on their instructional practices, particularly in teaching writing, and how their approaches have evolved since the implementation of the policies. By analyzing the data, this section delves into the

emerging implications, patterns, and relationships that surfaced throughout the study. It also examines how these findings align with or differ from existing research, providing insight into their significance and broader implications for teaching practices and policy development.

Teacher Support and Resources: Instructional Materials

All participants viewed access to instructional materials as essential, prioritizing and utilizing specific resources and programs to explore new content and pedagogical strategies. The two teachers who possessed an understanding of the research driving the Texas literacy initiatives were better equipped to critically evaluate instructional materials. However, the teacher with less understanding and experience placed an emphasis on ready-made programs and content which fostered a more transactional view of teaching.

A notable trend for all was a preference for structured, ready-made resources. Structured programs and materials, such as those acquired by the district or accessible online platforms, provided relief by offering turnkey solutions that minimized the time and effort required to create or adapt lessons. Online platforms such as *Teachers Pay Teachers*, *Pinterest*, *Facebook* groups, and *TikTok* have become popular sources for educators seeking inspiration, supplemental materials, or quick solutions to immediate instructional needs. The main challenge lies in balancing the benefits of readily available resources with an evidence-based instructional approach that ensures that all students receive equitable, high-quality literacy instruction. In some instances, there is an overreliance on pre-packaged materials to construct lessons instead of cultivating a flexible, nuanced understanding of teaching and learning. Teachers need guidance on how to integrate high-quality instructional materials while gaining a deeper understanding of instructional strategies that promote meaningful progress (Choppin et al., 2022). This is important because teachers with strong literacy expertise effectively use materials to assess

students accurately, provide targeted interventions, and implement diverse strategies to support various stages of literacy development (Fisher & Lapp, 2024).

In Texas, high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) are designed to align with the state's academic standards, support effective teaching practices, and enhance student engagement and success. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has emphasized the importance of HQIM to ensure teachers have access to comprehensive, evidence-based resources, particularly as the state transitions to more rigorous curriculum standards and prepares students for assessments such as the STAAR test. Given that teachers considered access to instructional materials crucial for engaging with new content and pedagogical strategies, it is the responsibility of educational leaders to thoroughly evaluate district-acquired HQIM programs to ensure they meet the needs of both educators and students for optimal outcomes.

Teacher Perceptions: Implementation & Effectiveness of Texas Literacy Initiatives

Teachers assessed the initiative's effectiveness by evaluating how well it aligned with their teaching methods and addressed the diverse needs of their students. They tracked progress through observations of student growth and improvements in the quality of work. While formal assessments, like standardized tests and benchmark exams, offered some insight into academic development, writing is a complex skill, and these assessments do not fully capture the nuances of student progress. It was interesting to note that the criteria for success were not aligned with state, district, or campus expectations. While a list of non-negotiables was referenced for areas like curriculum and instruction, assessment, and professional learning, there was no clear science of reading journey with measurable markers and check-ins to guide continuous improvement or to analyze and evaluate best practices.

Teachers acknowledged the potential benefits of the new literacy initiatives but felt cautious and uncertain about their ability to implement them effectively. They expressed a need for more time and resources to fully assess the initiative's impact. While teachers remain optimistic about their ability to improve student literacy and have observed early signs of success—such as increased student engagement—the challenges of continued implementation hamper these positive feelings.

Challenges – Assessment Pressure & Student Readiness/Differentiation

In Texas, teacher evaluations and job security are closely tied to student performance on the STAAR test, which has significantly heightened stress, particularly for teachers in underperforming schools with many students needing additional support. The intense focus on test preparation and student performance often created an urgent pressure to cover all required TEKS for ELAR within a limited timeframe. While strong literacy instruction was crucial, the emphasis on test preparation narrowed the curriculum, reducing time and attention for the science and art of teaching—what the teachers described as teacher craft. As a result, teachers felt compelled to prioritize preparing students for the assessments, leaving little room for writing instruction. When this happens, struggling students do not receive the additional support they need, and advanced learners are not sufficiently challenged to reach their full potential (Glass & Marzano, 2018).

Teachers expressed concerns about the varying levels of student readiness and the complexity of needs when planning writing instruction. Time constraints compounded these challenges, limiting their ability to explore and implement strategies that could enhance learning and engagement. Writing readiness is a multifaceted concept that requires attention to cognitive, linguistic, and developmental factors (Ahmed et al., 2022). Cognitive readiness refers to

students' ability to think critically and logically, influencing their capacity to plan, organize, and structure their writing effectively. Linguistic readiness involves proficiency in language skills, including vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, while emotional readiness is tied to a student's confidence, motivation, and willingness to engage in writing tasks. Developmental factors also play a crucial role in shaping students' writing approaches; younger or less experienced writers may require more foundational instruction, while more advanced students may benefit from opportunities to refine and expand their skills (Ahmed et al., 2022; Graham, 2019).

Differentiating writing instruction involves tailoring support, choices, and challenges to meet the diverse needs of students. By adjusting content, processes, products, and the learning environment, teachers can help all students improve their writing skills. However, this approach demands additional time and effort to design tasks, assess individual needs, and provide personalized feedback (Graham, 2019; Graham & Harris, 2016). Balancing the needs of students at varying levels can be challenging—some require scaffolding and support, while others thrive with opportunities for greater independence and challenge. Teachers need effective strategies to keep students on track, facilitate productive peer feedback, and address the needs of those working independently (Graham, 2019). Successfully implementing differentiated instruction often requires ongoing professional development and coaching to continually refine and enhance teaching practices.

Instructional Decision-Making – Instructional Strategies

Instructional decision-making involves the choices teachers make when designing, structuring, and organizing lessons to meet the diverse needs of their students. It requires anticipating potential challenges, selecting the most effective teaching strategies, and adapting as

needed to ensure students reach the desired literacy learning outcomes. Beyond selecting resources that enhance learning, teachers must determine the most appropriate teaching methods that align with both the content and students' needs. In this study teachers incorporated teacher craft, utilized rubrics, integrated different types of writing instruction, and employed digital tools and platforms.

Rubrics

Writing rubrics for third-grade students was an efficient tool for guiding and assessing writing development for the teachers in this study. By setting clear expectations, rubrics helped students understand what was required in each aspect of their writing while providing a framework for skill growth (Rietdijk et al., 2017). Teachers used rubrics to provide objective feedback, which increased students' awareness of the criteria and encouraged them to take ownership of their work. Rubrics offered a consistent, transparent approach for evaluating student performance, making it easier for both students and parents to understand the assessment criteria.

However, there was a strong call for more comprehensive training to help teachers effectively use these rubrics during the planning, instruction, and assessment phases of writing instruction. Teachers felt that they needed more professional development to fully understand how to interpret and apply the rubrics in ways that would support student growth. Another key concern was how to make the STAAR rubrics more student-friendly. Teachers emphasized the importance of ensuring that students could clearly understand the criteria being used to assess their writing. Suggestions included simplifying the language of the rubrics, offering clearer examples of what each level of performance looks like, and potentially incorporating visual aids or rubrics that students could refer to throughout the writing process.

Varied Writing Instruction

The STAAR test features two primary types of constructed response questions designed to assess students' ability to think critically, organize their thoughts, and communicate ideas clearly through writing. Short-constructed response questions require students to provide brief, focused answers to specific questions based on a passage or set of information. These responses are typically straightforward and assess students' ability to recall, summarize, or explain key concepts from the text. In contrast, extended constructed response questions require students to write longer, more detailed responses, often involving deeper analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of the text (Texas Education Agency, 2024b). These types of questions aim to measure a student's ability to synthesize information, make inferences, and present well-organized arguments or perspectives.

However, this testing format (and related instruction) does not fully capture the breadth of the writing process or the variety of writing genres necessary for students to succeed in real-world communication. The STAAR assessment is primarily focused on assessing students' ability to respond to texts in structured ways, which limits the scope of writing skills it evaluates. Specifically, it doesn't account for the various stages of the writing process—such as brainstorming, drafting, revising, and editing—which are essential skills for students to develop. Furthermore, the types of writing assessed, primarily analytical or expository in nature, do not reflect the full range of writing genres students encounter in both academic and everyday settings. Teachers expressed the need for creative writing because it fosters critical thinking, encourages students to explore their own voices, and allows them to engage with language in a more personal and dynamic way. The absence of creative writing in instruction means that students' growth as expressive, innovative writers is not fully supported.

Digital Tools

In addition to offering students the chance to practice the keyboarding skills required for the STAAR test, digital platforms provided valuable opportunities for real-time feedback from both teachers and peers. This technology enabled teachers to offer immediate comments, suggestions, and guidance on students' drafts, and helped to steer the revision process in a timely and constructive manner. By receiving instant feedback, students were able to refine their ideas while they were still fresh in their minds and make meaningful improvements to their writing in the moment.

Peer feedback played an equally crucial role in this collaborative environment. The process of reviewing someone else's writing required students to analyze and evaluate ideas carefully, which also strengthened their ability to think critically about their own work. Additionally, offering constructive criticism in a respectful and thoughtful manner helped students refine their communication skills, teaching them how to express feedback in ways that was both helpful and considerate. Overall, digital platforms not only enhanced students' writing skills but also cultivated a learning environment where students are active participants in both their own growth and the growth of their peers.

These findings imply a need for a more holistic approach to writing instruction and assessment—one that encompasses a wider variety of writing genres and addresses the entire writing process. This approach will better prepare students for the diverse writing challenges they will encounter both in school and in their future endeavors. Effective writing instruction goes beyond simply covering the content specified in the assessed curriculum; it involves employing targeted, research-based teaching strategies that foster continuous growth in students' writing abilities. Teachers must be flexible, adapting and modifying their instructional practices

to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners, from struggling writers to those with more advanced skills. Thoughtful instructional decision-making in literacy ensures that every student receives the support necessary to become both proficient and confident in their reading and writing abilities (Graham & Harris, 2016; Graham, 2020).

Teacher Motivation and Attitudes – Sense of Efficacy & Frustration/Burnout

Efficacy

In light of the new Texas literacy initiatives, a teacher's sense of efficacy plays a vital role in sustaining motivation and cultivating a positive learning environment, especially as they face the growing challenges of standardized testing and curriculum changes. Teachers who feel confident in their ability to support students through the intricacies of writing instruction are more likely to embrace innovative strategies and invest in their students' development. However, the pressure to meet evolving literacy standards and adapt to more rigid, test-driven writing tasks may undermine this sense of efficacy.

Teachers who have confidence in their ability to teach writing are more likely to implement effective strategies, remain persistent in the face of challenges, and foster a classroom environment that encourages engagement, motivation, and positive behavior. Rather than feeling overwhelmed or discouraged, these teachers tend to explore alternative approaches, adapt their instruction, or provide additional support to ensure student success. Their belief in their teaching abilities directly impacts how they engage with students, design lessons, and address difficulties, all of which contribute to improved student achievement (Bingham & Gerde, 2023; Harward et al., 2014).

Professional learning, collaboration with colleagues, peer observations, and participation in online communities offer valuable opportunities to strengthen teacher self-efficacy. By

gaining new skills, staying informed about best practices, and reflecting on their teaching strategies, teachers are better equipped to enhance their effectiveness. This ongoing development not only helps them navigate the evolving demands of their role but also fosters a sense of accomplishment, which further reinforces their confidence and sense of efficacy.

Frustration and Burnout

The demands on third-grade literacy teachers under the new Texas literacy initiatives have increased significantly, leading to a heavier workload and heightened expectations. A combination of intensive training requirements, a disconnect between policy and classroom realities, limited writing resources, emotional strain, and rising accountability pressures has had a profound impact on teachers' professional performance and personal well-being. It is crucial for school systems to recognize these challenges and provide the necessary support to ensure teachers can thrive in their roles and continue to positively impact student learning.

While early signs of student progress, such as increased engagement, were encouraging, teachers recognized that sustained growth would require ongoing effort and adaptability. They expressed uncertainty about how to address persistent learning gaps and provide the necessary differentiated support, all while managing resistance to change in their classrooms. The combination of increased workload and expectations, inadequate support and training, a gap between policy and practice, tension between autonomy and compliance, mounting accountability demands, and the emotional labor of teaching led at times to frustration and diminished morale. To mitigate this, school systems could provide ongoing support, professional development, and realistic expectations to help teachers sustain their sense of efficacy and maintain their enthusiasm for fostering students' writing growth under the new initiatives.

Implications for Theory and Research

In this study, sensemaking theory offered a framework for understanding how teachers made sense of and responded to the complex demands of the new Texas literacy initiatives and writing instruction. Sensemaking theory emphasizes the process through which people gather information, create meaning, and take action when faced with events or circumstances that are unclear or contradictory (DeHart, 2020; Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is a dynamic process of interpretation, in this case whereas individuals and as a group, they actively constructed their understandings of events to align with their interpretations. Furthermore, sensemaking as a collaborative process among colleagues is essential, as there is a notable difference between navigating these challenges alone and doing so collectively.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study have significant implications for both instructional practices and policy development regarding literacy education. First, they highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of how literacy initiatives impact teachers' instructional strategies, especially in the area of writing. The results suggest that while some educators have successfully adapted to the new initiatives, others face challenges that may require targeted support, such as professional development focused on writing instruction and ongoing collaboration among teachers.

Given the changes in teachers' approaches to writing instruction since the implementation of the new policies, it is essential that policymakers consider the diverse needs of educators when designing and rolling out future literacy initiatives. The study emphasizes the importance of aligning these initiatives with the practical realities of the classroom, ensuring that teachers have the resources and training necessary to effectively implement new strategies.

The goal of the mandated Texas Reading Academies was to deliver statewide professional development that equips teachers with the foundational knowledge for teaching reading and writing, while fostering a common language and shared understanding of professional learning expectations and experiences. However, there seems to be a misalignment between how the science of reading and different components of the literacy initiatives are defined at the state level, communicated at the district level, and understood at the classroom level. It is essential to establish a shared, common language around policy, expectations, and implementation. Additionally, there should be continuous discussions and sensemaking among stakeholders to clarify and calibrate the distinctions between research, evidence-based practices, curriculum, and instruction.

Access to instructional materials is pivotal in how teachers approach and implement teaching strategies. As educators navigate the complexity of meeting literacy mandates and student performance expectations, they often struggle to prioritize specific programs with broader pedagogical strategies. This challenge has become more pronounced due to the demands of the classroom, where diverse student needs, varying levels of academic readiness, and an expanding array of core and supplemental instructional tools intersect (Choppin et al., 2022).

Under growing pressure to meet educational mandates and student performance expectations, many teachers lean towards structured, ready-made resources to efficiently address their instructional needs. It's crucial to prioritize and differentiate the purpose of materials, resources, and programs within the broader context of instructional decision-making and best practices. We must ensure that teacher-friendly materials align with both the standards and rigor required by the Texas literacy initiatives.

A comprehensive approach to writing instruction combines a robust literacy curriculum with teaching methods informed by both pedagogy and content knowledge. Without expertise in these areas, educators may find it challenging to make the subject matter accessible to all students or to select the most effective instructional strategies (Higgs-Coulthard & DeFauw, 2022). Common instructional strategies include differentiating assignments based on students' abilities, offering choices in topics or genres, and providing scaffolding and support for both struggling and advanced writers (Graham & Harris, 2016).

Effective instructional decision-making in literacy is crucial for student success in reading and writing. It requires carefully selecting and adapting teaching strategies to meet diverse literacy needs, skills, and backgrounds (Graham & Harris, 2016). When teachers are not confident writers themselves, they may prioritize materials and activities that keep students busy, rather than engaging them in the productive struggle of learning how to write. Professional development that deepens pedagogical content knowledge and connects theory to practice is essential to support teachers in improving their instructional effectiveness.

Writing is a complex skill, and students' struggles do not always point to shortcomings in the curriculum or teaching methods. The success of a writing program should be evaluated from multiple perspectives, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative data that reflects student progress, engagement, and academic growth (Fisher & Lapp, 2024). To achieve this, it is crucial to effectively assess student development through various types of writing assessments.

Limitations

Due to the specific sample selected for the study—third-grade ELAR teachers in Texas public schools—the results are not transferable to populations beyond this group. Texas' education system is defined by a mix of state-level policies, local control, and a focus on

standardized testing and accountability. Local school districts have significant autonomy in decisions about curriculum, instruction, and budgeting, with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) setting the educational standards. Texas uses its own testing system, STAAR, which heavily influences school ratings, funding, and teacher evaluations. The state's funding relies on local property taxes, leading to disparities between wealthy and low-income districts. Texas also emphasizes school choice, with numerous charter schools offering flexible curricula. Teacher certification and professional development are regulated by the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the state has a large population of English Language Learners, influencing its educational policies.

Another limitation is the use of self-selected participants in the research. Since the participants volunteered, they may have particular characteristics, interests, or motivations that differ from those who chose not to participate. This introduces potential selection bias, meaning the sample may not represent the full range of perspectives within the larger population of third-grade ELAR teachers in Texas public schools. Therefore, this limitation should be considered when interpreting the results. Future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample to improve the validity and overall reliability of the findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study, being a small-scale investigation within a specific context—Texas—highlights several opportunities for future research. Given the unique nature of the study's context, it would be valuable to expand research to include a broader range of teachers across different contexts, such as rural, urban, and public charter schools, in other grade levels and/or states with similar initiatives to explore whether the findings hold true in varying educational environments.

Additionally, further research could revisit the current participants to gather more in-depth insights into their perspectives on instructional coaching. Although instructional coaching is widely regarded as a high-leverage practice for improving teaching, participants in this study perceived it as having a low impact. Re-engaging with participants could help clarify the factors influencing these perceptions and provide a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of instructional coaching for new literacy practices.

Another avenue for future research is adopting a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data. This would enable a more thorough exploration of the topic, combining statistical insights with detailed, context-rich narratives. Such an approach could provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and contextual factors shaping teachers' instructional decisions and practices, offering valuable insights to inform policymakers and support a shift toward prioritizing evidence-based writing instruction.

Finally, this research adds to the ongoing conversation about evidence-based practices in literacy instruction, highlighting the need for further studies to understand the long-term impact of policy-driven changes on teaching practices and student achievement. Future research could investigate how various implementation models affect student outcomes. By examining how teachers navigate and respond to educational reforms, this study calls for a more flexible and responsive approach to policy implementation—one that incorporates teacher feedback and aligns with the practical realities of the classroom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on literacy instruction by offering a deeper understanding of how some third-grade educators navigate the

complexities of teaching English Language Arts and Reading under Texas's new literacy initiatives. By focusing on the lived experiences of teachers, this research highlights the factors that shape instructional decision-making and the implementation of writing instruction strategies. The findings underscore the importance of ongoing professional development, collaborative support, and the alignment of resources to support effective literacy practices. Ultimately, this research aims to inform policymakers, school leaders, and educators themselves in their efforts to improve literacy outcomes for students, ensuring that instructional practices are both responsive and evidence-based, and that barriers to student achievement are effectively addressed.

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Appendix A - Focus Group Guide/Protocol

Welcome and Session Introduction (Lone Star Literacy)

Welcome and thank you for taking the time to join us today. My name is Octavia Gray-Essex, and I will be the facilitator for today's session.

The purpose of today is to hear your thoughts, feelings, and opinions on perceptions and experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas. Whatever you share will be used to create a composite picture of strengths to leverage, challenges to address, and improvement strategies to prioritize. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, so if there are any topics you don't feel comfortable talking about, feel free to refrain from participating in that part of the discussion. Your specific comments will not be attached to your name, for the sake of your privacy. You are also free to exit the Zoom session at any time.

This session will last about 150 minutes. Our discussion today will move briskly, and there will be times that we have to move on from a topic though you may have more to say. In cases like these, please feel free to place your comments in the chat and I will retrieve them at the end of the session.

The session will be audio- and video-recorded via the Zoom online platform. The recording is for my own transcription and analysis efforts, and will not be shared. All information will remain confidential, and my notes will contain no data linking participants to specific statements.

Ground Rules

"I want to share some important ground rules before we get started."

1. There are no right or wrong answers.
2. When you do have something to say, please do so. I want to hear from all of you.
3. Try not to interrupt when people are speaking.
4. You do not have to agree with the views of other people in the group, but please be respectful of the other participants in this room.

5. To ensure that everyone feels comfortable sharing openly and honestly in today's session, we ask that you do not share details of today's discussion outside of this room.

Participant Introductions

"I'd like to ask everyone to introduce themselves. Can you go around the room and share your name (and role if applicable)?"

Ice Breaker

"We will begin today's session with an ice breaker." (Something that made you smile today.)

Questions

1. What are your overall thoughts on the effectiveness of the Texas literacy initiatives?
2. What are your overall thoughts on the effectiveness of the new literacy initiatives in teaching writing?
3. In your opinion, what are the strengths of the new literacy initiatives when it comes to teaching writing?
4. What specific aspects of the initiatives have been most beneficial for your students?
5. What challenges, if any, have you encountered when implementing the new literacy initiatives in your writing instruction?
6. What additional support or resources do you believe would improve your ability to teach writing under the new literacy initiatives?
7. If you could change one aspect of the new literacy initiatives related to writing instruction, what would it be?
8. What improvements or changes would you suggest to better support teachers in teaching writing under these initiatives?

Conclusion

"Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today. The information you shared will be invaluable as we move forward with our efforts. Before we wrap up, is there anything you wanted to share with us that I didn't ask about?"

“As a friendly reminder, the second phase of this study includes follow-up individual interviews to further explore specific themes that emerge from today’s focus group. These interviews will also be conducted online via Zoom and will last approximately 60 minutes and be recorded for research purposes”.

Thank you for your participation in this research study. I appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to sharing your experiences, and your insights and feedback will play a crucial role in achieving the research goals.

Appendix B - Lone Star Literacy Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. This interview serves as a continuation of the insights gathered during the focus group discussion. Before we start, I'd like to provide some background information and answer any questions that you may have.

Third grade constitutes a critical transition when students are expected to shift from learning to read to reading to learn across the curriculum. For decades, there has been a nationwide campaign on the importance of third grade reading and the impact on graduation rates and life beyond K-12. The urgency related to third grade literacy instruction focuses primarily on reading, although writing is also a critical component of foundational literacy skills. My aim is to explore third grade teachers' perceptions and experiences teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas. This investigation will seek to understand the factors that influence your instructional decision-making processes and teaching practices.

Your interview responses will be confidential and will not be disclosed to anyone in your school district. Data from educators across the state of Texas will be combined and not connected to individual districts, individual campuses, or individual employees. Upon conclusion of the study, the notes will be referenced only for emerging needs. Please note, this is not an evaluation of any individual teacher, school district, or campus. This process is part of a much larger effort of collecting and analyzing data from many sources to create a composite picture of strengths to leverage, key challenges to address, and improvement strategies to prioritize.

You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Follow Up Interview Questions - Teaching Writing Under the New Literacy Initiatives

1. On a scale from 1 to 10, how confident do you feel in your ability to effectively teach writing under the new literacy initiatives? Why?
2. How much time do you typically dedicate to writing instruction?
3. Which writing frameworks or approaches do you use in your instruction?
4. What resources do you use when teaching writing? (e.g., textbooks, digital tools, specific curricula)
5. Have the new literacy initiatives changed your approach to teaching writing?
6. What specific challenges have you faced in teaching writing under these initiatives?
7. What strategies or resources have you found most effective in teaching writing under the new initiatives?
8. How do your students respond to the new writing curriculum?
9. How supported do you feel by your school/district in implementing these initiatives?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience teaching writing under the new literacy initiatives in Texas?

Thank you for your participation in this research study. I appreciate the time and effort you dedicated to sharing your experiences, and your insights and feedback will play a crucial role in achieving the research goals.