

# WORKING PAPERS/DRAFT

Identifying Effective Assessment and Remediation Tools for Struggling Writers:

An Urban Elementary Public School, Middle Grade (4<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup>) Focus

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December 15, 2017

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### **Abstract**

This present study serves as an examination of the use of self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) as a scaffolding instructional approach and tool to help urban-dwelling students learn, use, and adopt the tools employed by skilled writers. It is an approach that adds the element of student self-regulation to instruction. Teachers received a brief professional learning community (PLC) demonstration of SRSD instruction. The research focus was in a 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade urban public school setting. For this study, these grades were known as a middle grade classification. This was a small study of 33 randomly-selected students ranging in those five grade levels, from a school of approximately 600. Scientific results are quantitative and qualitative. They include statistically significant differences from the benchmark Test of Integrated Language and Literacy Skills (TILLS) set of four subtests focusing on three components of written expression. The fourth test of reading fluency was a requirement to the administration of the written expression subtests. The benchmark was administered near the end of January 2017. The posttest was administered five-plus months later, just shy of the recommended six-month time span, due to circumstances beyond my control. The standard scale score has a mean equal to 10 (mean=10) with a standard deviation of 3 (SD=3). The TILLS Percentile rank was used for graphing purposes so that a more universal comparison of the students' progress would be more easily visualized. The students' results were measured, recorded and compared to the benchmark. Analysis followed. Teacher survey responses were factored in. There was additional data from the writing portion of The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessment, which provided year-end results of student performance across all five grade levels. These results serve as a foundation for future research using SRSD as a tool to improve written expression and conventions. Multiple measures of data were used to draw specific conclusions.

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Writing, as a form of communication, is a metacognitive requirement for success; however, not enough 21<sup>st</sup> century urban-dwelling students, many of whom have natal bilingual exposure, have mastered the skills and conventions of effective written expression. In the case of this study, the second language is Spanish. This study focuses on finding solutions to a deficit in written expression and convention knowledge, district-wide, which has been monitored, but not actively corrected for years. The purpose of this study is to offer one potential solution.

### Personal Experience

As a young middle school student in Maryland, I do not recall the details that defined my own writing roadmap, but I do know that my teachers provided generous amounts of support, which helped me to become a rather prolific and effusive writer, over time. My school maintained a rich learning environment in which I found joy and a desire to build upon those fledgling skills. As I got older, I developed and continue to sustain my life-long lexicon, constantly learning new words and building my working vocabulary through reading. Reading fluency input is directly related to written expression output as reflected in the assessment design used for this research assignment (Nelson, 2016). As a prospective educational leader, I would like to pass on the ability to write well to both educators and students alike.

The class sizes were significantly smaller in my small private all-girls college preparatory school, (which I attended from 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades), compared to the urban-centered public school in which I currently teach eighth grade English language arts (ELA). The purpose for mentioning class size is in direct correlation to the amount of attention and one-to-one instructional time a teacher has available to spend with his or her students.

My experience developing a love of words, syntax construction, paragraph flow, message making and general writing conventions was amplified by working with an assortment of public

relations professionals in a high-profile corporate communications management job. This career experience along with over 13 years as a high school substitute teacher and elementary/middle school para-educator in New Jersey is the lynchpin of my work as a highly-qualified middle school ELA teacher. As a dually certified teacher (general and special education) as well as an Orton-Gillingham therapist (OGT), I use my OGT multisensory training when teaching literacy, particularly writing using the senses -visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile techniques. This tactic appeals to all children.

One example of an OGT technique to help students remember to self-correct their sentences is the C.O.P.S. strategy. We call it, 'Calling the C.O.P.S.' on your sentence. The activity is often accompanied by sirens and an illustration of a police officer, thus the sensory motor responses of sight and sound. In the C.O.P.S. strategy, the C stands for capitalization; the O stands for organization or overall sentence structure; the P stands for punctuation; and the S stands for spelling (spelling must initially be monitored by the teacher most of the time). The strategy is used repeatedly with and scaffolded by the teacher, until it becomes ingrained in the student's mental file cabinet. There is an assortment of similar mnemonic (phrase for remembering) devices that students can use, learn and retain. The assessment and writing skill activity tools discussed in this study are authentic and designed primarily for clinicians of students with language struggles; however, I would like to see if they can be tailored to general classroom use.

Although a study from right before the turn of the century espouses that "the results of the meta-analyses suggest that on average students who use computers when learning to write are not only more engaged and motivated in their writing, but they produce written work that is of greater length and higher quality," (Goldberg, Russell & Cook, 2003) it has been my experience

that the urban students have to jump two hurdles before creating great written expression on the computer. Those hurdles are (1) recording the conventions properly while getting their thoughts out; and (2) knowing how to type efficiently and quickly.

My research will shed light on a problem-solution model addressing the substandard written expression plaguing the school district in which I work. I will examine some of the reasons why urban youth struggle to write and how educators might be able to rectify the situation. The first job is to assess student ability for obtaining a baseline benchmark and then follow through to provide a range of specific remedies before administering a post-test. My goal is to present data, which will enhance curriculum design for writing.

#### Nature of the Issue Under Study

When I came to this district, I saw a weakness in student writing ability, teacher writing-teaching time as well as low teacher confidence/knowledge about the subject of writing and the teaching of writing. I knew that teachers needed to raise the administration's awareness so that change could be affected. Writing well is necessary for successful communication. It is a crucial life skill, which can determine choice job opportunities and, when not mastered, can undermine them. Students need to be assessed to determine comparative ability level for written expression and then teachers need to create and implement multiple measures that accompany a variety of evidence-based tools to mitigate the deficiencies.

It is important for teachers to be equipped to prepare their students to be successful in college and career, which includes the skill of writing.

As an ELA teacher in a vast Northern New Jersey district, I try to infuse writing opportunities into my lesson planning; however, I am frequently confronted with a lack of (1)

student attainment of grade-level proficiencies; (2) student self-regulation and; (3) low writing stamina, which is epitomized in their low standardized test results.

Writing is a key skill that unfortunately can be a challenge for teachers to teach and students to learn. In the urban school where I teach, the student performance data for writing assessments have been abysmally low for many years throughout grade levels and this can be attributed to not enough time on task, empirical, district-wide data confirms. Recently during a vertical articulation meeting (VAM) in my building, our data-driven vice principal remarked on the overall scores and stated, “Well the writing is low and in the red, which has been the case for a long time” (VP1, personal communication, September 25, 2016). For the last two years, the writing segment of English language arts unit assessment for the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) has been eliminated in our district. This shift away from the written assessments must have been a statewide mandate indicating: (1) that it may have been because of the adoption of the reading and math focuses of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), causing this curriculum shift away from writing instruction and (2) that we were not alone as a district in this mandate.

There is an epidemic of poor writing skills by today’s adolescents. Prior to the elimination of the writing unit evaluation, the data our district received came from a unit assessment given four times a year, testing a variety of writing genres in a scope and sequence after a nine-week course of instruction. In the district, writing instruction time allotment is scheduled at the discretion of each building principal. With many transient families in the district moving from one school to the next, most of the curriculum is aligned, but writing depends on teacher time, talent and resources. Inconsistency of instruction from year-to-year

and from school-location to school-location is another hurdle that many urban students must jump. Many of those transient students fall through the cracks as my research data will attest.

Urban-dwelling students enter school with a variety of disadvantages that arise from their socioeconomic status and prior background knowledge base. Many enter the starting gate of school with below par academic foundational experiences and exposures. Dr. Ruby Payne (2005, p. 135) poses the crucial question with the support of Lewis' research,

How do we break the cycle? Start literacy enrichment in the delivery room; cognition research and infant development studies show “that early language stimulation---from the moment of birth---influences brain development and later learning success.” There should be “support networks” to help young parents from poor means in developing their child’s language abilities (Lewis, 1996, p.

187)

There are parents who struggled in school and that parental influence reflects on to the child, manifesting itself often as high absenteeism, low motivation/low interest and poor follow-through on work tasks (Jensen, 2009). Unlike some countries, we live in one that endeavors to provide a formal education to the entire population. The U.S. mandates that all children be required to get an education, but since we are a country of immigrants, some families come to the U.S. and bring their children from places where education was not a priority and therein lies another preparation disconnect. Even at the beginning, the playing field is not an even one. Some students are born in this country to parents whose first and only language is NOT English, which makes it difficult for these students to (a) receive help with writing assignments at home and (b) practice speaking and writing the English language with their parents. I am describing scenarios from first-hand experience and as a primary source.

Evidence of an issue

In this urban district, for four years, I have held a position as English language arts lead teacher in as many grades, and each year, in each school the students have had below grade level writing skills. This current year during a vertical articulation meeting (VAM) earlier in the year, there was some discussion of how poorly students write and spell across grade levels in our school and the district, with teachers citing questions about what can be done about it. Our vice principal, who is data-driven and initiated the original discussion, brought it up again in another VAM meeting three months later. It is an acknowledged reality that many of our students have immigrated to the United States with little focus on education and some currently live in low-income, poverty-riddled neighborhoods. The brain of a child coming from that background is functioning in a stunted capacity for many reasons. Eric Jensen reveals in his description of the human brain's operating system that "to succeed in school, students need to have an academic operating system in place" (Jensen, 2009). He describes this academic apparatus as a crucial component to succeeding in school. Jensen says the must haves are:

- The ability and motivation to deter gratification and make a sustained effort to meet long-term goals;
- Auditory, visual, and tactile processing skills;
- Attentional skills that enable the student to engage, focus, and disengage as needed;
- Short-term and working memory capacity;
- Sequencing skills (knowing the order of a process); and
- A champion's mind-set and confidence.

These skills form the foundation for school success and can give students the capacity to override the adverse risk factors of poverty. These are not simple study skills; they enable students to focus on, capture, process, evaluate, prioritize, manipulate, and apply or present information in a meaningful way. Without improving the capacities of students' brains to process incoming data, student will not achieve at the same rates as their peers who possess these skills. To improve students' processing capacity, you must give them support as you challenge them. (Jensen, 2009, pp. 55-56)

Though most of the students in my study do not have diagnosed learning differences or disabilities, the poverty element presents challenges to the brain that manifest as a disconnect requiring a creative problem solving approach to teaching how to learn, specifically learning how to write expressively.

In a recent School Improvement Plan (ScIP) meeting, a teacher in her first year in our district responded to her post-observation feedback which stated that she is lacking rigor. The teacher's response was, "How can I teach my students to write paragraphs rigorously when, in the fourth grade, they do not know what an adjective is or how to form sentences properly?" (4<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher, personal communication, November 8, 2016)

For students to attain the skills of writing, they must have supportive scaffolding in place and those supports must be available to students even when there is no teacher around with whom to consult. Writing is often considered by many scholars to be the last literacy skill to be mastered for most students due to its complexity. The reason for the lag relates to multi-leveled structure along with the detachment from self and the required ability to anticipate and meet the needs of a reader (of the written work) other than the self. (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter. 2004)

Students can learn to read through learning to write and vice versa (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter. 2004). The dawn of the digital age has shed light on the possibility that computers will replace the art of handwriting, which some say is already dead. Writing is a metacognitive, fine-motor skill with a neurological connection and many students have not mastered that skill on grade level. (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter. 2004)

The teachers in my study voiced their opinions about their experience in teaching writing (Appendix B). Some found it difficult particularly because of the time constraints of the district's pacing guide.

Successful approaches to this action research hinge on the following: (1) assessing student writing is a one-to-one process, which might be daunting for a teacher with class sizes exceeding 10 students; (2) many teachers will need on-going professional development to execute the task of remediating writing given the time constraints in the district along with the full pacing guide, especially in terms of writing conventions; and (3) the negative attitude about writing, particularly among adolescent students.

#### Focus of proposed research

The focused purpose of this research is to find out if urban middle grade students' written expression skills will measurably improve, across all grade levels tested, after being introduced to a variety of SRSD strategies.

The screening apparatus being used is the groundbreaking assessment tool that tests oral and written language skills in students ages 6-18 years. TILLS a newly marketed screening tool that is backed by 30 years of research coupled with the use of self-regulating strategies by the student writer. This tool which can identify and track a student's strengths and weaknesses. The assessment will occur only after I have provided the teachers in my school training with

SRSD instruction (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004) designed by education researchers Drs. Karen Harris and Steve Graham. The SRSD tool was designed out of the research findings that “three out of every four 4<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students exhibited only partial mastery of the necessary writing skills and knowledge at their respective grade levels” (Persky, Danne, & Jin, 2003).

Students, in this action research project will receive their own copy of *Writing Adventures Workbook & Journal Book 1* (Cargill-Austin. & Padgett, 2011) as a resource to hone their writing skills at each teacher’s discretion. The third writing enhancement tool is one that has been embedded into the curriculum, which is PARCC Writing component, which is a scripted series of PowerPoint Presentations designed to be followed to the letter by teachers as a part of the district’s curriculum initiative to improve students’ written expression for the PARCC tests. It does not address writing conventions, however. Assessment of writing is a key component of a standards-based curriculum model (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015) similar to the one in our district.

As a result of increasing emphasis on educational standards, nationwide writing is playing a greater role in literacy for middle school literacy curriculums. The purpose of this study is to determine if, after obtaining a baseline written expression score for 33 students over five grade levels (consisting mostly of CLD/SES middle grade students), these students can use SRSD methods and regular workbook/journal writing tasks to develop their writing skills and teachers will in turn build their confidence teaching writing through the use of a variety of SDSR strategies.

### Definition of Terms

For this study, the key terms will be defined as follows:

- Self-regulating strategy development (SRSD) model— an implementation model for cognitive strategy instruction and is based on the research work by Graham, Harris, Read, Ryan, Short et.al. According to Read (2005) “The goal of SRSD is to make the use of strategies habitual, flexible, and automatic...” and an instructional approach designed to help students learn, use and adopt the strategies used by skilled writers. It is an approach that adds the element of self-regulation to strategy instruction for writing.
- Scaffolding – “in its literal sense, is an adjustable support used by a construction worker to reach a level higher than otherwise would be possible. Scaffolding as an instructional strategy also provides constructive adjustable support for individual learners.” (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004, p,159)
- Dynamic assessment – uses a pretest – intervention – posttest format to assess a student’s learning potential. It is very different from scaffolding. “Instructors use scaffolding strategies during dynamic assessment to vary intervention and test hypotheses about student learning capabilities.” (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004, p,163)
- Test reliability – refers to the stability with which ability is measured and is critical attribute of research for guiding the selection of an appropriate diagnostic tool when looking at a variety of assessments.
- The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is an end-of-year assessment, which is a product of a unique partnership between local educators and states working together to develop the next generation of testing. “The PARCC assessment system is an annual year-end test in English language arts/literacy and mathematics in grades 3-8 and high school. Many of the old state tests measured only lower-level skills. The new assessments serve as an ‘educational GPS system,’

measuring students' current performance, and pointing the way to what students need to learn by graduation so they are ready for college and/or a career" (parcc-assessment.org)

- TILLS – the Test of Integrated Language and Literacy Skills has been designed to identify language and literacy disorders, to document patterns of relative strengths and weaknesses and to track changes in language and literacy skills over time (6 month intervals). TILLS scale scores are measured with a mean =10 and a standard deviation (SD)=3. (Nelson, 2016)
- TILLS Written expression subtest – an assessment requiring students to read a story and then rewrite that story using more interesting terms and less choppiness. "...is a complex, integrated language task that allows for observation of a student's written expression skills at both sound/word and sentence/discourse levels. This subtest provides three scores that examine three different aspects of writing – a discourse score, a sentence score, and a word score. (Nelson, 2016)
- TILLS Written expression discourse subtest – tests the ability to maintain original content, i.e., writing fluency. (Nelson, 2016)
- TILLS Written expression sentence subtest – tests the ability to use syntax to combine multiple ideas. (Nelson, 2016)
- The TILLS Written expression word subtest – tests the ability to spell real words and inflict them correctly in sentences. (Nelson, 2016)
- TILLS Summary and Interpretation Profile Chart – The purpose is to document patterns of regular strengths and weaknesses. The Profile Chart re-orders the subtests of the TILLS model so that the scores portray a performance profile for the student and scores must be entered carefully and correctly. (Nelson, 2016)

- T-units – syntactic units, consisting of a main clause with every one of its dependent clauses. (Nelson, 2016)
- Measurement error – variability both in child’s performance and in the test administrator’s ability to score the test reliability in my case due to a shortened time interval than prescribed which was out of the test administrator’s control (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997; Haynes & Pindzola, 2004).
- Metacognitive – of or relating to conscious mental change (such as thinking, understanding, learning, remembering).
- Vertical articulation meeting (VAM) – a meeting of peers teaching similar grade levels or similar content to discuss commonalities among students, construct support systems for colleagues and share successful outcomes.
- Middle grades – the leveled sections of assessment monitoring in this study are four through eight (Tompkins, 2010)
- Meta-analysis- “a statistical tool used to summarize the direction and magnitude of the effects obtained in a set of empirical studies examining the same basic phenomena” (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001)
- CLD – culturally and linguistically diverse (Graves & Rueda, 2005, p. 214)
- SES – socioeconomic status (Graves & Rueda, 2005, p. 215)
- OGT – indicates an Orton-Gillingham Therapist certification designated by the International Dyslexia Association and IMSLEC
- IMSLEC – the International Multisensory Structured Language Education Council, a 501(c) (3) organization, which accredits quality Multisensory Structured Language Education (MLSE) training courses.

Research questions:

1. How can the written expression and written convention skills of urban middle grade students measurably improve across grade levels when districts provide teachers with specified time to scaffold and make the necessary improvements in this area?
2. How can SRSD tools focusing on a variety of formal writing genres positively impact teacher instructional effectiveness for raising students' state assessment scores in the writing process for struggling middle grade students in a multi-lingual urban setting?
3. What instructional tools and/or mnemonic devices are on the market, available and currently in use in the ELA classroom for teachers to use to remediate substandard writing in this student population?
4. What would some key elements be in establishing a school-wide pilot program to teach students self-regulating writing process strategies – strategies they can use for a lifetime?
5. How would teachers establish a baseline, monitor progress and then implement multiple tools to scaffold writing strategies?

### Literature Review

Our district has, for the past several years relied upon Columbia Teachers College resident expert, Dr. Lucy Calkins and her Writer's Workshop design to teach fledgling student writers in their most formative stations of cognitive development. I was indoctrinated into the program when I taught 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades all in one year, several years ago. It is a fine program which encourages non-writers to write because it produces a free writing environment.

Dr. Nicola Wolf Nelson, one of the pioneers at the center of the SRSD movement, also subscribes to the concept of a free writing environment. She writes of a classroom not unlike the Writer's Workshop model...

Adding a free writing component to writing lab sessions contributes to a positive classroom culture and conveys to students the encouraging aspects of constructive learning and ownership. To qualify as free writing, no external demands are placed on topics, spelling, or punctuation. Story starters are not compatible with free writing...During free writing, the only directions are to put pencil to paper and write (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004, p.97).

It is interesting to note that Calkins published, *A Guide to the Writer's Workshop, grades 3-5* in 2006, two years after Nelson co-authored *The Writing Lab Approach to Language Instruction and Intervention* (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004, p.97). Nelson's study determines that the "free writing" method is only one of many components to producing good student writers, whereas it is the backbone and core of Calkins' work.

Nelson along with her team of researchers were ahead of their time, when in 2004 she began her work on the writing lab approach; the very concept on which SRSD is based. She commented that explicit instruction was required for all students who presented with language

difficulties. Though most of the students in this urban community were not diagnosed with a learning difficulties, the language barrier did pose a challenge to successful writing. “Students with language needs at the level of syntax include students learning English as a second language, as well as students with disabilities.” (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 33) The second language learners as well as students with disabilities have profound struggles with written sentence construction over the spoken sentence structure. “Both groups may handle syntax adequately for use in spoken social interactions but run into difficulty with the more decontextualized structures of academic language, whether spoken or written” (Cummins, 1984, Tattershall, 2002).

Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1978) is at the core of the self-regulated development theory based in the writing lab approach. Nelson (2004) writes of Vygotsky “[he] explained the social origins of self-control and the development of the mind as a phenomena in which mediation by a more mature learner contributes to cognitive-linguistic development by a less mature learner.” Using the concept of scaffolding – an instructional strategy...provides constructive adjustable support for individual learners.” (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter 2004)

What is the writing lab approach? “The writing lab approach, with its collaborative, inclusive, individualized instruction is appropriate for all students” (Nelson, Bahr, Van Meter, 2004, p.69)

Nelson noted that “sustained writing” is not conducive to a general education because there are always time constraints. This statement was confirmed by the teachers whom I surveyed. Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter espoused years ago (2004) that the writing lab approach (not capitalized) was necessary to “provide opportunities for a team of educators, with parental support, to come together in a collaborative enterprise to address mutual goals.” She defines the

writing lab approach as a way to bring all educational stakeholders together within the existing curriculum to address their mutual goals and “help all of their students become literate and acquire communicative competence”. (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p.5). There is an ownership principal on the part of the students, as well. She deliberately doesn’t capitalize the term writing lab approach (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 7)

In 2016, Nelson created the diagnostic, evaluative tool entitled, *The Test of Language and Literacy Skills* (TILLS) to help therapists and clinicians assess struggling writers, which I used to complete this study.

She writes, “we believe that building better and happier language users and writers requires an accepting attitude on the part of instructors, who delight in students’ unique expressions of ideas and who encourage students to follow their own constructive pathways to make independent decisions.” (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004, p.16) The independent decisions to which this team of researchers refer, pertain directly to self-regulated development strategies.

Since our community is multilingual and multiethnic, it makes sense to briefly spotlight an international angle to a portion of this research question. Writing and writing proficiency is by its very nature one of the hallmarks of critical thinking and critical thinking is a key component of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning model, worldwide.

Writing is [also] an essential part of schooling in all subject matter areas, as it gives students the opportunity to synthesize information from multiple sources and perspectives, to decide what information is relevant and important to share, and to judge how best to organize and present this information, all of which help

students clarify, deepen, and expand their thoughts and feelings about a topic (Bruer, 1999; Lindemann, 1995).

This need to write well spans academic arenas, worldwide. International studies have drawn the same conclusions as those performed in the U.S., with some citing teacher preparedness as well as student discomfort with performing writing tasks.

Writing quality can be perceived by some as a subjective measure (McNamara, Crossley & McCarthy, 2009) and yet, evaluators who are appropriately trained can assess writing with a strongly positive inter-rater reliability. It “is based on readers’ judgment of the overall merit of a paper, taking into consideration factors such as ideation, organization, vocabulary, sentence structure, tone, and so forth” (Graham & Perrin, 2007a). “These evaluations are quantified on a numerical scale, representing a single overall judgment (holistic score) or a score for each attribute assessed analytic score” (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015).

A team of researchers from Portugal and Brazil found by sampling teacher perceptions and practices that teachers weren’t particularly confident in their ability to produce good writers (Viega Simao, Malpique, Frison, Bragagnolo & Marques, 2016). These teachers reported on everything from the time they devoted to teaching writing the different strategies they use to scaffold student writing and self-editing. “Teachers reported little time devoted for writing and the teaching of writing in their classes.” (Veiga, Simao, Malpique, Frison, Bragagnolo & Marques, 2016).

Both Brazilian and Portuguese teachers noted the importance of producing strong student writers. The fact that writing education around the globe is facing similar obstacles and overcoming those obstacles in a similar fashion should be noted, especially since our district instructs students of a diverse grouping of nationalities. Though these teachers were aware of the

importance of teaching writing most of them very infrequently used explicit methods like self-regulated writing. Though once they were more formally and directly taught to use the SRSD practices, a “positive correlation was found between teachers’ preparation to teach writing and their practices to promote students’ self-regulated writing (Veiga, Simao, Malpique, Frison, Bragagnolo & Marques, 2016).

As a teacher of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) urban youth, I understand the value of being able to identify my students’ weaknesses so to better design a fix. It is also important for students to learn to recognize and self-correct errors as an internal process. Even this self-correction process must be modeled and taught explicitly. “Explicit instruction in learning strategies can increase the comfort and learning potential of students needing support” (Graves & Rueda, 2005, p. 220).

Socioeconomic realities affect students’ aptitudes for writing, specifically, and affect emotional connections to school, in general. Sociocultural approaches to learning must be used to affect change for these students, and educators must realize that: “(1) learning is social; (2) learning is facilitated by assisted performance that is responsive to individual needs; (3) learning is mediated by cultural tools and artifacts; and (4) learning occurs in communities of practice and is indexed by changes in participation within these communities” (Graves & Rueda, p. 217).

Students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) circumstances compounded by lower SES backgrounds may also impact writing ability. Data results for a significant number of CLD students who also have a low (SES) or experience poverty have shown that the combination can hamper student achievement in school. “When families are in poverty, students may be affected by factors related to nutrition, child care, access to print, family job security, accumulation of school-relevant prior knowledge, and a host of other indices of social and

cultural capital” (Graves & Rueda, p. 220). Supporting students who are exposed to diverse learning strategies is one potential key to success.

Diversity in achievement is a reality in the U.S. where “in 2002, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments of writing proficiency indicated that “28% of fourth graders, 31% of eighth graders, and 24% of 12 graders performed at or above proficient levels, but fewer African American and Hispanics were in the ‘proficient’ group than whites or Asian Pacific Islanders” (Graves & Rueda, 2009 p. 214). Bilingual and second language learners make code-switching adjustments between two languages.

School-age bilingual children and second language learners must learn a new language at the same time they are learning to cope with the demands of schooling (Guitierrez-Ciellen, 1999). Cummins (1984) recommended distinguishing basic interactional conversational skills (BICS), which might serve English language learners well in informal social settings, from the cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALPS) of schooling that present greater challenges to English language learners. In other words, academic concepts often are expressed in unfamiliar language, have fewer contextual supports, and require world knowledge that may not be in students’ realms of experience.” (Nelson, Bahr, Van Meter, 2004, p. 83.)

Dr. Nicola Nelson and her team researched the relationship between scaffolding, executive function and self-regulation. All of these have a metacognitive base and are linked to learning when present. “Scaffolding permits instructors to target and achieve individualized objectives in partnerships with students.” (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 160) Scaffolding is used primarily by the instructors to aid the student. Self-regulation, on the other hand, is “the

ability to use pre-established routines to scaffold oneself through new and more difficult problems.’ Some say self-regulation and executive function have an inverse relationship, while other says it is more of a direct one. (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 161) Asking questions are at the core of scaffolding and these questions are “designed to guide students to attend to cues that previously were undetected in order to make cognitive, linguistic, and social connections to support further learning [with the ultimately goal being] to help students stretch their understanding and use of language by creating a link between the observed response (what students are doing now) and the expected response (what they must do to reach the next level of maturity) (Nelson & Van Meter, 2002)<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, Eric Jensen, one of the pioneers of brain-based learning and author of several books on the effects poverty on learning, uses an activity that helps students capture the meaning of a writing task. Jensen (2013) discusses using visual and tactile teacher tools to help low socioeconomic (SES) students’ retention and peer-work to aid their retention. The team approach requires students to share their work repeatedly over five-minute segments. The students stop writing and pass their four-to-eight sentence summaries for peer review. At the end of the activity, the students can read their peers’ comments and “make use of the peer feedback” before turning it in to the teacher. (Jensen, 2013, p. 103)

When students are taught in a direct way with the regular support of teacher feedback, the results are astounding. Comparison unclear. Teachers who understand some of the cultural barriers recognize how burdensome it can be to retain and understand new information. These students are often operation in “survival mode- attempting to manage demanding-academic tasks and at the same time maintaining an egocentric concern for their own well-being. (Graves & Rueda, 2009)

Researchers have discovered that learning self-regulating strategies can prove incredibly helpful because of their multisensory nature. Students can also practice role-modeling with peers. (Hallenbeck, 2002)

In general, cognitive strategy instruction aims to shape behavior by teaching strategy steps, cognitive modeling, guided instruction, and self-regulation (Hallenbeck, 2002). One well-documented model for strategy instruction is the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD model developed by Graham and Harris at the University of Maryland (Graham & Harris, 2005). The SRSD model is an approach in which students learn specific strategies and self-regulation procedures (e.g., goal setting, self-assessment, and coping self-talk) for using the strategies during writing activities. Teachers model the use of the strategies and provide diminishing amounts of scaffolding (e.g., guided collaborative practice with ample feedback) while the students master the skills to reach a criterion for learning. The findings of research conducted using SRSD and other strategy instruction studies show that, across content areas and differing student needs, strategy instruction is effective. When strategy instruction is used in an inclusive classroom, it can lead to positive outcomes for students with and without disabilities. (Graves & Rueda, 2009, p.221)

A few of the key elements of strategies can be effective for CLD students and are considered useful for SRSD approaches to writing are to: (1) align the curriculum's scope and sequence with specific strategies; (2) use language that is easy to understand for the CLD student; (3) have extensive teacher modeling in order to cement the use of the simple and clearly understandable strategy; (4) use "think-aloud for each step"; (5) connect the strategies to students

and make them personally relevant to the lives of students while linking them to “content-learning objectives” ; and (6) make practice, practice, practice the road to Carnegie Hall, in other words use the strategies repeatedly and apply them to an assortment of practical situations. (Graves & Rueda, 2009).

The written expression skills of urban middle school students have the potential to measurably improve, across all grade levels tested, after initially being screened using TILLS with students ages 6-18 years. The assessment identifies and tracks a student’s strengths and weaknesses after providing the teachers in my school with the SRSD instruction supports designed by education researchers Harris and Graham. Visuals are important when teaching all students, especially urban middle school students with multicultural backgrounds. The five senses come into play, but the visual sense is most prevalent when writing.

“SRSD is one of the most effective writing interventions (Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012) and has improved the writing skills of students with emotional and behavior disorders (McKeown, FitzPatrick & Sandmel , 2010). Jenson says that poverty can produce levels of stress for some students such that emotional and behavior challenges come into play. Research supports its effectiveness across measures, including increased word count, sentence count, number of paragraphs, number of transitions, number of essay parts, and overall quality (Ennis & Jolivette, 2014; Losinski, Cuenca-Carlino, Zablocki, & Teagarden, 2014).

SRSD explicitly addresses the writing planning process, and it has “six recursive steps which are(a) develop background knowledge, (b) discuss it, (c) model it, (d) memorize it, (e) support it, and (f) independently perform it. Using collaborative modeling and later peer support, students practice writing and self-regulatory skills with support” (McKeown, FitzPatrick & Sandmel, 2010).

Self-regulating strategy development (SRSD) tools can focus on expository writing skills instruction and increase teacher instructional effectiveness and higher state student assessment score growth in the writing process for struggling middle grade students in an urban, multi-lingual setting, by giving students tools to use when the teacher is not around. Professional development for teachers must be intentional, thorough and engaging. It also must provide ample opportunity for modeling practice time. Multiple resources state that writing is a challenge to teach and teaching preparation for this task is under represented and under researched in the pre-service arena and professional development for veteran teachers, worldwide.

“Learning strategies are not a curriculum but cut across all curricular areas. Strategies that enhance access to content are used in literature, science, social studies, and math classes and facilitate knowledge acquisition” (Graves & Rueda, 2009, p. 220). It is important for teachers to provide ample opportunities for students to practice strategies during each lesson. Studies show that the use of strategy instruction is effective at both the elementary and secondary levels (Graves & Rueda, 2009, p. 220).

McKeown et al. (2010) indicate that teachers require intensive professional development to actuate the use of SRSD in their classrooms. The pedagogy is not easily transmitted and adopted as an instructional strategy. Teachers in McKeown’s study felt they would benefit from seeing the use of SRSD, an instructionally complex concept, modeled before they could gain confidence of their own success using it. The practice-based professional development (PBPD) approach was more fruitful than a hands-off webinar approach (McKeown, Fitzpatrick & Sandmel, 2010). Practice-based professional development provides teachers support while learning to execute this unfamiliar procedure because it focuses on the “educational practice and

development of skills rather than simply on information and materials” alone (McKeown, FitzPatrick & Sandmel, 2010).

In a study using both PBPD and SRSD, a group of fourth grade teachers experienced success with their 17 assigned students, with no differentiation in the instruction for general education and special education students. After a two-day intensive PBPD, the teachers began to work with the students using the strategies they had practiced. The results yielded “high levels of fidelity” at 96%, and students improved the quality of their writing (Kuihara, Harris, Graham, Brindle, & McKeown, 2013). In her own study, McKeown (2010) drew on a variety of schools and teacher volunteer participants and most of them were very positive at the outset, which may have impacted the outcome. “These teachers entered PBPD with positive attitudes, excited to learn a new strategy, and remained consistently involved throughout the two days” (McKeown, 2010).

Assessment of students utilizing a baseline tool and then a posttest is one of the most reliable quantitative instruments to gauge growth in writing (Sperger, 2010). Any pilot program would require a tool for measuring growth. A researcher in Connecticut explored the writing ability of several 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys in a suburban middle school in Connecticut for six weeks. The key to the success of this experiment was that the researcher, Dr. Sperger, designed it to “examine the effect of instruction in the Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD; Harris & Graham, 1996) writing approach” on this population’s writing achievement (Sperger, 2010). Teacher training provided through six hours of professional development was a key aspect of the experiment. Time spent with the teachers by the researcher was also substantial and represented another important variable (Sperber, 2010).

Graphic organizers and clever acronyms also help students to grasp a visual the complex and demanding process of writing (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2014). “Although children typically begin school with a positive attitude toward writing, this attitude becomes more and more negative during the elementary school years” (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, & Gentile, 1994). These are the years for fruitful development of foundational skills. We as teachers need to find strategies that appeal to students and will help them to hold onto these skills. SRSD has a wide assortment of techniques that can be incorporated into the curriculum. SRSD is a tool that supports, not supplants, the more expansive elements of the writing curriculum. (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, & Gentile, 1994).

There is no pre-scripted sequence to utilizing SRSD; it is simply a tool that can be shared effectively with teachers and placed in the right hands can produce better writers. Teachers must make the decision how the strategies best fit their classroom. For the younger grades the program concentrates on having the students are able to write sentences. In older populations, sentence writing should precede the use of the SRSD strategies, unless, adaption of strategies for each grade level is encouraged. Teachers and administrators can decide. (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander 2014).

“Results indicate that for both boys and girls, at all grade levels, the mean posttest score [a routinely administered statewide standardized test] was significantly higher than the mean pretest score” (Sperger, 2010). The key to this project’s success was that the teachers received constant communication and PD support as well as the six-week cycle of student instruction where SRSD writing approaches were infused into the student’s lessons (Sperger, 2010). Sperger (2010) writes, “Researchers have identified elements of instructional programs and interventions that are effective for helping adolescent students learn to write well.”

Teachers would require additional time in their schedule to bring the students to full writing mastery. The alternate assessment, TILLS coupled with the use of certain sections of the *Writing Adventure Workbook & Journal*, a tool filled with “pages of fun activities to build writing skills from basic sentences to paragraph” (Cargill-Austin & Padgett 2001, 2011).

Sentence fragment.

Feedback, as part of the process of writing is the critical component “in effective formative assessment, as it provides information that is used by students to improve their writing or learning and by teachers to make changes in their instruction,” (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015, p. 45) which is the best way to help them to self-regulate when writing. Accordingly, students use feedback about their writing to close the gap between what they write and the desired goal for a better paper. Such feedback can come from adults (including teachers and peers), a computer, or through self-assessment (Graham, Hebert & Harris, 2015).

For years, it has been reported across the country that writing instruction is the weakest link of the literacy chain. It is not easy to teach because of the individual, differentiated nature to the process (Dinkins, 2010). Assessment can measure the effectiveness of the product that the process yields. Writing well opens doors for students to escape lives of poverty and closes doors to cultural, economic and social consequences (Graham & Perrin, 2007a; National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003). For many years, even decades, no one has successfully tackled the challenges of reaching students, affording them the same opportunity to practice writing while establishing a comfort zone of optimal ability. I would argue that the final sentence is not at all fair.

For 30 years, educational researcher, Dr. Karen Harris and her colleague, D. Steve Graham have been researching a new concept called Self-Regulated Strategy Development

(SRSD), which has had good results among the populations that have been exposed to it. Even though as of late, other writing models, like writer's workshop model have received more notoriety and recognition of success becoming the most dominant choice for instruction, particularly in the middle school years (Graham, 2006b; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006). The work of doctoral candidate Elizabeth Dinkins produced positive data from her "nine-week study which included 30 observation hours, 11 teacher interview hours five student interview hours, instructional documents and student writing" (Dinkins, 2010).

Dinkins produced five major findings from her work with a group of eighth grade students. Writing is a subjective process that can yield teacher bias when conferencing with students and making determinations during the editing process. "Autonomous classroom instruction was the product of teachers acting with and reacting to external forces to sustain a commitment to their convictions about education and student learning" (Dinkins, 2010, p. \_\_\_\_). By the eighth grade many students had already established who they were as writers and their staunch stances regarding their writing experiences impacted the study. Finally, many students did gain a positive benefit from new and alternative ways to gauge the procedural component of good writing and the self-regulating component was enlightening to many of the students in the study. Students basically now understood the why of certain writing style elements (Dinkins, 2010).

Understanding and self-awareness will enhance students' ability to self-regulate "the how" of their writing (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander (2014). Teacher feedback and support will gradually glean student self-regulation, self-efficacy and success.

### Methodology & Procedures

Since writing is such a key skill to success, how can our school develop cross-curricular activities supporting the use of SRSD strategies, particularly in ELA and Social Studies? When administering the writing assessment how often should it be administered so that progress is effectively monitored?

In this urban setting, there is one grade level of ELA and Social Studies teachers. I selected one English language arts in grades 4<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> and their Social Studies teachers. After obtaining their permission to participate in this action research project, I sent them 2 consecutive surveys. The first one was to determine how they would make the selection of students and almost all chose from the three achievement leveled-tiers low-growth, medium growth and high growth) but chose the informal process of picking names from a hat. Once the students were determined, I began to test them one-on-one, while simultaneously meeting with their teachers to impart on them, knowledge of the SRDS process.

As stated in Dr. Nicola Nelson's book, The Writing Lab Approach to Language

#### Instruction and Intervention:

Self-regulation is the ability to use pre-established routines to scaffold [or adjust the support used in constructing a new concept into use] oneself through new and more difficult problems (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 161). Some researchers equate executive functions and self-regulation; others differentiate them (Singer & Bashir, 1999b). (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 161) Our sense is that the term *self-regulation* may be viewed as a special aspect of executive functioning. It involves learning to use one's inner voice to mediate problem solving and to regulate choices and behavior (Nelson, 1995). (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, p. 161) This more specific meaning is

consistent with intervention literature in which the self-regulated strategy development (SRSD instructional model is given a particular meaning. The SRSD model is one that is supported by a number of research studies conducted in a variety of writing process contexts by Graham and Harris, and their colleagues. (Graham, Harris, & Troia, 2000, for a review). Most of these studies were conducted with fourth- through eighth-grade students with learning disabilities. The SRSD model also has been found to be effective in inclusive environments (Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993).

This research was based on a community of learners who dwell alongside one another in a general education classroom in where students with and without disabilities learn together very similar to the controlled population from which I drew my data. I worked with a sample of students ranging in grade level from 4<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup>. It might be noted that one of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students is actually of 6<sup>th</sup> grade age, but he never received an IEP. This year he is in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom.

“Most of these studies were conducted with fourth- through eighth-grade students with learning disabilities. The SRSD model also has been found to be effective in inclusive environments [as well] (Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993). When studying the writing abilities and techniques of middle school students, I plan to explore the pedagogical approach of their teachers before and after application of the treatment. My experimental design plan is to select September writing samples from the beginning of the school year written by 33 students (three students selected by the ELA general education teacher and three students selected by the grade level Social Studies teacher) from each class of 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. The pool of students for this study will be gathered from each of three academic tiers (high-growth, medium-growth and low-growth,) and the lead ELA teachers in collaboration with the social studies

teachers will have the final say in who will be the participants. What about the volunteer status of research participants? What you have written so far does not speak to the criteria for student participant selection. The reason for examining such an expansive number of grade levels is to draw on the expanse of grade levels used in past research studies and to interface with a wider variety of teachers. The limit of six students per grade level also allows for a realistic management of cases since hands-on, one-to-one evaluation of writing can be tediously time-consuming. In fact, my student testing for this study required the hiring of substitute teachers in my classroom as I performed test administration elsewhere.

Additionally, surveys and interviews collected on line via Google classroom, which gauge both student and teacher opinion as the research unfolds. I would like to know how both students and teachers feel about the writing process, so I plan to create a survey of pertinent questions for each group. The students will be asked via the Google forms survey tool questions that have multiple choice, short answer and yes/no responses. Before the comparative analysis begins, a baseline needs to be established and these four tools--- surveys, interviews, TILLS individual student assessment of written expression and previous year's PARCC written expression scores - will provide that baseline.

The teachers will also be surveyed to determine (1) the feelings about teaching writing; (2) teacher aptitude/knowledge and (3) teacher effectiveness. I plan to observe each participating teacher before as a baseline and after I share some self-regulating strategies with each of these instructors to try. The teacher surveys will have an introduction explaining the purpose of the survey and directing them to answer openly and honestly to give me the best feedback.

To triangulate the data, I will also ask to see the teacher's lesson plans as they pertain to teaching writing and compare PARCC writing expression and convention scores with the TILLS written expression scores.

Artifacts, including student writing samples from prior years, would be helpful for progress monitoring, but since we are in a brand -new school, I am unsure as to whether student files have migrated with them. This is also true of the availability of last year's PARCC scores.

Writing tool and instruments placed at the fingertips of students are a necessary requirement, and there are many to choose from on the market. One that I find easy to use is the *Sentence Sense* workbooks 1 and 2. Williams Van Cleave, a leading education researcher and developer of content, authored these books for students who struggle with literacy. Van Cleave's workbooks begin at a third-grade level and span through secondary school integrating everything from basic parts of speech needed for scaffolding to compound/complex sentences to independent and dependent clauses. use his/her best handwriting; otherwise the teacher and the dragon will be unable to read it. I really do not think that penmanship should be a trait observed. I have used *Sentence Sense* with a variety of grade- leveled students with a great deal of success. Students are also encouraged at periodic intervals to construct sentences that have a minimum word count equivalent to their age. This direction is designed to teach students to have flow when writing paragraphs, making their writing more interesting. Van Cleave worked directly with Kildonan co-founder and visionary, Diana Hanbury King. Kildonan School happens to focus on students with language impairments – generally in the areas of specific learning disability and dyslexia. The remedies that fix what ails these children and adults has been fruitful for the general education populations as well. Although Van Cleave's workbooks are

excellent tools, Sentence Sense Books 1 and 2 are not reproducible resources. My preference will be to use the *Writing Adventures Workbook and Journal* for the teacher-selected 33 students.

Another very popular approach to supporting student writing is the use of graphic organizers and there are a variety of them on the market. SRSD has an assortment of acronyms accompanied by a myriad of graphic organizers with catchy names. There are even electronic graphic organizers available for schools, like ours, which have one-to-one technology and they are called Holt Interactive Graphic Organizers (<http://my.hrw.com/nsmedia/intgos/html/igo.htm>). These multisensory approaches are memorable for most students and specifically in our urban school environment. Time dedicated to teacher training and development of comfort with using these tools is a function of student success.

Once the teachers receive training in the self-regulating strategies for writing process and share the knowledge with their students, I will provide a set of and “exit interviews” to obtain feedback on the success or failure of using a variety of tools to make students better writers. Not as clear these the highlighted phrases could be. Additionally, I will be looking for feedback from teachers in their own words. The writing samples will speak to increased skill over time due to teacher practice and student engagement in the process, keeping in mind that every classroom is an island.

In my research, to minimize the effects of researcher bias especially in the qualitative research design portion, I utilized Geoffrey Mills “three Es” of data collection – experiencing, enquiring and examining - and produced a fair and balanced perspective on student writing expression and teacher’s ability to raise student skill levels.

## Discussion of Findings

### Teacher survey data findings

In our school there is a single teacher for each grade level subject for third grade and up. For this study, I surveyed both the ELA and Social Studies teachers in grades 4 through 8. Both of the social studies teachers surveyed teach two grade levels each and they provided me with a one student randomly gathered equally from three tiers, for a total of three each. I also included two special education teachers in my research. There were a total of ten teachers who contributed to this study.

### Student Data Findings

The 33 selected students participated in the written expression subtests of the TILLS. The TILLS measure of reliability has been published in peer-review articles, and although was a tool that was published last year, which is “designed to assess language in the oral and written modalities for school-age children” it is, nonetheless backed by over 30 years of research (Mailend, Plante, Anderson, Applegate & Nelson, 2016). It recommends that a research assistant/clinician/ academic therapist should administer the subtests and obtain required written responses from the child’s response form. Since the TILLS assessment is so new, the research sample was designed to include including two subsets of students- typically performing as well as those with diagnosed language impairments.

The full battery of TILLS subtests are used by therapist and clinicians to screen for any language learning disabilities. “Furthermore, well-designed norm-referenced tests are ideal for some clinical or research purposes but not others (Pena, Spaulding and Plante, 2006). “For example, standardized tests are typically not suitable for selecting therapy techniques and targets” (McCauley & Swisher, 1984, Merrell and Plante, 1997) and many are not appropriate for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Gutierrez-Clellen & Pena

2001). The full 15-subtest TILLS is for standardized use with native speakers of American English,” (Mailend, Plante, Anderson, Applegate & Nelson, 2016) it concluded the presence of a learning disability (Brookes Publishing associate., personal communication September 28, 2017). For tracking progress in a specific skill, test administrators may wish to give only those subtests relating to that skill. TILLS subtests are curriculum-relevant because they correlate directly to “language demands of the curriculum.” (TILLS, 2016) A clinician is key to successful progress monitoring, since teachers do not always have ample time to do it.

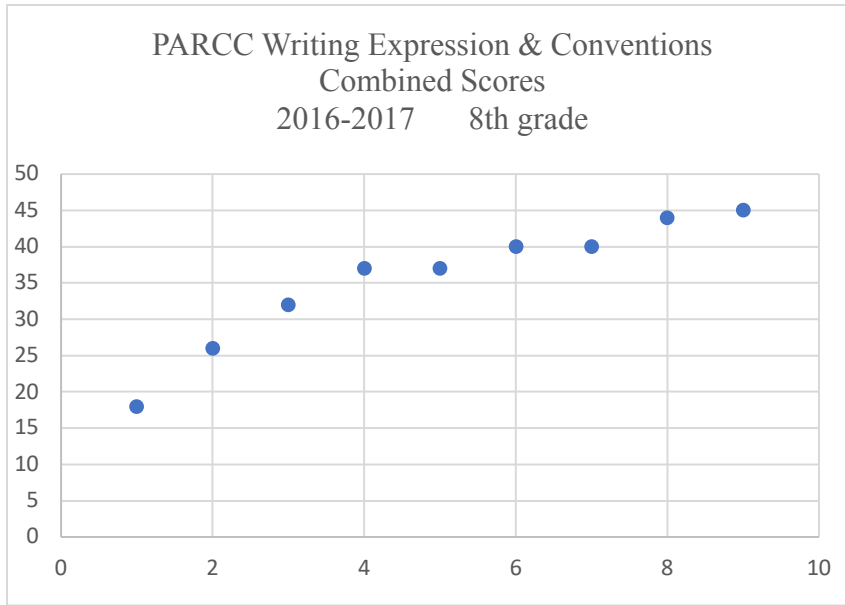
PARCC writing is incorporated into the curriculum and I gained access to my students’ PARCC scores from school year ending June 2017. My 8<sup>th</sup> grade students had the added variable that I was their ELA teacher and this was my research project. I could work with my students during class and during intervention, although I rarely found time to overindulge them with grammar, sentence and discourse writing practice. One thing that really supported my research was that my students could work on their writing in all aspects of my teaching. I was infusing the skills I wanted them to learn, as whole class instruction, as my study subjects into the lives and minds of my entire class. When I received the 2017 PARCC report for my class of 46 that over half (or 28 students) met or exceeded expectations in the written expression and conventions category while of that 46, and additional six students were approaching expectations. The work that I had done with the class in writing produced stellar results with 67% (rounded) of my class improving in written expression after a year of learning to use SRSD strategies and using them consistently. Prior PARCC scores for meeting or exceeding expectations were at 14% of the same incoming 8<sup>th</sup> grade class in 2016. That is significant growth and turn around in one school year. My administrators were thrilled at the numbers

because, as previously referenced in this action research report, the school had very low numbers for writing proficiency.

The TILLS assessment tool was designed primarily as a measure to determine if a student was learning disabled in language and literacy, while the PARCC was designed as an end-of-year assessment of students' skills on a higher level. My findings suggest that though only a small number of students were previously diagnosed with a language learning disability, the students in this survey performed on a very under average level. The group represents mostly low socio-economically disadvantaged students whose parents are not native English speakers. The results did show that with the use of SRSD strategies infused into the fabric of whole class writing instruction did provide a foundation for growth. Since this was my research project, it should be noted that not only did my most of students increase on their TILLS scores from January to June, but 6 out of 9 (or 67%) of these research-targeted students met or exceeded expectations on the written expression and convention portion of the PARCC. There was a 61% of the total class increase result where they met or exceeded expectations on the PARCC written expression portion from my total class of 46 tested. This is a 47% (close to half the class) increase from last year. Last year the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the PARCC overall was 14%. When adding those who approached expectations, the percentage increased to of the 3 students in my research pool who did not meet or exceed expectations, one of them approached expectations. Of the remaining two students in my study who did not meet or partially meet expectations, FA8 was recently released from the bilingual program and JE8 was a classified student with an IEP, which she has had for years. As an OGT, I am suspecting traces of dyslexia in JE8 based on preliminary testing results.

Sixth grade is the grade that I am teaching this year because when you are a highly qualified ELA middle school teacher, your principal places you where you needed. All other grades had different ELA teachers administering remediation writing tools. I utilized the most flexibility with my own students because this was my action research project. It was also possible for me to incorporate my strategies to the whole class through infusion and thereby use a more larger, more diverse student population in my control group.

The charts indicate that there is a direct statistical relationship between the how the students scored on the TILLS' writing expression, writing discourse and writing syntax versus the PARCC. Another interesting notable is that none of the students in the entire group of 33 tested in the 100 percentile. Even students who do the best in the class are still not much above the 60th percentile on the TILLS and their PARCC scores have a tangential relationship. The percentile reflects the base skill measurement out of over thousands of students, nationwide and only one (an 8<sup>th</sup> grader from my class) reached into the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile on one measure of writing proficiency. I believe these numbers accurately reflect the student skill level in the my school district. Improvement is possible and I believe SRSD strategies used regularly on grade levels 3 through 8, will show school-wide improvement over time.

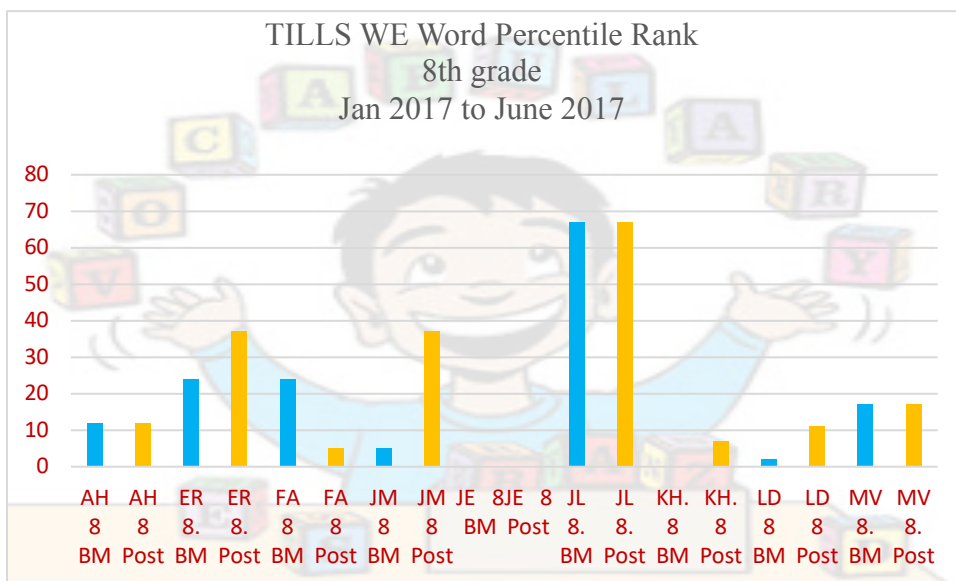
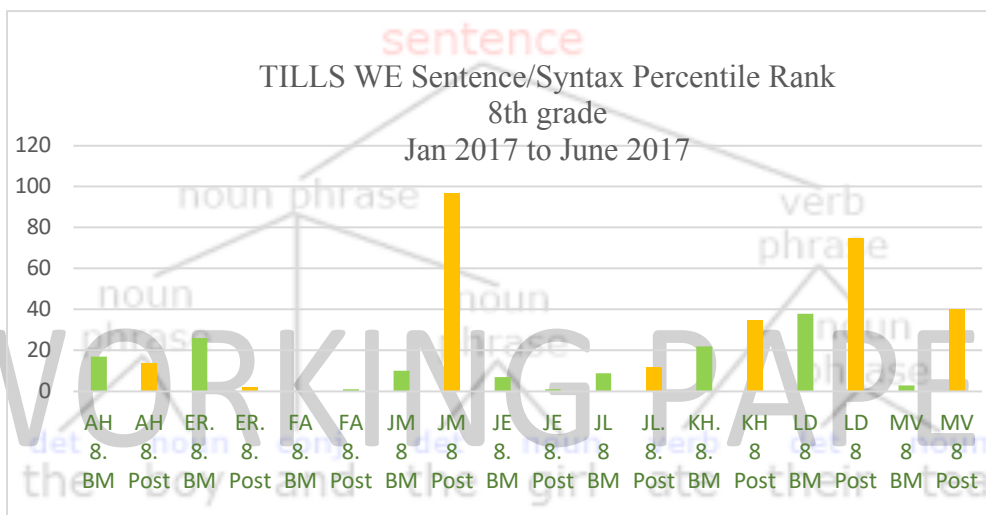
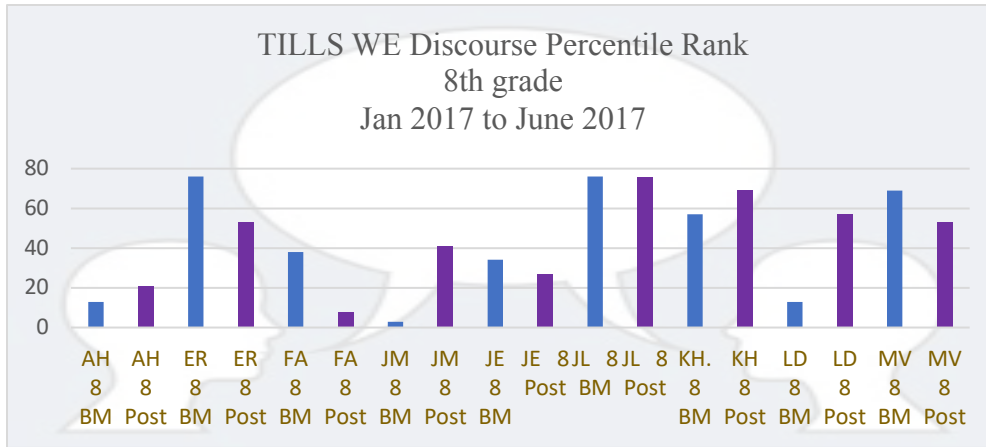


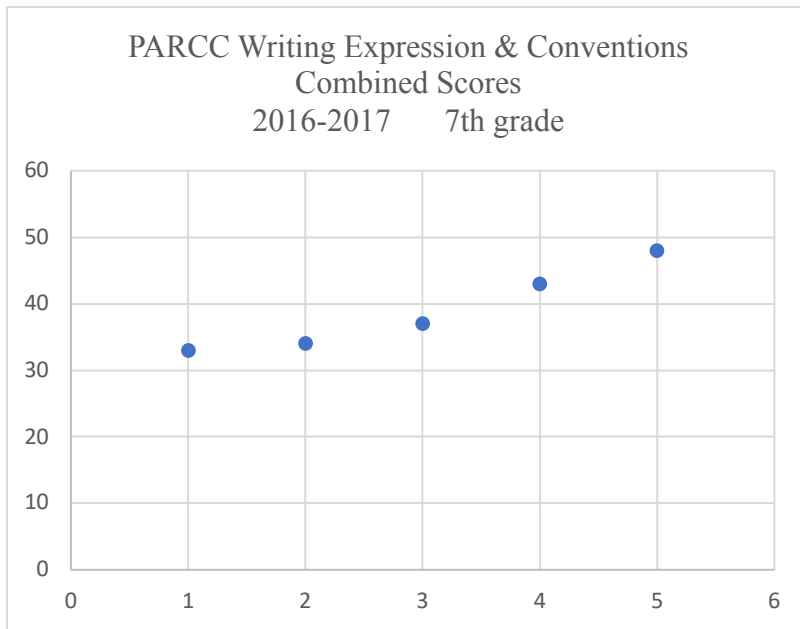
8<sup>th</sup> grade

- 1.JE 8
- 2.FA 8
- 3.LD 8
- 4.ER 8
- 5.AH 8
- 6.MV 8
- 7.KH 8
- 8.JM 8
- 9.JL 8

WORKING PAPERS

\*The percentile rank measures students nationwide of the same age. It is a very good nationwide measure of skill level of students of the same age. No bar graph score indicates an extremely below level/negative score.





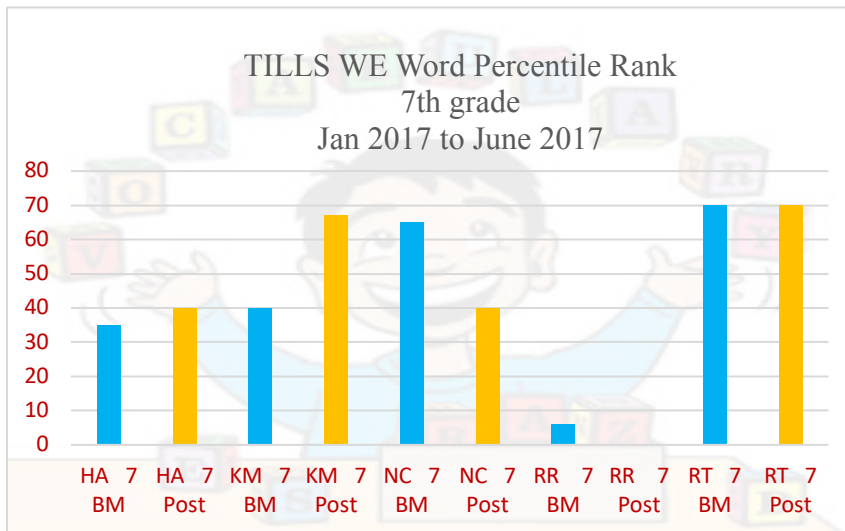
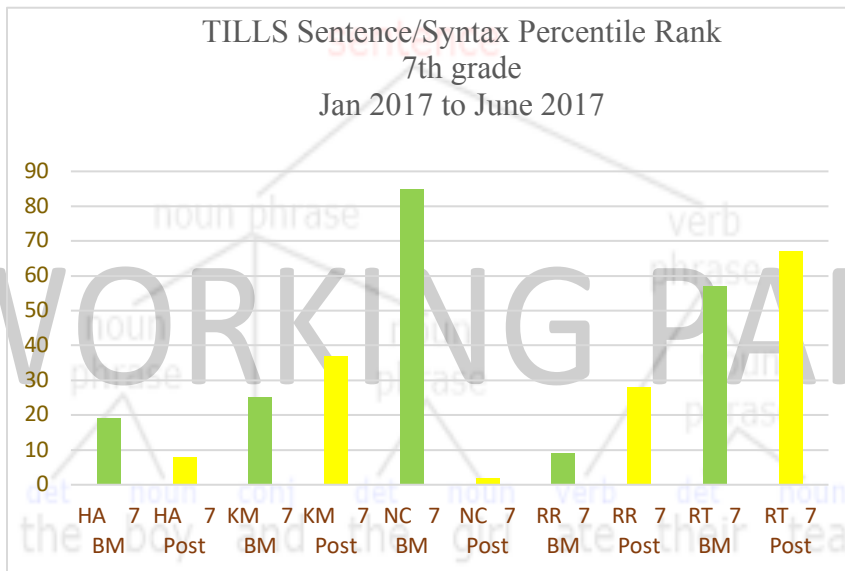
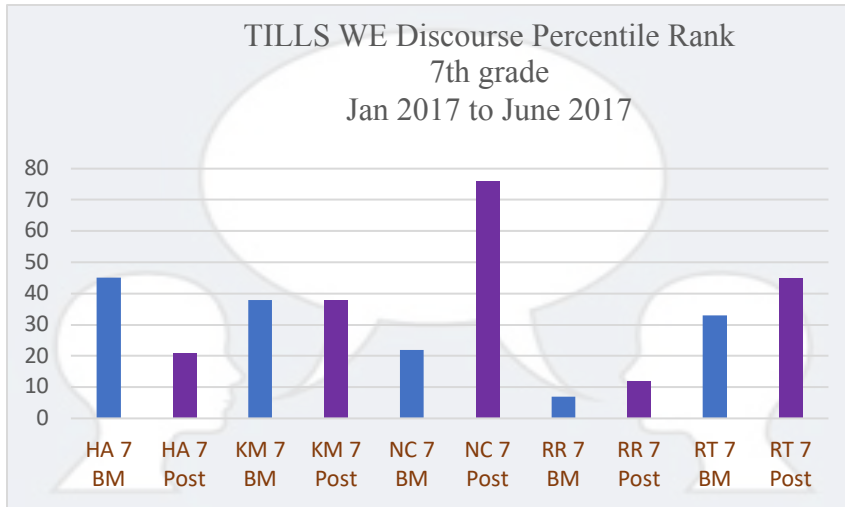
7<sup>th</sup> grade

WORKING PAPERS

1. RR 7
2. HA 7
3. NC 7
4. RT 7
5. KM 7

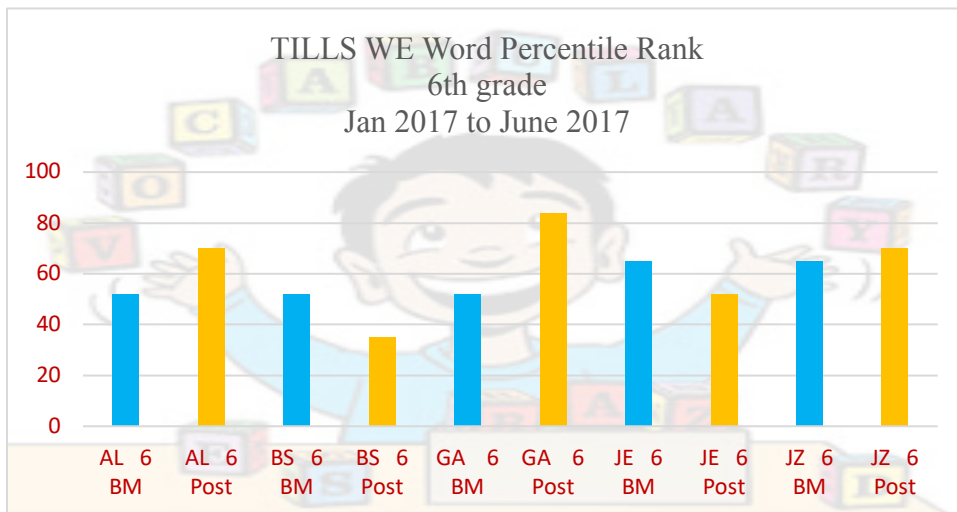
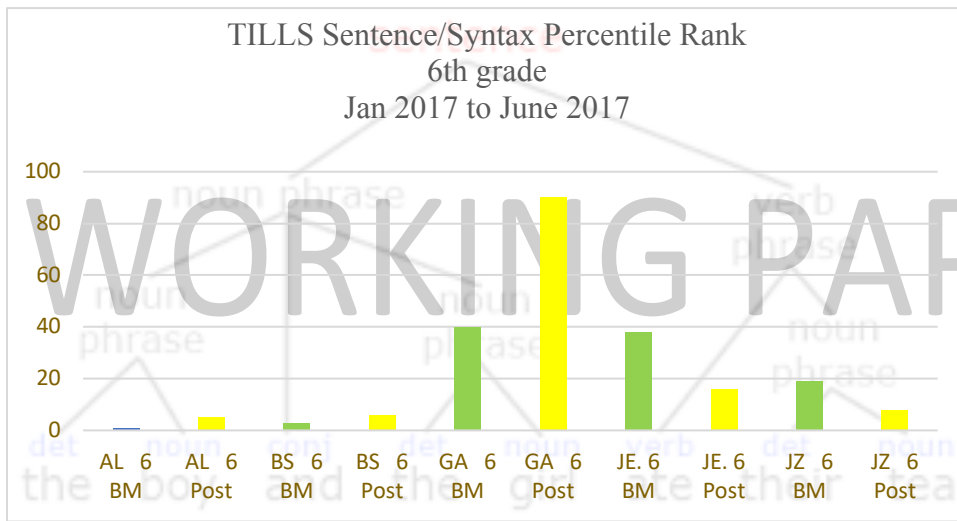
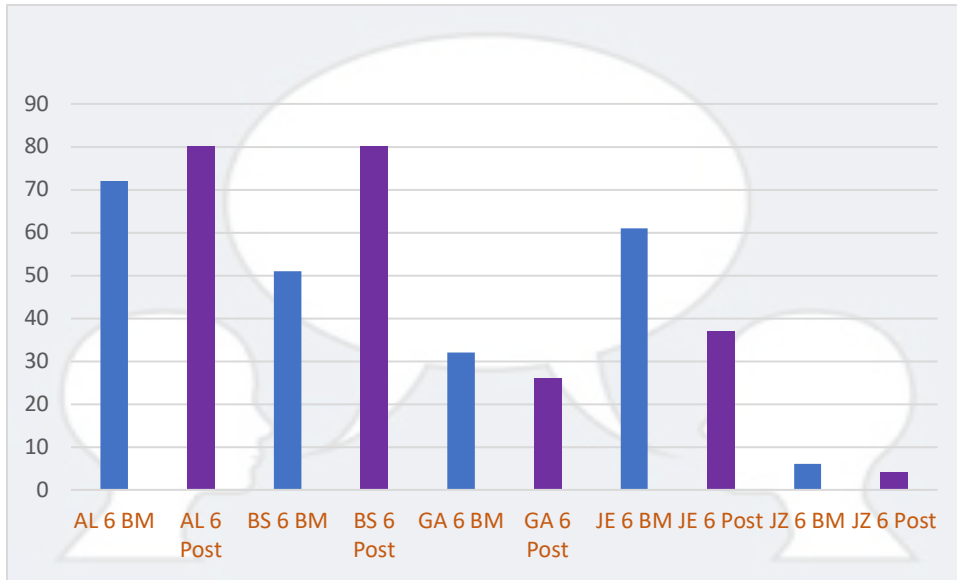
\*The percentile rank measures students nationwide of the same age. It is a very good nationwide measure of skill level of students of the same age.

No bar graph score indicates an extremely below level/negative score.

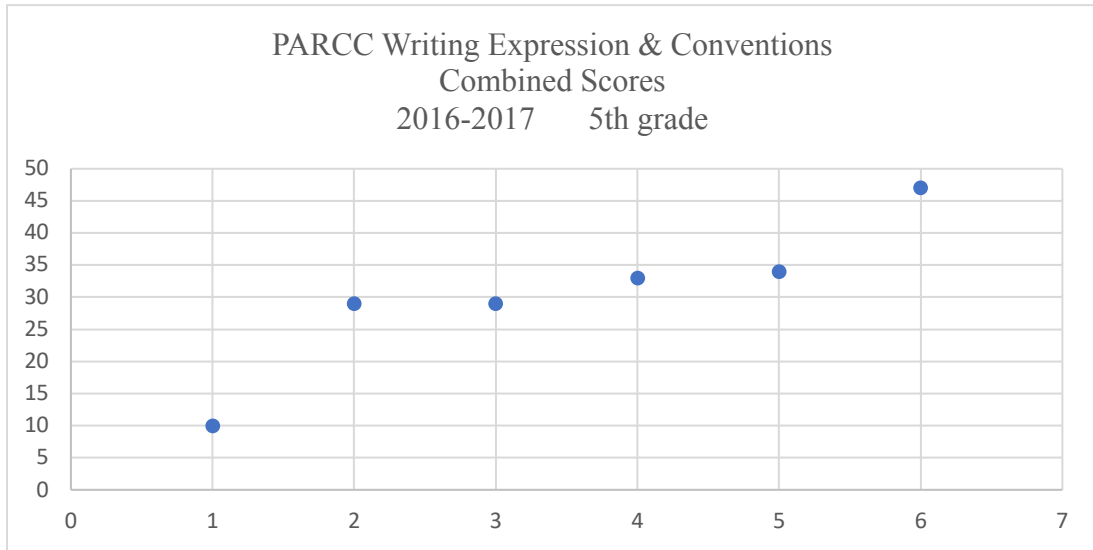


PARCC 6<sup>th</sup> grade info goes on this page

WORKING PAPERS



WORKING PAPERS

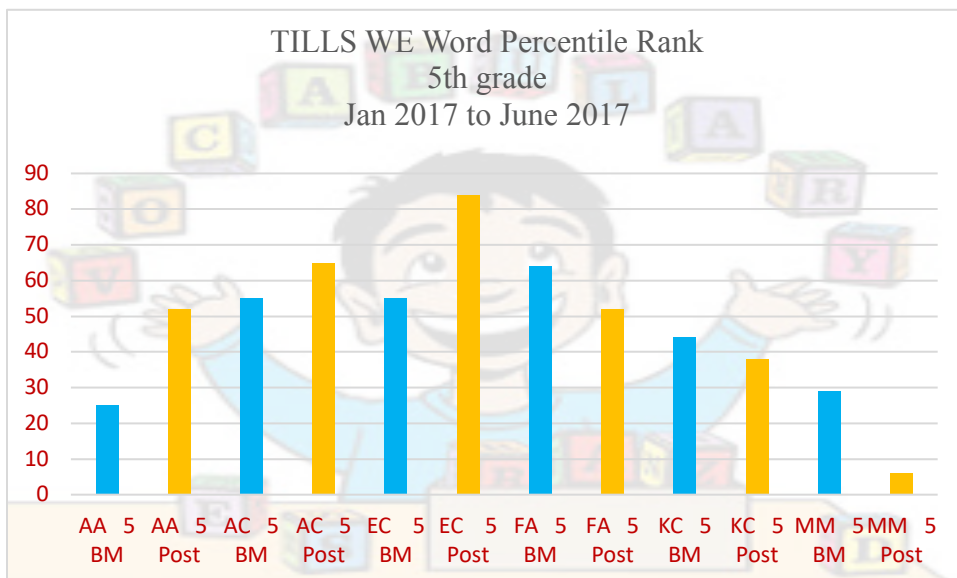
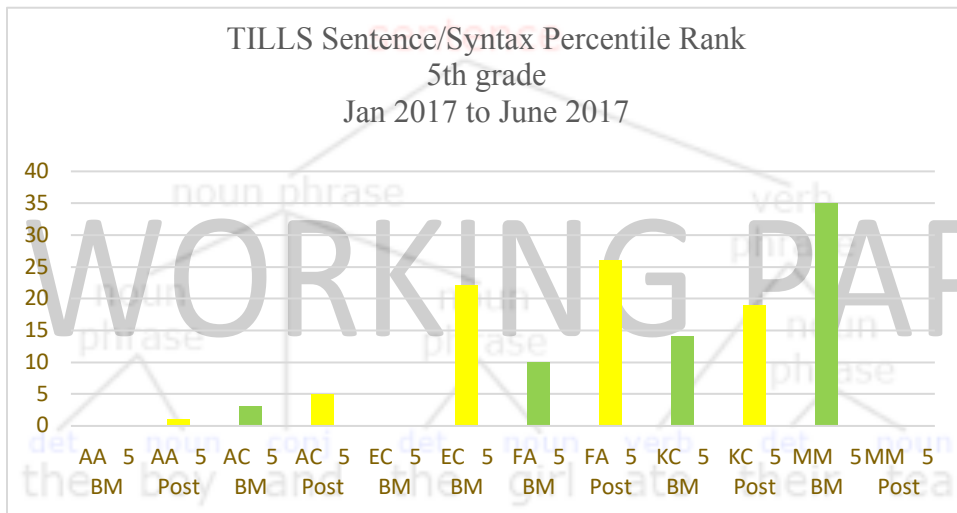
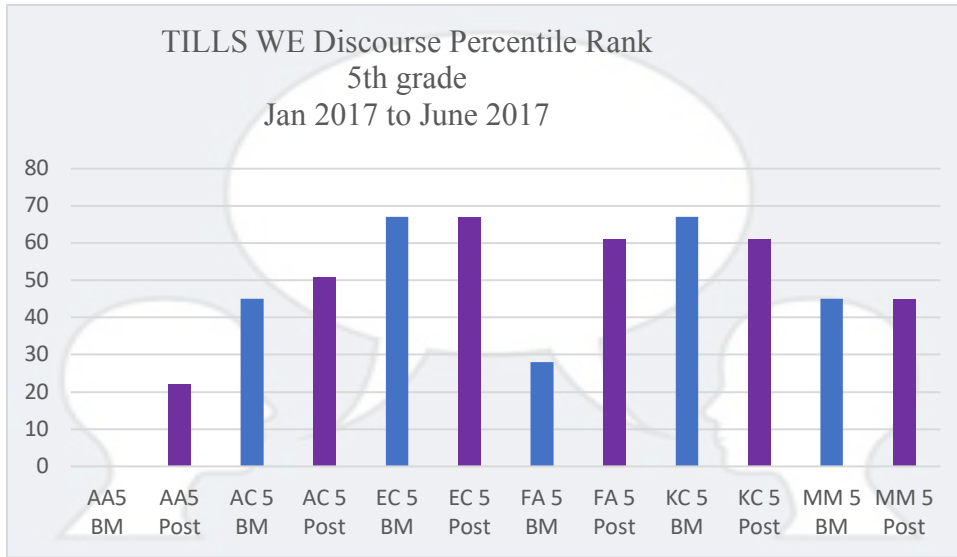


5<sup>th</sup> grade

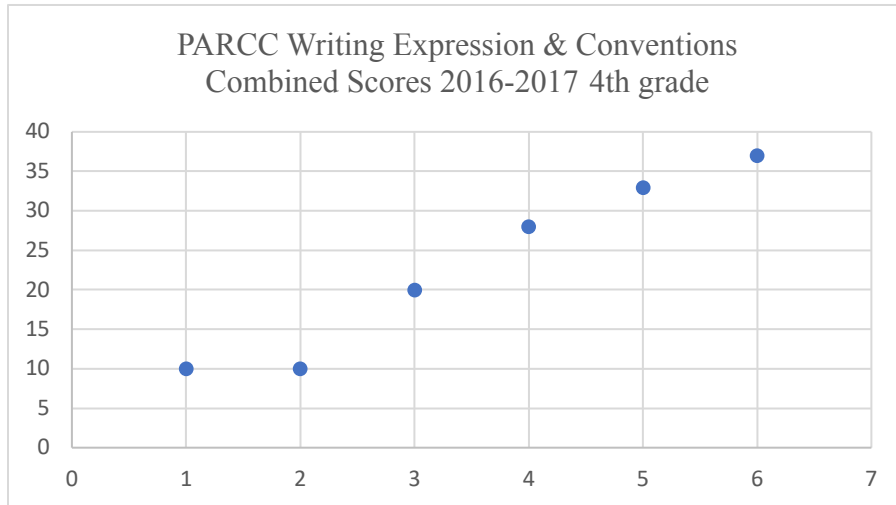
- 1. MM 5
- 2. AA 5
- 3. KC 5
- 4. EC 5
- 5. AC 5
- 6. FA 5

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\*The percentile rank measures students nationwide of the same age. It is a very good nationwide measure of skill level of students of the same age. No bar graph score indicates an extremely below level/negative score.



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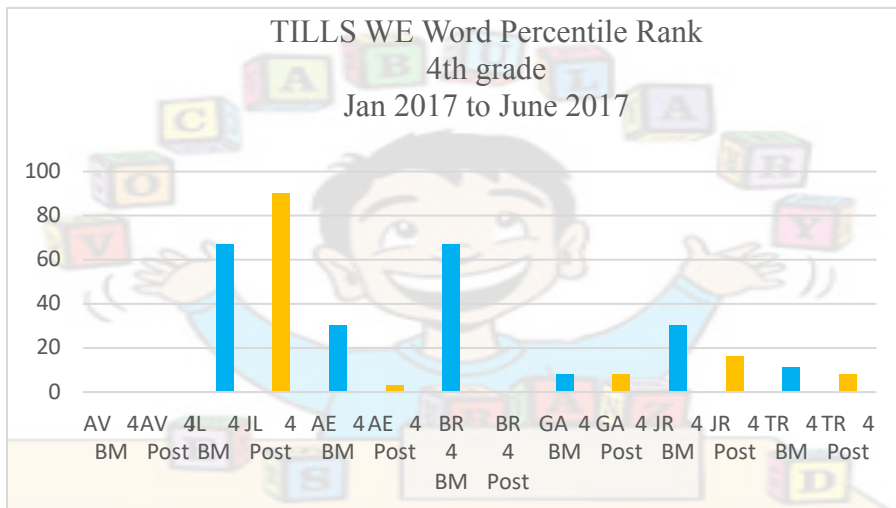
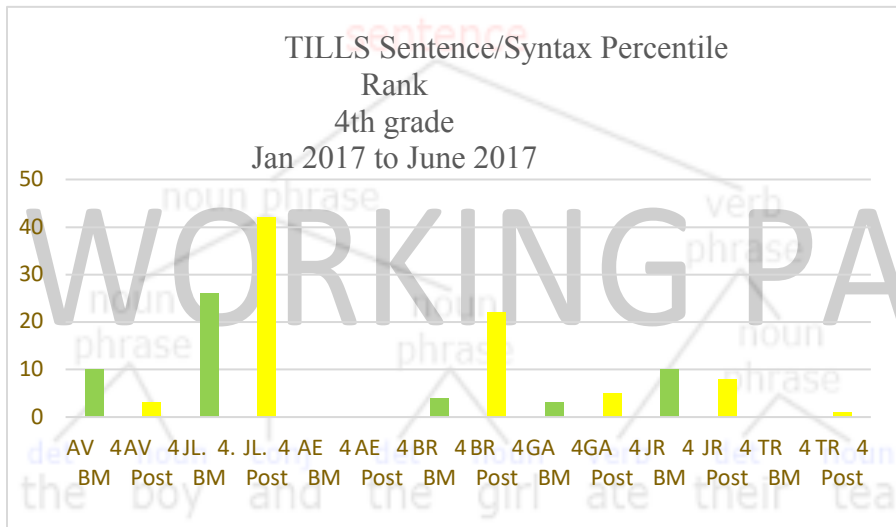
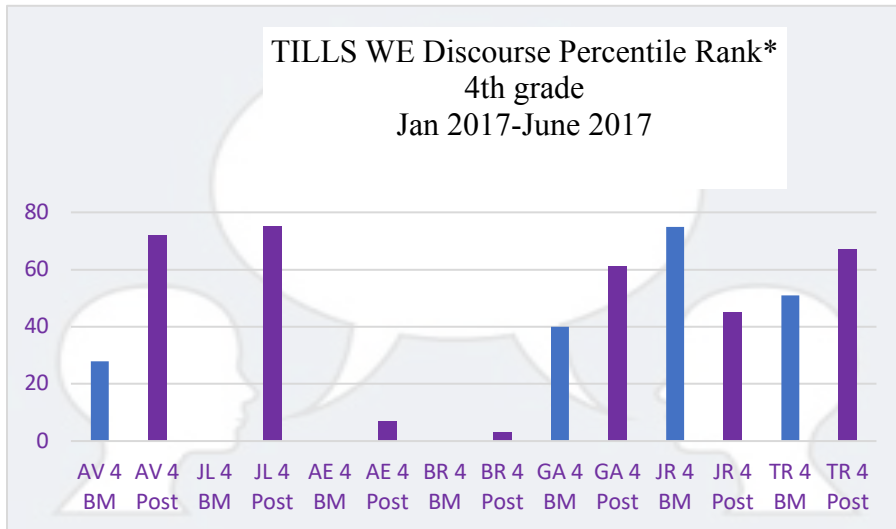


4<sup>th</sup> grade

- 1. AE 4
- 2. BR 4
- 3. TR 4
- 4. GA 4
- 5. JR 4
- 6. JL 4

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\*The percentile rank measures students nationwide of the same age. It is a very good nationwide measure of skill level of students of the same age. No bar graph score indicates an extremely below level/negative score.



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### Conclusions

TILLS was designed primarily as a measure to determine if a student was learning disabled in the area of language and literacy, while the PARCC was designed as an end-of-year assessment of students' skills on a higher level. My findings suggest that though only a small number of students were previously diagnosed with a language learning disability, the students in this survey performed on a very under average level. The group represents mostly low socio-economically disadvantaged students whose parents are not native English speakers. The results did show that with the use of SRSD strategies infused into the fabric of whole class writing instruction did provide a foundation for growth. Since this was my research project, it was should be noted that not only did my most of students increase on their TILLS scores from January to June, but 6 out of 9 (or 67%) of these research-targeted students met or exceeded expectations on the writing expression and convention portion of the PARCC. The statistic of 61% of the total class result met or exceeded expectations on the PARCC written expression portion from my total class of 46 tested. This is a 47% (close to half the class) increase from last year. Last year the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the PARCC overall was 14%. When adding those who approached expectations, the percentage increased to of the 3 students in my research pool who did not meet or exceed expectations, one of them approached expectations. The remaining two students who did not meet or partially met expectations, FA8 was recently tested out the bilingual program through a test called ACCESS and JE8 was classified with an IEP. As an OGT, I am suspecting that JE8 may have dyslexia or some other specific learning disability based on her language skills and testing results.

For the students in my building, as well as those in the remainder of the district, direct, explicit instruction is a mandatory instructional strategy. The next component to helping our

students make marked improvements is to teach them how metacognitive approaches to the beginning and completing the task of writing. Students who are English language learners often need scaffolding before they can stand on their own as writers.

My findings also indicate that students who have language learning differences are linked to students who has limited language proficiency due to a second language acquisition, so it stands to reason that some of the same tools can be used to remediate failing writing in both populations.

Time limitations still remain a culprit because the teachers of our district have an enormous academic skills' smorgasbord and a very restrictive pacing guide. The teachers in my research even remarked in their surveys that if there was more time to cultivate the skill and art of writing they believe the students would experience greater success. Since this initial phase of this collaborative action research project, our principal did change our ELA scheduling design to 40 minutes reading ad 40 minutes writing in a 90-minute block for 3- 8 and she is allowing the younger grades to incorporate more writing into their days.

My findings also suggest that the speed with which our district requires us to teach a multitude and sometimes disjointed ELA elements is mind-numbing at times. This 2017-2018 school year, I teach 6<sup>th</sup> grade and I recently administered the Unit 1 State Assessment, which consisted of both a convoluted narrative piece of fiction, written in the third person and an intensive science-based informational text piece on soil. The culminating writing assessment was a response to the fictional story. One of my students, clearly struggling and misinformed about how to tackle the assignment of writing a five-paragraph essay, wrote the first paragraph in a rambling style about the first reading and the second paragraph about the second reading. This confusion sums up the dilemma in a nutshell. The incident is a metaphor for the mumbled-up

mess that conflated this student's mind and morphed two disjointed readings into one causing him to write something nonsensical. Additionally, he lacked the resources to figure things out under time constraints, i.e., use SRSDs.

I propose that another similar study be performed on kindergarten through second grade students as well as ninth and tenth graders. Both groups could benefit from the early use of SRSD strategies. "The outcome [of using SRSD strategies] is that [all] learners reach higher levels than would be possible without support. Ultimately, the goal is to create successful and independent learners." (Nelson, Bahr & Van Meter, 2004, p. 159)

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<sup>1</sup>The terminology of *observed response* and *expected response* was introduced by Goodman (1969) to differentiate a miscue a student makes while reading a word aloud (the observed response) in contrast to the word printed on the page (the expected response). Nelson and Van Meter (2002) expanded the meaning to represent other mismatches between what a curricular task requires (the expected response) and what a student does in attempting the task (the observed response.).

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**Appendix A**

TIILS/PARCC Student Data Breakdown & Analysis

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**Appendix B**

Teacher Surveys

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**Appendix C**

TILLS Summary and Interpretation Profile Chart

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**Appendix D**

Sample of Parental Permission for Participation of a Child in A Research Study Form

English/Spanish versions

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