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A National Study of Teaching and Assessing Writing in Canadian Middle Grades Classrooms
Une étude nationale de l’enseignement et de l’évaluation de l’écriture dans les classes intermédiaires au Canada

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Article abstract

This article reports comprehensive findings from a national study of the teaching and assessment of writing in classrooms across ten Canadian provinces and two of three territories. Through interviews with 216 grade 4-8 teachers and observations and interviews in 22 classrooms (1 to 3 classrooms in each province), we gathered information about participating middle-grade teachers’ goals, and the practices and resources (including computers and multi-media, parents and community resources) that they use to teach and assess writing. The strengths and challenges that they identify in teaching writing and assessing writing, and the people who have most greatly influenced their writing instruction provide additional information on which we base implications for teacher education and professional development initiatives.

A NATIONAL STUDY OF TEACHING AND ASSESSING WRITING IN CANADIAN MIDDLE GRADES CLASSROOMS[1,2]

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ABSTRACT. This article reports comprehensive findings from a national study of the teaching and assessment of writing in classrooms across ten Canadian provinces and two of three territories. Through interviews with 216 grade 4-8 teachers and observations and interviews in 22 classrooms (1 to 3 classrooms in each province), we gathered information about participating middle-grade teachers' goals, and the practices and resources (including computers and multi-media, parents and community resources) that they use to teach and assess writing. The strengths and challenges that they identify in teaching writing and assessing writing, and the people who have most greatly influenced their writing instruction provide additional information on which we base implications for teacher education and professional development initiatives.

UNE ÉTUDE NATIONALE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT ET DE L'ÉVALUATION DE L'ÉCRITURE DANS LES CLASSES INTERMÉDIAIRES AU CANADA

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article présente les résultats exhaustifs d'une étude nationale portant sur l'enseignement et l'évaluation de l'écriture dans les classes des dix provinces canadiennes et de deux des trois territoires. Des entrevues auprès de 216 enseignants de 4[e] année à secondaire 2 ainsi que des observations et des entrevues dans 22 classes (1 à 3 classes dans chacune des provinces) ont été réalisées. Ce faisant, nous avons accumulé des informations auprès des enseignants des écoles intermédiaires participant sur les objectifs, les pratiques et les ressources (incluant les ordinateurs et autres technologies ainsi que les parents et les ressources communautaires) que ceux-ci utilisent pour enseigner et évaluer l'écriture. Les forces et les défis identifiés par les participants en ce qui a trait à leur enseignement et évaluation de l'écriture — et les personnes ayant le plus influencé leur pratique d'enseignement de l'écriture — sont des éléments d'informations supplémentaires sur lesquels nous nous appuyons pour formuler certaines implications pour les initiatives de formation et de développement professionnel des enseignants.

Writing has long been viewed as a core competency for school success, as it is both a means of learning and a way of demonstrating learning. Research through many decades has shown that writing supports and deepens students' learning of concepts across the curriculum (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004). In addition, writing has been an ever-present tool for assessing students' learning (Graham, 2006). Despite the potentially significant role of writing, students do minimal amounts of extended writing in language arts and even less in other subject areas (Applebee & Langer, 2009). Their teachers receive "a token amount of training in the teaching of writing, whether in their pre-service preparation or in professional development workshops" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 3). As a consequence of this inattention to a basic and important aspect of literacy education, many students entering the work world lack the writing proficiency required by their jobs and their employers spend billions of dollars on programs to develop their writing competencies (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges, 2004).

In the contemporary global economy and social world, written communication is increasingly important (Brandt, 2005). As the knowledge economy expands, many public and private businesses and organizations are seeking employees with expertise in "transforming complex organizational histories and interests, needs, and constraints into textual form" (Brandt, 2005, p. 176). With the development and popularization of digital forms of publication, young people and adults alike find audiences (known and unknown) and social connection through their online composition.

Given the essential role that writing plays in education, work and social contexts, it is important for researchers, policy-makers and teacher educators to place greater attention on the teaching of writing. In the United States, policy-makers have called for reforms in the teaching of writing to address the need for teachers to devote more time to teaching writing, make greater use of standards to assess writing, and incorporate technology to a greater degree in their writing instruction (National Commission on Writing in American Schools and Colleges, 2003). In addition, researchers have conducted large-scale research studies of writing instructional practices at the high school level (Applebee & Langer, 2009, 2011; Kiuhara, Graham & Hawken, 2009) and elementary level (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010). The majority of teachers surveyed in these studies used evidence-based practices (e.g., modeling), as categorized by the authors in their meta-analysis of writing research, at least several times a year, although more than half did not use these practices on a regular basis. Approximately half of these teachers provided opportunities for students to use computers during writing classes. Applebee and Langer's (2011) survey of exemplary middle and high school English, math, social studies, and science classrooms in five states showed that, in comparison to results of a similar survey conducted in 1979, test preparation now plays a large role in the amount of time that teachers spend on writing instruction.

In Canada, however, similar surveys of classroom writing instruction have not been conducted. Prior to our current study, the only comprehensive national data on classroom writing practices in Canada came from a study of middle-grade and high school teachers' responses to the teacher questionnaire component of the 2002 School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP), a national writing test for 13- and 16-year old Canadian students (Hunter, Mayenga & Gambell, 2006). Analysis of the teachers' questionnaire responses showed that teachers rewarded students' effort as well as their achievement when grading student writing. Teachers were more likely to provide feedback on writing after compositions were submitted for grading, than to provide ongoing feedback. In terms of writing instructional approaches, approximately one-third of surveyed teachers presented their students with models of good writing to show what was expected in their writing. Students engaged in collaborative writing in 29% of teachers' classrooms.

Our survey of teachers across Canada's 10 provinces and two of three territories, conducted through interviews with 216 teachers from grades 4 to 8, provides a needed reference point for further research on writing pedagogy and assessment. Canadian classroom contexts have much in common with American contexts, but assumptions about what happens in Canadian classrooms should not be made based on surveys of American classrooms. It is important for Canadian educators, researchers and policy-makers to base teaching, research and policy decisions on current Canadian data.

We have previously published discussions of specific pieces of the survey, such as the role of parents and communities to support classroom writing instruction (McClay, Peterson & Nixon, 2012), assumptions underpinning instructional writing practices using digital technology and multimedia (Peterson & McClay, 2012), issues in teaching writing in rural Canadian classrooms (Peterson, 2011), and ways in which teachers assess and provide feedback to students on their writing (Peterson & McClay, 2010). In addition, two papers have been published reporting on our observations in 1-3 classrooms in each of the 10 provinces; one focusing on teaching practices observed (Peterson, 2013), and the other on teachers' use of digital technology and multimedia (McClay & Peterson, 2013).

In this article, we present the findings from our national study of writing instruction and assessment in Canadian classrooms in their entirety, including findings that have not previously been published. The following research questions framed our study:

1. What are teachers' goals, and what practices and resources, including digital technology and multimedia, do teachers use to teach and assess writing in grades 4-8 classrooms across Canada?
2. What do teachers identify as the strengths and challenges that they face in teaching writing and who has most greatly influenced their writing instruction and assessment?

Following a brief background of policy and curriculum characteristics regarding writing instruction across Canada, we present our research methods and findings. We conclude by summarizing what we have found in answer to the two research questions.

BACKGROUND: CANADIAN CONTEXTS FOR WRITING CURRICULA AND ACHIEVEMENT TESTS

Because education is a provincial / territorial responsibility in Canada, K-12 curricula are developed by departments or ministries of education in each province and territory. The four Atlantic provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island) have a common curriculum developed in 1996. The Northwest Territories and the other six provinces have their own curricula, developed between 1996 and 2009. The Yukon Territory uses the British Columbia curriculum, developed in 2006. All of the writing curricula across Canada recognize the integral role of technology in formal and informal communication, mandating the use of digital technology and multimedia to compose texts.

Large-scale achievement tests are also the responsibility of each province's Ministry / Department of Education. The provincial achievement tests that have an impact on teachers and students participating in our research are written by grade 6 students in eight of the provinces and territories. In British Columbia and New Brunswick the testing occurs in grade 7 and in Saskatchewan, the testing occurs in grades 5 and 8. All the tests include composition, as well as reading passages. Students have time to talk with peers before writing in four provinces and two territories. Students are encouraged to plan, draft, revise, and edit their writing. Students are allotted two hours to write the exams in most provinces, with exceptions in British Columbia (90 minutes), Quebec (three hours), and Manitoba (portfolio assessment carried out over months in the classroom).

There is one large-scale national achievement test, Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP), which replaced the Student Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP), in 2007. The tests assess 13 and 16 year old students' reading, writing, mathematics and science. One subject is assessed each year or more recently, every three years. Writing was last assessed as a SAIP test in 2002. At that time, approximately 60% of 16-year olds reached the grade level expectations or beyond and approximately 40% of 13-year olds reached this level.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research proceeded in a two-phase structure: in Phase 1, we conducted telephone interviews with 216 middle grades teachers across the country, and in Phase 2, we observed and interviewed 21 of the initial 216 participants and visited their classrooms.

Phase 1: Telephone interviews: Wanting to provide a broader picture than is possible with observational research, but still capture the particularities of each teacher's classroom and practices, we used conversational interviews (averaging 35-40 minutes in length) with 216 grades 4-8 teachers (162 female and 54 male) across the country. These interviews were conducted by four research assistants and one of the researchers. Almost half of participating teachers (48%) had 15 or more years of teaching experience. Fourteen percent had less than 5 years of experience, 38% had 6-14 years teaching experience. (See Table 1 for breakdown of teachers' grade levels.)

TABLE 1. *Numbers of participating teachers at each grade level (N = 216)*

Grade Level	Number of Participating Teachers
Grade 4	38
Grade 5	26
Grade 6	27
Grade 7	14
Grade 8	30
Grades 4-6	40
Grades 7-8	40
Grades 1-8	1

We randomly selected four school districts — two rural and two urban wherever possible — in each province and then randomly selected three to six schools within each district, arriving at a total of 152 schools. Sixty percent of participating teachers taught in urban or suburban schools and 40% taught in rural schools. We selected the four school districts based on their location in the province, attempting to have one school from the northern part of the province, two from the central part of the province (one more easterly and another more westerly) and one from the southern part of the province. We interviewed between 20 and 23 teachers from each province, with the exception of Quebec, where we interviewed 17 teachers, the small province of Prince Edward Island, where we interviewed 14 teachers, and the two territories, where we interviewed six from the Northwest Territories and two teachers from the Yukon Territory. Our sample is smaller in Quebec because there are only nine English school districts in the province and the Anglophone population is approximately 600,000 within an overall Quebec population of just under 8 million. Our sample size was smaller in Prince Edward Island and the two territories because of their low overall population numbers (less than 150,000 in PEI, and less than 50,000 people in each of the two territories) (Statistics Canada, 2012). In addition, our sample was influenced by the number of teachers that agreed to participate.

After gaining ethics approval from a randomly-selected school district, we contacted the principals of the randomly-selected schools and requested the names of grades 4-8 teachers who were teaching writing. We then telephoned the teachers at school, one-by-one, to invite their participation, seeking a range of grade levels and a balance of female and male teachers. The principals did not know which teachers we contacted from the lists that they gave us. During the recruitment call we arranged a convenient time to call the teachers who agreed to participate in the interviews.

Interview questions are found in Appendix A. The interviews were recorded with teachers' consent. The recorded interviews were transcribed and then imported into Excel 2007. We wrote macros in the Excel program that allowed us to apply multiple codes to each of the responses. Each teacher's response to each question was coded separately. We did not collapse responses across a number of questions. We developed a preliminary code book for the categories of responses for each of the questions using inductive analysis (Cresswell, 1998; Glaser, 1998) of 13 transcripts. We conducted four inter-rater reliability exercises with an additional 5 transcripts each time. Improving each time, the accuracy rates went from 74%, to 76%, to 83% and finally to 89% inter-rater agreement. The coders discussed discrepant interpretations of the data in order to come to common interpretations of the 28 transcripts chosen for the reliability exercises.

Phase 2: Classroom visits: To contextualize and deepen our interview data, the two researchers visited 21 classrooms from the sample of 216 teachers who had taken part in the telephone interviews. Our selection of Phase II teachers was based on their location, as we attempted to include at least one teacher per province and a mix of rural and urban teachers. There were one to three classroom visits in each of the 10 provinces: three in each of Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Manitoba, two in Alberta, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, and one each in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Quebec. The recruitment process for Phase 2 was hampered in

Prince Edward Island and Quebec because fewer teachers took part in Phase 1. We also found that many Phase I participants had moved on to consultant or administrative positions and were no longer teaching writing. Fifteen teachers were female and six were male. Twelve teachers taught in urban schools and nine taught in rural schools. Eleven teachers taught intermediate grades (7-8), and 10 teachers taught grades 4-6. In terms of teaching experience, two teachers had taught for less than 5 years at the time of the classroom visits, eight teachers had taught for 6-10 years, five for 11-20 years and six for more than 20 years.

Data sources for the visits to classrooms of 21 of the 216 participating teachers included field notes of observations in each teacher's classroom during two to four writing class periods, artifacts (lesson plans and student materials used in the learning activities) and audio-recorded 20-minute interviews with the teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the practices and perspectives that they had talked about in the telephone interviews. With the goal of contextualizing teachers' telephone interview responses, our analysis involved identifying concrete classroom examples of the interview findings.

TEACHING AND ASSESSING WRITING IN PARTICIPATING MIDDLE-GRADES CLASSROOMS

Goals for students

As shown in Table 2, across the grades, greater numbers of participating teachers said that the most important goals in their writing instruction (as identified in responses to interview question 2) were for students to enjoy writing (62%) and be able to communicate effectively through writing (43.1%). A grade 4 Saskatchewan teacher expressed a typical response that focused on affective qualities: "I want students not to be scared to take chances; be creative and feel comfortable."

As Table 2 shows, almost half of participating teachers across the grades thought it was important to develop students' competence in using various genres for a range of purposes and a variety of audiences. Underscoring the need for students to recognize the purpose of written texts, a male grade 4 teacher from Quebec said, "I want students to see the usefulness in the writing of different forms. For instance, we do letter writing, poetry, movie script writing, and radio plays. I want students to have a chance to write all different kinds of texts."

When talking about the goal of using literary elements and attending to details, grades 4-6 teachers identified narrative literary elements and grades 7-8 teachers identified elements of essays. For example, a grade 5 Newfoundland teacher said, "I want students to be able to draw their readers in; to get their attention so that they want to read the rest of the story", whereas a grade 7

Prince Edward Island teacher wanted her students to "be able to defend an argument; to create a good paragraph or a good essay where they get their point across and prove it." At upper and lower grade levels, approximately 20% of teachers identified development of convention skills and the ability to use literary elements as important goals for their writing instruction.

TABLE 2. *Teachers' goals for students' growth as writers (%)*

Goals	Grades 4-6 *N*=132	Grades 7-8 *N*=84
Affective engagement and personal development	60.6	64.3
Effective communication of ideas	46.2	38.1
Write for a variety of purposes and audiences	43.2	46.4
Put effort into planning, drafting, revising and editing	27.3	27.4
Use literary elements and attend to details	22.7	14.3
Use writing conventions correctly	19.7	20.2
Succeed in provincial tests	10.6	13.1
Use digital technology and multi-media to compose	2.3	2.4

NOTE. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers identified numerous goals.

Teaching practices

As shown in Table 3, responses to question 4 of the interview indicated that almost all teachers teach mini-lessons on various elements of writing, such as effective leads and organizing ideas within paragraphs. Providing time for feedback and revisions to the writing was a practice carried out in 88% of teachers' classrooms in a typical week. Teachers in grades 4 to 6 (50.8%) were more likely than grades 7 and 8 teachers (20.4%) to provide opportunities for students to publish their writing and read it aloud to peers in Author's Chair (Graves & Hansen, 1983).

Thirty-three percent of grades 4-6 teachers and 27.4% of grades 7-8 teachers described typical writing classes using the term *writers' workshop* and less than 25% of teachers said that they provided prompts with topics on which all students were to write.

TABLE 3. *Teaching practices (%)*

Teaching Practice	Grades 4-6 N=132	Grades 7-8 N=84
Mini-lessons	97.8	91.2
Write and revise using teacher and peer feedback	90.2	85.7
Author's share/publish writing	50.8	27.4
Writers' workshop	33.3	27.4
Writing prompts	18.2	22.6

Observations of teachers participating in Phase 2 provided specific examples of how teachers carried out writers' workshop in their classrooms. These teachers provided students with varying amounts of choice in determining the topic, purpose, audience and genre of their writing. Four teachers encouraged students to generate ideas in writers' notebooks (Fletcher, 1996) and did not assign topics at all. Other teachers provided a selection of artifacts and topics to help students generate ideas for their writing. In a grade 7 class, for example, students chose one photograph from a large stack and used the teacher's suggestions (e.g., thinking about the character's age, family background and history, as well as the conflict the person may be facing and what he or she might be thinking) to compose a story or poem of any genre or form. Teachers observed in Phase 2 also used current world and community events and content area topics as starting points for writing. Some of the examples showed community-school connections. In one rural Newfoundland school, students contributed to a poetry book and to a cookbook that were sold to community members to raise funds for improving the school playground. The book included favorite family recipes and poetry written by the children from each family. In a rural grade 7/8 Manitoba class, students interviewed senior citizens in the community and then used the interview responses to write biographies to give to the interviewees. The three participating grades 7 and 8 teachers in New Brunswick provided time for students to draft and revise speeches for school-wide, school district and provincial competitions.

Student talk. Participating teachers' responses to question 8 of the interview showed that students were encouraged to talk about their writing with peers in 91.7% of grades 4-6 teachers' classrooms and 98.8% of grades 7-8 teachers' classrooms. Much of the talk was formally scheduled for assigned writing where students were encouraged to brainstorm ideas for their writing. Teachers also gave students the choice to engage in peer conferences. Many teachers felt that the independent writing time should be quiet, as a grade 7 Northwest Territories teacher explained:

> For the major writing assignments the expectation is to write quietly and share later. I encourage all my students to be prepared to share what they write with the class. They also have the opportunity to discuss their writing in peer editing sessions.

Resources for teaching

Classroom materials. To implement their writing programs, 90.0% of grades 4-6 teachers and 85.7% of grades 7-8 teachers levels indicated that they used published materials (see Table 3 for a breakdown of the various materials). The *Six Plus One Traits* (Spandel, 2005) was the most popular. When asked about the merits and drawbacks of the published materials, approximately 70% of teachers at all grade levels identified positive contributions of the materials. Within this group, teachers with less experience appreciated the structure provided by the materials. The majority of teachers within this group agreed with a grade 5 Alberta teacher: "I wouldn't say that they change my instruction. They just give me new ideas." Teachers talked about the exemplars, rubrics and recommendations for literature selections that they found helpful in the various resources they used.

The 30% of teachers who identified drawbacks found that the student materials were often beyond their students' comprehension levels and were not interesting to students. The predominant drawback of published programs, however, was their prescriptive nature. As a grade 5 Prince Edward Island teacher, explained, "I do not like working with lock-step programs where you have to [teach] in a certain order."

In addition, approximately one-third of all teachers used materials found on the internet and created their own materials. Phase 2 observations also showed that teachers used internet texts for mini-lessons. A grade 7/8 Manitoba teacher created a PowerPoint of photographs illustrating a story she had written about a tiny abandoned house on a popularly-used highway and a grade 7 Nova Scotia teacher used slam poetry videos from YouTube as sample speeches for students to assess using the scoring criteria for their assigned speeches.

Children's and young adult literature, professional development materials, educational journals, curriculum guides, and school district resources also supported participating teachers' writing instruction.

Computers and multimedia. Slightly more than 76% of grades 7-8 teachers and 78% of grades 4-6 teachers said that they use computers to teach writing on a regular basis. Eighteen percent of grades 7-8 teachers and 13.6 percent of grades 4-6 teachers require word processed final copies. Whether word-processed submissions are required or not, in 15.9% of grades 4-6 teachers' classrooms and 36.6% of grades 7-8 teachers' classrooms, students hand in final written assignments that have been word processed. Teachers told us that lack of access often prevented students from writing all drafts on computers. A grade 5 teacher from New Brunswick identified the access issue in her school:

> We have a computer lab and I try to sign them up once a week to get in. And we don't have time to type them all, but we usually type probably one a month. I would say, we get in and get one finished.

TABLE 4. *Resources used to teach writing (%)*

Resources (either directly used by students are serving as the sources for creating student materials)	Grades 4-6 N=132	Grades 7-8 N=84
Published teaching resources	90.9	85.7
Internet resources	32.6	35.7
Teacher-made materials	34.1	27.4
Children's and young adult literature	32.6	25.0
Materials from workshops and other professional development opportunities	26.5	21.4
Educational journals	18.2	21.4
Curriculum guides	25.8	15.5
School district resources	19.7	22.6
Workbooks, exercise books	12.1	14.3
Multi-media: movies music, TV, screenplays	4.5	10.7
Materials from graduate courses, additional qualifications courses	3.8	2.3

NOTE. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers identified numerous resources.

Teachers who provided opportunities for students to use computers only for the good copy explained that access was not the only factor precluding the use of computers to compose drafts as well as good copies. A British Columbia grade 8 teacher explained that "students want to use computers for neatness, but are not able to use spell check or grammar check features. They can't tell when errors are or are not being picked up by the computer. When using tools like PowerPoint, frequently the content suffers while students master the use of the tool." However, a few teachers, such as a grade 7/8 Ontario teacher felt that "If students draft on the computer, they can recognize spelling errors faster because it's more text-like."

Students used digital technology to create websites and webcasts, to communicate via email, and to participate in blogs in just over 10% of participating teachers' classrooms. Teachers participating in Phase 2 gave examples of podcasts and videos of speeches and Claymation cartoon movies that their students had created and uploaded to the school website.

Parents and community resources. Mindful that parental involvement in schooling is an important underpinning of success in school literacy (Gill & Schlossman, 2003), we asked about parental and community support of the teachers' writing programs as part of the issue of resources available (interview questions 1 and 7). As shown in Table 5, 81.8% of participating grades 4-6 teachers and 76.1% of grades 7-8 teachers said that parents of their students supported their children's writing. Teachers discussed parental involvement both in general and specific terms: in general terms as support for schoolwork and the school (e.g., making sure students completed their assignments) and in specific terms as related to teachers' writing programs (e.g., providing response for a draft of writing in progress). Approximately half of all participating teachers indicated that community resources–generally author visits, writing competitions, and young author conferences–figured in their teaching of writing.

TABLE 5. *Parent and community resources (%)*

	Grades 4-6 N=132	Grades 7-8 N=84
Parents help children at home with their writing	81.8	76.1
Teacher draws upon community resources to teach writing	54.5	53.5

Class time for writing

As shown in Table 6 approximately 61% of participating teachers across the grades responded to interview question 3 by saying that students spent 2-4 hours per week writing or involved in writers' workshop in language arts classes. This is close to the one-hour per day recommended by the National Commission on Writing (2003). The next largest group of teachers (22% of grades 4-6 teachers and 29.7% of grades 7-8 teachers) provided one hour or less per week for writing. Only 10% of participating grades 4-6 teachers and none of the grades 7-8 teachers scheduled at least an hour daily. A few teachers (8% of grades 7-8 teachers and 4.9% of grades 4-6 teachers) said that the amount of time varied and did not give hourly estimates.

TABLE 6. *Time allocated to writing (%)*

	Grades 4-6 teachers *N*=132	Grades 7-8 teachers *N*=84
1 hour or less/week	22.0	29.7
2-4 hours/week	61.7	60.8
At least an hour daily	10.0	0.0
Varies	4.9	8.0

Writing assignments

In their responses to interview question 6, participating teachers said that they assigned creative writing (e.g., poetry, stories, plays) most frequently in language arts, and they assigned research reports / essays most frequently in the content areas (see Table 7). This trend occurred across the grades. In a comparison by grades, greater percentages of grades 4-6 teachers assigned creative and personal writing (e.g., journal, diary, friendly letters), and asked students to respond to texts (e.g., through aesthetic response, book reviews or answering questions about the text) and write to a picture prompt or story starter in language arts classes. Greater percentages of grades 7-8 teachers assigned research reports / essays, persuasive writing, sentences or paragraphs, and formal business writing (e.g., business letters, resumes, cover letters, applications). These grade level trends were fairly consistent across the content areas, as well.

Assessing and providing feedback on student writing

Participants indicated in their responses to interview questions 10 and 11 that they relied heavily on the provincial performance standards and rubrics in their writing assessment and when providing feedback to students on their writing. As shown in Table 8, grades 4-6 teachers (74.8%) were more likely to use provincial scoring guides and rubrics to provide feedback and to determine grades than were grades 7-8 teachers (49.4%). Our Phase 2 observations showed that the scoring guides / rubrics tended to be based on six traits of writing (Spandel, 2005): content / ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions. Teachers across the grades were more likely to provide verbal feedback than written feedback. Self-assessment and portfolio assessment were not frequently used forms of assessment (less than 20% of teachers identified these assessment practices across the grades). Peer feedback, however, was used in 97.8% of grades 4-6 teachers' classrooms and 88.1% of grades 7-8 teachers' classrooms. Teachers were divided as to how helpful peer feedback was to improving students' writing. A grade 4 teacher in Quebec described the merits of peer feedback:

> I think it has to do with audience and when the students are writing something for their audience of their peers and they know their peers are going to read it and be critiquing it, it may make them step up a level in their writing because they know that they can do better.

Eight of the 10 teachers who identified limitations to the value of peer feedback taught grades 4-6. They talked about peers not having the writing experience and competence to provide effective feedback.

TABLE 7. *Types of writing assigned (%)*

Type of Writing Assigned	Language Arts		Content Areas	
	Grades 4-6 N=132	Grades 7-8 N=84	Grades 4-6 N=132	Grades 7-8 N=84
Creative	93.9	84.5	19.7	9.5
Personal	83.3	61.9	31.8	17.9
Response to Text	54.5	52.3	31.8	25.0
Research Reports/Essays	46.2	54.8	55.3	28.6
Persuasive	32.5	47.6	5.3	8.3
Sentences/Paragraphs	27.3	36.9	9.8	8.3
Formal Business Writing	16.7	26.2	5.3	7.1
Writing to a Prompt	18.9	7.1	2.3	4.8

NOTE. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers identified numerous assignments.

TABLE 8. *Teachers' feedback and assessment practices (%)*

Feedback and Assessment Practices	Grades 4-6 N=132	Grades 7-8 N=84
Peer feedback	97.8	88.1
Teachers' verbal feedback	86.4	82.1
Rubrics/scoring guides	74.8	49.4
Teachers' written feedback	65.2	66.7
Portfolios	16.7	13.1
Students' self-assessment	14.4	8.3

NOTE. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers identified numerous feedback and assessment practices.

TEACHERS' IDENTIFIED STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THEIR TEACHING

As Table 9 indicates, the grades 4-6 teachers' responses to interview questions 12 and 13 were more likely than grades 7-8 teachers' responses to identify teaching practices, such as modeling, thinking aloud, providing examples, providing feedback, teaching genres / forms, and using literature to teach writing, as their strengths. Combined, these specific practices were cited as strengths by 78.8% of grades 4-6 teachers and 58.2% of grades 7-8 teachers.

Teachers provided many examples of how they were successful at motivating students and supporting them to carry out all stages of the writing process. Teachers' own enthusiasm for writing was also considered a teaching strength, as expressed by a Nova Scotia grade 6 teacher: "I think it is my acceptance of children writing what they enjoy to write, and my love for writing. I really enjoy the written word. I think my enthusiasm for it rubs off on the students."

Although more than one-third of participating teachers said that they provided sufficient time for students to write and receive feedback from their teachers, 65.9% of grades 4-6 teachers and 58.3% of grades 7-8 teachers were also concerned about the need to provide more time for students to write and to meet with their teacher to talk about their writing. Approximately 10% of teachers talked about wanting to find more time for one-on-one conferencing with students.

TABLE 9. *Teachers' identification of their writing instruction strengths and needs (%)*

	Teaching Strengths		Desired Changes	
	Gr. 4-6 N=132	Gr. 7-8 N=84	Gr. 4-6 N=132	Gr. 7-8 N=84
Instilling a love of writing	43.2	36.9	3.0	11.9
Providing time to write & get feedback	38.0	34.5	65.9	58.3
Modeling/thinking aloud with examples	26.5	19.0	7.6	2.4
Providing feedback	12.9	10.7	10.6	10.7
Providing choice	10.6	8.3	1.5	0.0
Teaching genres/forms	8.3	3.6	8.3	10.7
Using literature to teach writing	7.6	0.0	0.8	0.0
Using specific criteria/performance standards	6.8	7.1	3.0	2.4
Using writers' workshop	6.1	9.5	6.1	4.8
Using technology to teach writing	6.0	1.2	13.6	14.2
Teaching writing conventions	1.5	3.6	9.1	10.7

NOTE. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers identified numerous strengths and challenges.

In regard to specific teaching practices, participating teachers primarily wanted to become better at providing feedback to students and finding meaningful ways to teach a variety of genres. A grade 4 Northwest Territories teacher, for example, said, "I found that one year I was really big on poetry and another year I was really big on narrative. Last year, I spent a lot of time on non-fiction. It's nice if you can touch on everything, but in one year, I find I can't really do all the genres justice." Very few participating teachers identified their use of technology as a teaching strength. Approximately 10% noted that this is an area needing improvement.

Influences and professional preparation for teaching writing

Colleagues were identified most frequently as having influenced the writing instruction of participating teachers (see Table 10) in their responses to interview question 14. A grade 5 teacher from Newfoundland and Labrador explained: "A teacher in my school was really into readers / writers workshop. Often I would go in to see how she was running her classroom. I'd take notes of charts she would have on the walls, and that really influenced me." Authors of resources for teaching writing, such as Nancie Atwell, Lucy McCormick Calkins, and Ruth Culham, and of children's / young adult literature were also highly influential.

TABLE 10. People who have influenced teachers' writing instruction (percentage of teachers)

Influential People	Grades 4-6 teachers N=132	Grades 7-8 teachers N=84
Colleagues	26.5	28.6
Authors of resources for teaching writing	26.5	13.6
Courses, university professors/instructors	22.7	22.6
School/district/provincial in-service or consultant	21.2	20.2
Teacher who taught participating teacher	16.7	15.5

NOTE. Percentages do not add to 100 because teachers identified numerous influential people.

Initial teacher education courses and in-service opportunities, such as workshops, conferences and work with consultants, were also highly influential. Participating teachers identified university professors / instructors who instilled a desire to write, engaging students in reading and writing, and providing feedback on their writing, and they indicated that these university people had helped to improve their teaching practices in composition instruction. The role of teachers in fostering a love of writing was highlighted by approximately 16% of participating teachers, who identified a former teacher as being influential to who they were as writing teachers.

The majority of teachers reported that they do some writing outside of school, though 34% of grades 4-6 and 27% of grades 7-8 teachers indicated that they do not. Some writing was professional (written by 25.5% of grades 4-6 teachers and 34.5% of grades 7-8 teachers) and other writing was personal, taking the form of journals, diaries and creative writing such as narratives (written by 26%

of teachers in both grade groups). A further 16% of grades 4-6 teachers and 11.9% of grades 7-8 teachers identified correspondence (usually email and other electronic forms) as the type of writing that they engaged in outside school.

DISCUSSION

Teachers' goals, practices and resources for teaching and assessing writing

Like the teachers of 13- and 16-year old students participating in Canada's 2002 SAIP (Hunter, Mayenga, & Gambell, 2006), participating teachers in this research were mindful of the importance of affective goals, which the National Commission on Writing (2003) identified as important to students' writing development. Their goals are reflected in research on motivation and writing showing that positive self-image as writers is highly correlated with writing achievement (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007).

To accomplish these goals, participating teachers selected and modified resources, (commercial and internet resources, as well as children's and young adult literature) to meet students' needs. Participating teachers' teaching practices included direct instruction involving the use of modeling and exemplars, as did middle-grade and high school teachers whose SAIP questionnaire responses were analyzed by Hunter, Mayenga and Gambell (2006). Such instruction is among the research-based best practices identified by Graham and Perin (2007).

In many respects, their writing instruction was consistent with a process approach / writers' workshop approach to teaching writing, as teachers provided time for student interaction; gave students choices in their writing; focused on personal writing, such as journals, response to literature, and personal narrative; and required multiple drafts (Graves, 2004; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Ray, 2001). Teachers also linked the reading of literature with writing tasks. This practice is based on research showing that "reading and writing are dependent upon common cognitive substrata of abilities (e.g., visual, phonological, and semantic systems or short- and long-term memory), and anything that improves these abilities may have implications for both reading and writing development" (Shanahan, 2006. p. 174).

Committed to the goals advocated by the National Commission on Writing (2003), 66% of participating teachers devoted at least 2-4 hours per week on writing or writers' workshop. Close to 30% of grades 7-8 teachers allocated less than one hour per week, however. In this respect, teaching practices were not consistent with best practices associated with a process approach to teaching writing, as students need time to carry out the thinking processes associated with composing: planning, goal setting, drafting, ongoing revision, and editing, drawing on their knowledge of the topic and of audience expectations. One to two hours per week are not sufficient to allow students to craft quality compositions and, in the process, develop as writers (Graves, 2004; Ray, 2001). According to Graves (2004), "Children need to write a minimum of three days out of five. Four or five days are ideal" (p. 91).

A notable difference between the results of our cross-Canada survey and that of Hunter, Mayenga and Gambell (2006) lies in teachers' perceptions of the role of feedback in teaching writing. Teachers in the previous study tended to provide feedback on students' final compositions. Middle-grade teachers in this study, however, were highly conscious of the importance of providing peer and teacher feedback during the writing process and of providing clear criteria for assessment. A primary goal in their feedback and assessment practices was enhancing students' motivation and self-esteem as writers. In these ways teachers followed what researchers recognize as effective practice (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Although teachers whose SAIP questionnaire responses were analyzed tended to assign independent writing over collaborative writing, teachers participating in our study painted a picture of their classrooms as places in which young writers talked to each other and to the teacher about their writing. Our observations confirmed an emphasis on productive, supportive talk. Given that oral language development and writing development are linked, and that social interaction contributes to students' writing and overall learning (Fisher, Myhill, Jones, & Larkin, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978), these practices are essential to supporting students' writing development. Through talking with peers and their teacher, students gain new perspectives and content for their writing, as well as a sense of social expectations, understandings, values, and perspectives that guide their topic choice and decisions about ways of communicating their ideas (Dyson, 2002).

Although participating teachers assigned few multi-media projects, they used computers more widely than was evident in previous research (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Laframboise & Klesius, 1993). Computers played a minor role in students' writing processes, however, as they were used primarily for the "good copy" of students' writing.

Teachers appreciated parental support for school work and achievement. Their views of parental ability to contribute more specific response or involvement with children's writing, however, varied according to their perception of the parental and community commitment to literacy and the English-language proficiency of the parents. Although few teachers spoke about actual positive involvement of parents or communities in their writing programs, those teachers who did offered exciting and rich examples of parental involvement as responders and audiences for their children's writing.

Strengths, challenges and influences on teachers' writing instruction and assessment

More than half of participating teachers said that they did some professional and / or personal writing outside of school. Many said that their enthusiasm for writing and abilities to motivate students to write, as well as their use of particular teaching strategies, were their strengths. These strengths are important to effective writing instruction, as teachers should "understand good writing and develop as writers themselves" (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 5).

In terms of challenges, as has been the case for teachers participating in previous research, lack of access to digital technology was a barrier to teachers' extensive use of technology to teach writing (An & Reigeluth, 2011). Teachers' views on the development of writing abilities were also a factor in their use of technology to teach writing, as many teachers appeared to assume that composing with pen and paper is a natural precursor to composing using computers in middle grades. Given that these assumptions have not been borne out by research (Goldberg, Russell & Cook, 2007), as composing on computers has been shown to result in improved writing quality and quantity, this is an area for future professional development initiatives. An additional challenge was the lack of time for providing one-on-one feedback to students. The importance of feedback on students' writing development has been well-documented in previous research (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Graham, Harris, & Hebert, 2011; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Peterson & McClay, 2010) and is another area to target for professional development.

Given that more than 25% of participating teachers identified colleagues as being most influential to their professional learning, it is clear that professional development initiatives should incorporate collaborative learning opportunities among teachers within schools and school districts. Local and provincial in-service consultants, facilitators of professional development sessions and professional resources have been as influential as university courses and instructors, indicating that a range of professional learning opportunities should be initiated to support teachers' writing instruction and assessment.

Contributions of this research

In conclusion, this study provides a Canadian perspective on the teaching and assessment of writing that has been heretofore absent in the literature. We are aware that teachers who agree to participate in research are not "typical" teachers and their self-reported data may not reflect actual practices. We went to great lengths to gather more in-depth information with interviews rather than surveys and with some classroom visits; however, we recognize limits on having full understanding of the teaching and learning contexts of participants. Indeed, even though the sample size of 216 teachers is relatively large for interview research, it is important to be cautious when generalizing the results across the country. We also recognize that this research is time-sensitive (the end of the data collection period was in the 2011-2012 school year), as teachers' practices are changing, particularly with respect to the use of new technologies to teach writing. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study contributes useful and much-needed information about teaching and assessment practices in Canadian middle-school classrooms that can be used as a starting point for policy-making, teacher education and curriculum development in the field of writing.

NOTES

1. In every discussion and in every observation, we saw participating teachers' pride in their work, their appreciation of their students, and their commitment to providing the very best education possible for all the young people in their charge. We believe that the teaching of writing is tremendously complex, and we want to express our appreciation to the many teachers who allowed us to observe and talk with them about their teaching.
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APPENDIX A: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS)

1. Talk about the community surrounding your school. Would you consider the school to be in an urban or rural community? How do you draw upon the people and resources in the community to teach writing?
2. What are your goals for your students as writers?
3. How much time do you schedule for teaching writing?
4. What happens in writing class in a typical week in your classroom?
5. What resources do you use when you teach writing? What do you see as the advantages / disadvantages of the program(s)?
6. What kinds of writing do you ask students to do in language arts? in other subjects?
7. What kinds of support do parents of your students give to their children in their writing?
8. Do you structure your writing classes so students talk to each other? How much talking do students do in your writing classes?
9. Do you use multimedia and computers in teaching writing? If so, how? Talk about some examples of ways your students use computers and multimedia at home. What percentage hand in printed-out work rather than hand-written work?
10. How do you give feedback to your students on their writing? How important do you feel this feedback is in helping students with their writing? What do you use to assess?
11. Do students give feedback to each other on their writing? How important do you feel this feedback is in helping students with their writing?
12. What do you feel are the strengths of your writing instruction?
13. What would you like to change about your writing instruction?
14. Who, or what, has influenced your writing instruction most?
15. Are you a writer, yourself, outside of school?

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