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Using Stories as the Landscape of Writing: A Case Study of Mentor Texts in the Elementary Classroom

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USING STORIES AS THE LANDSCAPE OF WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF
MENTOR TEXTS IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

by

Christine McDowell

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
English
Western Michigan University
June 2015

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USING STORIES AS THE LANDSCAPE OF WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF MENTOR TEXTS IN THE ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Christine McDowell, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 2015

In this dissertation, I investigate the way in which mentor texts are defined and implemented by four elementary classroom teachers within one school district, and how this mode of instruction allows for an increase in teacher autonomy while still addressing Common Core State Standards. This project focuses on each participant as they share a common goal in writing instruction while maintaining their teaching identity and curricular freedom.

One goal of this study is to provide the educational theory that supports mentor text instruction that is missing from the movement. Many teaching guides exist that explain the concept of mentor texts, but they do not explore the foundations behind the teaching practice. This study seeks to create this missing foundation to ensure that this practice becomes a permanent part of writing instruction, rather than a passing trend.

The second goal is to provide insight as to how teachers put this theory into practice. The same teaching guides are filled with detailed lesson plans and annotated bibliographies, but they do not examine how to make this practice a permanent part of writing instruction. Instead, they read as disjointed singular lesson ideas. This study also seeks to break down the implementation process so that it is accessible to all

teachers. Although the concept of mentor texts is growing in the field of English Education, little has been said about the implementation of the practice into mainstream writing instruction. What are the critical features of a quality mentor text? Do they support Common Core State Standards? How do the criteria of mentor texts differ among lessons, or among teachers? How do students respond to mentor texts as a model of writing? This study examines how teachers are implementing mentor texts into a permanent part of their writing curriculum, how they discern which mentor texts to include, and how they facilitate the instruction with their students.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.” I have many people to thank for helping me navigate this journey through the PhD program, who helped build me for the future.

Karen Vocke, you have been more than an advisor, you are also my friend. You always know exactly when I need a firm push or when I need space to learn through my own experiences. You opened my eyes to world of ELL methodology, filling a void in my pedagogy and philosophy. From the first day we met, you were inviting and supportive and proved to be a strong ally and advocate. I am equally glad that we spent our time over coffee, taking the dogs to the park, or road tripping to yoga. I did not just work with Karen Vocke, the professor; I had the joy of working with Karen Vocke, the person.

Jonathan Bush, thank you for your patience and calming words during every freak-out moment that is graduate school. Thank you also for the opportunity to continue working with Third Coast Writing Project. You helped me create strong connections within the CEE writing group, helping me to feel grounded, connected, and a true member of the English Education community.

Ellen Brinkley, this journey would not have been possible without you. Several years ago you required each of us attending the Third Coast Writing Project to

Acknowledgements—Continued

present an hour long professional development talk to a roomful of peers. With your guidance, I found my confidence, my voice, and my passion for English Education. Initially I enrolled in the summer institute to boost my teaching repertoire. Instead, I was inspired to leave a job I loved—teaching eighth grade English Language Arts—to pursue a career teaching English Education to pre-service teachers.

Kia Richmond, you have been so very instrumental to helping me navigate my professional identity as a teacher educator. I always look forward to our collaborating sessions at NCTE and CEE, and you always ensure that I feel confident and secure, like a true colleague.

To my cohort: Kristin Sovis, Briana Asmus, Suzanne Ehst, Josh Anderson, and Steffany Maher, you have been instrumental in helping me through this process. From analyzing literature to being conferences roomies, we have had so many laughs and moments of insight. I am proud of each of you and look forward to future conferences and celebrations with you.

On a personal note, I need to thank my husband, Cory McDowell. Without your continuous support, I would never have been able to finish this program. You read every paper, spent days quizzing me for my oral exams, bought all my favorite junk food during my highest moments of stress, and always knew how to make me laugh and put things back into perspective. You are quite simply the best. Finally, I would also like to thank my family for their patience and for their support in this endeavor.

Christy McDowell

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The practice of using mentor texts in the classroom centers itself on the concept of using existing text-- usually published literature-- as a focal point for writing instruction. Mentor texts provide students with models of quality writing, which students analyze and utilize in their own writing. With the development of mentor text instruction came a myriad of unknowns that make implementation difficult for students and detract from teacher autonomy in curricular planning. This case study examines how four elementary teachers incorporate mentor text instruction into their curriculum, while maintaining academic freedom in a time of curriculum reform and packaged curricula. It analyzes the execution of their instructional methodology for commonalities and theoretical applications for teachers who are unfamiliar with mentor text practice. Through the analysis of these emerging themes, this study addresses the ramifications of mentor text instruction and offers recommendations for implementing their use into a writing curriculum.

Challenges

In a time of education reform (2009-currently 2015) and Common Core State Standards, hereafter referred to as CCSS, came a rise in prepackaged curricular programs. According to Stan Karp:

Having financed the creation of the standards, the Gates Foundation has entered into a partnership with Pearson to produce a full set of K-12 courses aligned with the Common Core that will be marketed to schools across the country. Nearly every educational product now comes wrapped in the Common Core brand name.

Some of these programs may intend to serve the best interest of students, but they also work as a profit base for publishing companies. For example the Collins Writing Program, owned by Collins Education Associates, is a company that profits from the investments the school districts make into its program. Similarly, Scholastic commoditized the concept of the 6 + 1 Traits of Writing, offering “Trait Crates” which are bundles of books and lesson plans available at multiple grade levels. Prentice Hall offers a program called “Writing Coach” that is designed for grades 6-12 and was written by the publishing company, who, incidentally, is owned by Pearson. Pearson, among other publishing companies, helped develop the CCSS, and then rolled out a series of textbooks and curriculum guides already aligned with the new national standards. This, according to Hodge and Benko, led to the increase in prescribed curriculum, which takes away from society’s trust in teacher-led curricular design and thus ruins teacher autonomy in lesson planning (173).

Though the Heinemann Company teamed up with Lucy Calkins to create a mentor text writing curriculum, fundamentally, the design of mentor text instruction is not designed to be a part of a prepackaged curriculum. Instead, it presents itself as a methodology for writing instruction that allows teachers to make their own decisions regarding the choice and implantation of the mentor texts selected and used, which

leads to another issue surrounding the use of mentor texts: teachers who are unfamiliar with the practice often do not know how to begin incorporating them into the classroom. Independent authors and researchers in the field of English Education, such as Katie Wood Ray, Ruth Culham, Lynn Dorfman and Rose Cappelli, and Ralph Fletcher have written several independent guidebooks. While lesson plans fill these practical guides, they still leave the new practitioner at a loss of where to begin. Should teachers be trying to incorporate all of the suggested texts into their classrooms? Should they begin with a small selection? Not only do the guidebooks fail to explain a process or strategy for implementation, but they also fail to provide the theoretical background that makes mentor text instruction a sound practice.

The creation and implementation of the CCSS brought several issues into education. This study is not going to address all of the controversies in educational reform, but it will examine its impact on teacher autonomy. At the time of this writing, several states are fighting against the implementation of the CCSS. Until a decision is made in this movement, however, the CCSS still govern the content of what teachers are expected to teach in their classrooms. Consider the following from the Common Core website, “The standards establish what students need to learn, but they do not dictate how teachers should teach. Teachers will devise their own lesson plans and curriculum, and tailor their instruction to the individual needs of the student.” At its essence is the suggestion that teachers do know what is best for students and should have the autonomy to teach in a manner they deem most appropriate for the students’ needs. Under a blanket statement such as this, it would seem that mentor text

instruction would be a viable option for teachers to incorporate into their writing curriculum. However, the standards website alone does not tell the whole story.

As mentioned earlier, with the rise of the CCSS also came the rise of newly developed curriculum guides written for teachers to aid in the adoption of the new standards and benchmarks. On the surface, it appears a grand gesture on behalf of the publishing companies as they seek to help teachers rework their curricular structures to ensure coverage of the standards. However, it is not often clear that these same publishing companies were on the ground floor of the CCSS, and in fact helped to write them. This means that the publishing companies, Pearson in particular, were creating the CCSS and the new curricular guides not for the best interests of students and teachers, but in the best interest of their own profit (Layton, Cavanagh). Not only did Pearson aid in the creation of the CCSS, but they also designed the standardized tests that measure how well a student is progressing through the national curriculum. In other words, Pearson wrote the standards, and then wrote the books that teach those standards, and *then* wrote the tests that measure how well those standards are met in the classroom. As key players in political reform allowed, encouraged, and bankrolled this initiative, legislators also began tying teacher evaluation and school performance scores to the passing rate of these tests. As school districts scramble to become competitive in the race to draw in top dollars in per pupil funding, what choice do they have other than to play into the hands, and wallets, of the business market that has taken over education? This is how the CCSS, with its idyllic language, hinders teacher autonomy in the classroom. As Hodge and Benko explain:

One cannot help but feel that the message of teacher autonomy is undercut by the stated purpose of the Publisher's Criteria—influencing instructional materials and textbooks. Therefore, the Publisher's Criteria are intended to influence what texts *publishers* choose, what questions and instructional activities *publishers* will include related to those texts, and what assessments *publishers* will write around those texts. If publishers are the ones with the choice...then teachers may very well have little autonomy over their instructional decisions in a time of increasing pressure to standardize curricula” (190).

Further complicating the issue is the number of underperforming schools that are not making adequate progress on their standardized assessments. Under NCLB, school districts that were not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) risked losing autonomy through the stages of school improvement. In Michigan, for example, schools had five chances to make AYP on their standardized test, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program. According to senior policy analyst, Robert Manwaring, if a school district met its AYP then the state Department of Education remained a neutral party, allowing the district full autonomy in teaching and evaluating. However, if a school district did not meet their AYP for two consecutive years, then the state considered it a school in “district improvement status” which must develop an improvement plan, use Title I funding for professional development, and allow students to transfer to other schools (6). Regardless of its placement on a watch list, the district still had a degree of autonomy in selecting its methodology for raising its standardized test scores by the next year's test. However, school boards often grew

nervous about being on the District Improvement list, making it common for districts to adopt curricular guides that were pre-aligned to state and national standards.

If a district failed to make AYP three years in a row it must tap into its Title I funding to provide tutoring and/or after-school programs from a “state-approved provider.” Wiley et al., in a regional report on the impact of AYP, clarify that in the third year of missing AYP, not only does the district need to provide supplemental services, but they also must do one of the following: replace staff, change management, extend the school day, restructure the school’s internal organization, or adopt a new curriculum (6). At this point, any degree of teacher autonomy is slipping away into the hands of the district’s administration.

A district that failed to meet AYP for four consecutive years faced the same corrective actions as in year three, but must restructuring plan is now a requirement. At the fifth of year of not meeting AYP, the school must implement the restructuring plan, reopen as a charter school, replace all or most of the staff, and is subject to a state takeover (Manwaring 5; Wiley 6;). At this point, the district has lost any degree of autonomy it once held, not only amongst the teachers, but also amongst the administration.

As CCSS developed, many districts were reeling from the effects of NCLB, even after the Bush administration left office. School reform continued to become a political platform, and many districts felt gun-shy about returning to an autonomous state. Not to mention, several districts invested a large portion of their budgets into textbook adoption from publishing giants such as Pearson, Prentice Hall, Houghton Mifflin, and McGraw-Hill. Very few school boards would be willing to change

curricular structure once they invested their money into expensive curriculum packages. Therefore, while the language of the CCSS aligns itself with teacher autonomy, for many districts it was too late for teachers to maintain curricular control.

Purpose/Background Information

While reformers are pushing their movement with dollars, there is a significant push back from teachers. Arming themselves with information and data, these teachers fight for what is best for students. Some districts give their teachers the autonomy to make curricular decisions to meet the needs of their students. By examining the theory behind these decisions, these leaders in best practice can become stakeholders in the battle of education reform.

One purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the theory-into-practice dimensions of mentor text use in actual elementary classrooms. There are several guidebooks in the field with rich lesson plans and annotated bibliographies of mentor texts ready for classroom use. While this is a good starting point for teachers who are new to the concept of mentor texts, current research does not offer practical strategies for implementing a new lesson structure for teachers who have not used them before. One underexplored area of research is the documentation of how mentor texts are used in actual classrooms. This multiple case study will provide insight as to how teachers put theory into practice in the elementary school environment, provide rationale for the inclusion of mentor texts into the writing curriculum, and examine how teachers utilize the level of autonomy provided to them within their school district.

How I Came to this Project

In 2009, I participated in a month long session of the Third Coast Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project. At that time, I focused on reviving my writing instruction, developing strategies for my eighth grade students, and rediscovering my own writing. Though I was a middle school teacher, my elementary background brought me to breakout sessions in which other participants often sought advice about teaching specific writing strategies. One of the leaders would often answer, “Get a mentor text.” At that time, I was not as invested in mentor texts simply because it was an unfamiliar term. I would use the occasional picture book in my classroom to teach a writing trait, but nothing more.

When I began my course work at Western Michigan University, I found myself face-to-face with college freshmen and scrambling to find examples of what good writing looked like. I knew that if I wanted my students to write an editorial they first needed to see—and analyze—an editorial. The next semester found me teaching a writing methods course for pre-service elementary teachers. As I immersed myself in syllabus preparation and textbook previewing, I saw the familiar phrase: mentor text. I first read about them in Katie Wood Ray’s *Wondrous Words*. As I read, I could still here the leader’s voice in the back of my mind telling me to teach my students—my college students—with a mentor text. Therefore, I did. Before writing a personal narrative in my composition course, I rounded up examples of memoir from David Sedaris and Maya Angelou, as well as some of my own. Before writing an editorial, I brought in the letter to the editor section of our student newspaper. When it came time

to embark upon the Unfamiliar Genre Project¹ I first created my own so that I could model each step. As I began to immerse myself in bringing in models of the texts that I wanted my own students to produce, I discovered that there was more to the concept of mentor texts than simply reading an example. Students needed to explore the text, looking for what the author does with the words on the page, or in some instances, what the author chooses not to do. As my students began analyzing the elements of each author's craft, they began to internalize these techniques into their own writing.

While these writing examples had an impact on my freshmen composition students, I found that mentor texts were equally effective in my writing methods course for elementary teachers, a class composed of college juniors and seniors. For this course, I focused on using picture books to teach the different traits and crafts of writing. Even though these books were meant to be a starting point for a lesson plan idea, it soon became apparent that my students and I were also analyzing and internalizing the authors' techniques into our own writing. From Doreen Cronin's

¹ Fleischer, Cathy and Sarah Andrew-Vaughn. *Writing Outside Your Comfort Zone: Helping Students Navigate Unfamiliar Genres*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2009. Print.

The Unfamiliar Genre Project is a complex process that aids students in their writing and researching skills while developing metacognition into their own learning processes. Students study a new genre by collecting examples of it, analyzing the defining characteristics of it, and then creating their own work that matches the genre's characteristics.

*Diary of a Fly*² we learned how to slow down a moment in a chronological narrative. From Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*³ we learned how a character's point of view influences a plot line. Not only were we using mentor texts to teach others, but we were also using them to learn about writing for ourselves.

As I continued to teach this methods course, I found myself tweaking the required readings. *Wondrous Words* had some good points, but I felt that there was more to be covered. I turned back to the traits of writing that I knew so well and paired picture books with writing traits for my students. I also dove further into my own reading and discovered several guidebooks that addressed what mentor texts are, usually with sample lesson plans and thorough annotated bibliographies. However, what I could not find was a reflective writing about teachers' experiences, successes, and downfalls with mentor texts in the classroom. The theory of mentor texts sounds great on paper—students read, reread, analyze, interpret, and apply writing strategies from literature into their own writing. Nevertheless, how does this transfer into assessment? How do teachers demonstrate the impact that mentor texts have on student writing? Are elementary or middle school students capable of these higher orders of thinking skills? How much pre-teaching is necessary for students to understand how to use a mentor text on their own? Alternatively, do they even use them on their own? These questions developed into the following guiding questions:

² Cronin, Doreen, Bliss, Harry. *Diary of a Fly*. New York, N.Y.: Joanna Cotler Books, 2007. Print.

³ Browne, Anthony. *Voices in the Park*. New York: DK Pub, 2001. Print.

How do teachers define the concept of mentor texts? How do they decide which mentor texts to use in their classrooms? To explore these overarching questions, the following sub-questions were considered:

- What are the critical features of a quality mentor text?
- How do teachers connect mentor texts to writing instruction?
- How do mentor texts support Common Core State Standards?
- How do the criteria of mentor texts differ from lesson to lesson?
- What designates a “good” mentor text?
- How do students respond to mentor texts as a model of writing?

The Missed Evolution of the Mentor Text

The term *mentor text* refers to an existing piece of text used in the classroom to teach writing. While many teachers rely on children’s literature, a true mentor text can be anything that has printed material on it, including menus, billboards, newspapers, and student writing. For the sake of this project, a mentor text is existing literature unless otherwise specified. While the term itself can take multiple meanings, it is a common term. A simple sweep through the educational section of the bookstore will show that there are indeed many practical books available for teachers. What these practical books are missing, however, is a sound theoretical background, which I will address in Chapter Two.

Early in this project, one goal of mine was to discern the origin of the term. After exhausting the literature of mentor text instruction, and likewise, after a quick email with some of the key writers of the concept--Kelly Gallagher, Ralph Fletcher,

and Penny Kittle--it became apparent that though the term is often tossed around, no one can pinpoint its exact origin. While many practitioners, researchers, and scholars dance around the concept of connecting reading to writing (which will be examined in Chapter Two), they miss the chance to give it a concrete name and thus making the practice a part of mainstream instruction.

The Significance of Mentor Text Instruction

The concept of mentor texts is simple: Teachers model quality writing by exposing their students to quality writing. By incorporating literature into writing students are able to make connections to the author's craft and incorporate them into their own writing. For example, in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*⁴ by Eric Carle, the caterpillar, after engaging in a junk food binge, forms himself into a cocoon before transforming into a butterfly. In this text, the author chose to use concrete nouns to name the food eaten by the caterpillar. Rather than calling it "fruit", he specifically named oranges and plums. He also made the conscious decision to include the word *cocoon*. This decision to include a sophisticated vocabulary word is an intentional one. It is an example of crafting with specific word choice, which is a concept that students can internalize into their own writing.

As teachers and students work with mentor texts, students see models of quality writing that is also accessible to them, thus leading to higher levels of student engagement. Teachers can and will ask students to incorporate vocabulary into their

⁴Carle, Eric. *The very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York: Philomel Books, 1987. Print.

writing. Seeing it in an actual book will help students see the writing as a real-world writing strategy that real authors utilize. Many practitioners advocate for authentic writing experiences, but what students also need are authentic models of writing.

This level of modeling a writing craft also builds upon the teachers' autonomy as they seek out books with the modes of craft their students need to see. Rather than relying on a curriculum-pacing guide or a textbook, teachers are choosing which texts to bring into their classrooms as well as how to utilize them with students. Teacher autonomy leads to ownership. Ownership leads to passion. Passion leads to expertise. As teachers become familiar with the mentor texts that best serve their students, they become experts at selecting relevant models. Navigating this space, though, can feel overwhelming to teachers, especially ones who are unfamiliar or are new to this practice. Teachers, old and new, need to feel supported to try new teaching strategies to fit the needs of their students. When teachers feel trapped by prescribed curriculum or overwhelmed by the vast possibilities of mentor text instruction, their autonomy declines. With the number of guidebooks available for teachers to reference, it can be overwhelming for them to discern a beginning point for this practice. They are inundated with the number of books and genres available to them and do not always know how to find the books or lessons that will serve their students' needs.

The Development of Mentor Texts

The field of education is saturated with practical applications. Many writers are current or former classroom teachers writing about their experiences creating and developing a curriculum of writing instruction, thus the concept of mentor text takes

its form from these authors. For example, Katie Wood Ray explains that mentor texts are a pivotal part of the writing workshop. This is where student exposure to quality writing removes the mystery of expectations. It is not enough for students to read literature, they need to slow down and learn how to read like a writer. Ray explains this is where the learning takes place (16). This act of noticing allows teachers to step back and let students take control of their learning--to a degree. Teachers can take the lead in the classroom and model this process for students through read aloud/think aloud, but it is still a process that instructors must teach to students.

History of Background that Frames Study

Writing and reading have a history together in English Language Arts classrooms. A common purpose of mentor texts is to serve as a source of inspiration for student writing. For example, if an instructor reads a book to her students about a snowy day in the woods⁵, students can then use the book as a source of inspiration to write about a memory they have on a snowy day. Yet, mentor texts can work as a foundation for writing instruction that goes far beyond its use as a prompt for writing. Students and teachers can use them to analyze how a text is organized and structured. They can examine the voices of the narrator or characters, or explore dialogue, sentence structure and punctuation simultaneously. Students can mimic the writing techniques they observe, or they can spend time critiquing the author's choices and then try to recreate the text to make improvements, which encourages higher level

⁵ Keats, Ezra Jack. *The Snowy Day*. New York: Viking Press, 1962. Print.

thinking skills. The more teachers and students analyze a text, the more possibilities emerge that serve as learning opportunities.

Despite all the possibilities of what students can learn from a mentor text, its use is still an emerging mode of instruction in the English Language Arts curriculum. Authors like Lucy Calkins and Shelley Harwayne addressed the need to link reading to writing in English Language Arts classrooms in the 1980s. However, new material that demonstrates how to use mentor texts only started surfacing from authors such as Ray, Dorfman and Cappelli, Culham, Calkins, and Fletcher in the past decade. The value of using mentor texts in writing instruction is undisputed but how do educators decide which books to include into their writing curriculum?

Teachers embraced the connection between reading and writing, often favoring the side of reading. Many merely have students write a literary response to a reading passage as the only connection between the two subjects. It looks good on paper, after all, students are writing about their reading. However, this is a missed opportunity for students to dig into the layers of the reading, to analyze the author's writing craft and to synthesize these techniques into their own writing. The use of mentor texts is a perfect opportunity to help teachers and students dig deeper into the interconnection between reading and writing. Many teachers do utilize mentor texts, but a concrete process for *how* to use them has not been established. Likewise, the field lacks the research to support *why* teachers and students should use mentor texts. All we have are resource books containing bibliographies and lesson plans. These do not address the methodology for putting the theory of mentor texts into practice. What we do not know is how teachers define and view the concept of mentor texts. We do not know

how teachers decide which mentor texts are best and for which purposes. We also do not know how teachers proceed to select mentor texts to suit their own needs outside of the bibliographies provided.

Summary

This introductory chapter has provided a rationale and theoretical perspective for studying the characteristics of mentor text instruction in an elementary setting. Guiding questions for the study were introduced.

A review of the literature will be included in Chapter Two. The review of the literature will focus on the educational theory of Vygotsky, Bandura, Bloom, and Rosenblatt, specifically how their theories of learning apply to mentor text instruction. Chapter Three will provide an in-depth rationale and description of the qualitative methodology used in this study, while the focus of Chapter Four will discuss the results of the study. Finally, Chapter Five will provide a discussion of theoretical implications and possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Mentor Texts: An Overview

This chapter explores the educational learning theories that support mentor text instruction and how they are applicable in the English Language Arts classroom as children's literacy grow in speech, reading, and writing simultaneously. These theories are currently missing from present writings about mentor texts and will strengthen the rationale for its use in a writing centered classroom.

Educational Psychology

Vygotsky influenced and revolutionized classroom practice by studying and establishing a connection between speech, thought, and writing. Long before learning to speak children learn to communicate through sound. Babies quickly learn to communicate through crying. As children continue to mature, they learn to speak through human interaction, hearing words and sounds and make associations with them. For example, hearing the word ball each time a child picks one up leads her to associate the word ball with the object. She may begin with a first letter and vowel connection, such as "ba." As she continues to interact with other people saying the word "ball" the child then, after practice and correction, becomes able to connect each of the sounds that she hears in the word. Vygotsky refers to this as immersion learning as children learn sounds and words through interactions with others (Smagorinsky

169). For children, learning to write is similar to learning speech, but is far more complex. As in speech, learning to write allows children to communicate. Peter Smagorinsky studied Vygotsky's principles on speech, thought, and writing extensively. He writes, "While people learn and use speech in primary language spontaneously through immersion, written speech 'forces the child to act more intellectually....The motives of written speech are more abstract, intellectualistic, and separated from need'" (169). Breaking down this quote, children, then, learn to write through immersion, meaning they are learning to write the words and sounds they hear and see, making associations between letters and sounds, and between words and objects. However, with speech, the child does not have to concentrate actively on the letters that the sounds and words are making.

For the child to recognize and say the word "ball," the child does not have to picture or identify the individual letters that form that word. In writing, however, the child does need to engage actively in the activity. Not only does the child have to consider the sounds involved in writing the word "ball," but she also has to concentrate on the individual letters connected to those sounds. She has to think and understand the "b" and "l" as the beginning and ending sounds of the word. Initially, she may use her vowels incorrectly, writing "boll" or "bell" yet she will still be able to get her meaning across to her audience. James Zebronski, who also completed a thorough study of Vygotskian principles, calls this process *agglunation*. He writes, "Agglunation is a process whereby words, phrases, or even entire texts are combined and merged into a single new word unit. This new word unit is the result of the combination of several previous units and meaning, and yet also is a new identity"

(167). The child who writes “boll” is recreating the word that sounds like the object she is trying to turn into a word. Thus, she is taking a combination of letters that have previous meaning to her, mainly the “b” and the “l.” She likely remembers that a vowel belongs inside the beginning and ending sounds, but she cannot remember which one. Thus, she has used her prior knowledge of letter combinations and made a new word, a new identity for the letter combination, as she recreates the word “ball.”

Similarly, immersion will help this child learn that the vowel she needs is an “a” as she continues to write, read, and identify sight words and letter combinations. Vygotsky refers to this process as imagining the setting for the writing. This does not necessarily mean the setting of a story or essay, but the setting for choosing which letters represent which sounds. Mentor texts provide this immersion for students as they learn letter combinations to form words. Not only will students learn from direct instruction about letters and their sounds, their combinations and their blends, sight words and vocabulary, but also through the reinforcement of seeing the word used in context. Referring back to Vygotsky, mentor texts, then, set the stage for beginning readers.

As children immerse themselves in speech and writing, they go through similar stages of development. According to Vygotsky’s studies, children go through four stages of speech development (Emerson 256). Initially, children learn to speak by imitating words and sounds. This is where they realize that they can make the “b” sound as they point to a bottle or ball. As they progress into the second stage they further realize that everything has a coordinating name and begin to name everything they can—puppy, ball, mommy, bottle, doll, bed, etc. It is not until the second stage,

external speech, that children are able to make the connection between select sounds and objects. Likewise, they may think in fragments and speak without thinking about the actual words behind their speech. A child may say, “Want ball” rather than “I want the ball.”

As children become fluent in their speaking, they transition into the third stage, *egocentric speech*. In this stage, children often keep a running oral narrative of their behaviors, even if they are with other people. This stage helps children direct their behavior. For example, a child that is counting will feel the need to count aloud to help her stay on track and recite her numbers in order. Similarly, a child who is coloring will announce the colors she is using as a mode of keeping track of the colors she used and the colors that she still needs. It is not that the child needs to keep a running dialogue, but rather she is thinking aloud which, ironically, is referred to as *private speech*.

The fourth and final stage is *inner speech*, which is where children begin to internalize their thoughts. The child who is counting will begin saying her numbers in her head rather than out loud. Likewise, the child who is coloring will no longer announce the colors she is using at that moment. While students are beginning to hold their thoughts inside their minds, they also begin saying the words that they read in their head while they read. This suggests that the stages of speech development mirror themselves in the process children go through as they learn how to write, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1
Coordinating Stages of Speech, Reading, and Writing

Speech	Reading	Writing
Imitation	Signature	Scribbling
External Speech	Recitation	Letters
Egocentric Speech	Comprehension	Semiotics
Inner Speech	Analysis	Transaction

In order for children to write, they must first learn letter sounds and formations. Though an emergent writer may scribble lines on a page as a mode of writing, it is not decodable to any audience. Even that child will have a hard time recalling the exact words she “wrote.” Just as the external speech stage uses incomplete sentences, emergent writing is also distorted. Once teachers introduce letters, however, students have a tool for communication. Much like the second stage of speech, the writing may still be unrecognizable to many others. For example, a student may be attempting to write, “I like the red ball.” However, while they are still in their second stage, students will be writing in a combination of agglunations. The emerging writer may write, “iltrb.” To the child, this is the same sentence as “I like the red ball” except this student is writing the first sounds of each word. Once students gain command of letter combinations and words, they are able to write out

longer sentences and phrases, akin to the egocentric stage. They also have a tendency to read their words aloud while they write in this stage.

As students become fluent writers, they enter the inner speech mode. This is where they internalize their thoughts and turn them into writing. Zebroski writes, “Writing is a relation, a social relation that is first shared between two or more people in community and is subsequently internalized, individuated, and made concrete by the individual” (17). In this quote, the shared community refers to the stages of external and egocentric speech; the internalization, then, becomes the inner speech. It then follows that reading also becomes a social act.

As students decode and comprehend words, the text then serves as a series of signs to be interpreted both personally and culturally—a process referred to as semiotics. Smagorinsky argues:

Studying writing as a literacy practice from a Vygostkian perspective thus requires attention to the context of composing. This context is not simply the immediate environment in which a writer writes, but, most significantly, the cultural and historical elements of that setting that suggest the appropriateness of particular conventions, syntax, vocabulary, diction, and other aspects of composing a text (116).

In other words, students are not reading and writing in isolation, but are, in fact, interacting with the text. A student may bring her personal experiences to a story. For example, if a child reads a short story about a New Year’s Eve celebration, she may reflect upon celebrating the holiday with her family. Perhaps she was able to stay up later than normal to watch the ball drop on television and partake in some sparkling

grape juice. Perhaps she and her family wore hats, swung around noisemakers, and gave each other kisses. Alternatively, perhaps, she read a short story about the Chinese New Year, reading about the parades and fireworks, which in contrast to her own personal experience, reminded her more of the 4th of July. In either case, the child is bringing her own experiences into the transaction of reading (Rosenblatt 11). The same holds true for writing.

Children in the beginning stages of their writing development will make personal and cultural connections to their writing. If they write about their favorite animal, then it is likely that they have an experience with this animal, perhaps as a pet, perhaps in a zoo, perhaps in a book or movie. The emerging writer will not think to create her own fictitious animal in the style of Dr. Seuss. At least, not until she has an encounter with a Dr. Seuss book, or until she enters a more advanced stage of writing to think creatively.

Reading, like speech, has stages of development. According to Resnick and Resnick, there are four stages of literacy. First is the *signature stage*, which is when a child is able to sign his name. As writers in this stage are learning their letters, learning how to write their name is one of the first tasks they acquire. Second is the *recitation stage*, in which students are able to recite from memory a selected passage, without necessarily understanding it. At this stage, students may be able to remember songs or poems, maybe even a short picture book, and are able to recite it back to someone. While this child might be able to recite the playground rhyme “Ring around the Rosie”, she is not going to understand that this rhyme is actually referring to the

Great Plague that swept through England in 1665. Why should she? She has no personal or cultural connection to the disease or to this particular rhyme.

The third stage is the *comprehension stage* in which students are able to read or recite a passage, but this time with some literal understanding. Referring back to the nursery rhyme, a student may realize that rosy is a color and that ashes come from burning things. She most likely still will not catch on to the plague references, but she is able to decipher that there is a ring of red followed by ashes. Finally, the fourth stage is called the *analysis stage* in which students are able to read with a demonstration of comprehension and are able to think critically about the text. This is where the student is likely to connect the ashes to a crematorium, and the posies as a folklore cure. Even if the student is unable to make these connections right away, she is able to think critically about the rhyme's intended meaning and make the decision to explore its origin and meaning. These stages, I argue, exist in learning to write.

As mentioned earlier, students begin learning how to write by learning letter formation. They may not know the sounds that the letters make, nor can they string them together to form a word, but they are able to recognize them individually and copy them. This aligns itself up nicely with the signature stage. As students learn sight words, they may enter the recitation stage. They may be able to recognize a sight word in a text or even spell it correctly on a spelling test. This would be an act of decoding which does not equate with comprehension. At the comprehension stage, the student would be able to write a word intentionally. If they were writing about the weather they may write, "I got wet." At the comprehension stage, the child knows what she is trying to communicate to the reader and is able to do so. At the analysis

stage, the child would be able to take the same text and embellish upon it. Perhaps she would write, “It is March and it is raining outside. The rain made my hair wet.” At this stage, the child understands the concept of synonyms and antonyms. She might write “mist” instead of “rain” or “damp” instead of “wet.” The point is that the student progresses through each mode of communication through stages.

As students progress through the stages, the teacher has the opportunity to scaffold student learning through what Vygotsky called the *Zone of Proximal Development*, which refers to the area in which learning takes place. Smagorinsky writes, “The zone described by Vygotsky is a set of parameters that defines a learners’ range of potential in a formal instructional relationship” (50). When teachers are reaching students in the zone of proximal development (hereafter referred to as ZPD), they are meeting students in a range that is neither too easy nor too difficult. For example, rather than students reading a story as a whole class, the teacher may employ literature circles in which students choose a book based on their reading interest and ability. If students choose a book that is too difficult, they are more likely to give up on the reading. Likewise, if they choose a book that is too easy, they may stagnate their learning. It is up to the teacher to help the students make choices that meet them in their ZPD.

The same holds true in writing. Some students will take naturally to creative writing and figurative language. A teacher, then, can expect those students to incorporate metaphors and hyperboles into their writing. Other students will struggle with figurative language, focusing their attention on literal interpretations. These students, rather than writing metaphors, may need to practice with similes first, or

perhaps even with alliteration. In essence, when teachers are meeting students at their level of instructional need, they are meeting them in their zone of proximal development.

While teachers are differentiating their instruction, they also need to model instruction and outcomes. Albert Bandura wrote about modeling--how children learn by watching others. He explains that modeling is more than simply exposing students to a desired outcome or skill set. Instead, modeling can help students learn in two ways. First, students acquire new patterns of behavior. Sometimes they acquire new information by watching their teachers model a desired outcome. Usually, though, they obtain procedural information about how to acquire the knowledge for themselves. For example, a teacher may demonstrate how to read subject headings to determine whether an informational book will serve as a quality source of information. It is possible, but not likely, that the students will learn the information they need about their individual research topics as the teacher models this process with her mentor text. What is far more likely is that students will acquire the skill of searching subject headings in their own books. Bandura refers to this process as observational learning (5).

Second, Bandura argues that modeling desired learned outcomes lowers students' inhibitions. For example, if the teacher models for her students how to refute an author's choices, they will feel more comfortable than they would if they had not seen it in practice first. The same applies to mentor texts. If students are able to read a two-voice poem and analyze it together as a class, then they will be much more likely to write one than they would if they had never seen one before. In regards to

literacy, Frank Smith refers to this as joining the literacy club. He argues that if children learn reading and writing by watching others who read and write, then they will feel that literacy is accessible. He writes, “The learning takes place without deliberate effort, even without awareness. We learn to write without suspecting that we are learning or what we even learn. Everything points to the necessity of learning to write from what we read, as we read” (20). In other words, children learn behaviors of literacy by engaging with others who utilize literary skills, whether they are teachers, parents, or other students. The more students engage with literacy, the more they subconsciously pick up from it and the more they learn. The key, Smith argues, is to ensure that all students feel that they have access and membership to the literacy club. Donald Graves further illustrates this point noting, “The children may try some of the author’s forms of expressions, ways of illustrating. Fine, but it is their choice. Often the children don’t know they are using elements from literature” (29). Though Graves believes that the children are learning from authors subconsciously, I argue that mentor texts help students progress into higher level thinking skills.

Howard Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Learning*, which explores levels of thinking, also supports mentor text usage. With mentor texts, students, along with their teachers, are analyzing the text, making sense of the author’s choices. If they are reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*⁶, they may analyze Eric Carle’s decision to make the caterpillar his central character, actually his only character. They may analyze the significance of the caterpillar’s decision to go on a junk food binge. They

⁶ Carle, Eric. *The very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York: Philomel Books, 1987

will also interpret. What does the caterpillar represent? What does the cocoon represent? Does this story have an implied moral for children? Students will evaluate. Was it necessary or effective to introduce the story as a counting book? Does that decision have any impact on the story? If Eric Carle had changed any of the food options, would the caterpillar still have gone on his junk food binge? Do all caterpillars go on a junk food binge? These types of questions are examples of higher level thinking that students can do with a mentor text, and must do with their teacher. Young students are not prone to think critically about a text in this manner. They need their teacher's guidance to model this behavior and to facilitate these discussions.

As this occurs, students begin to synthesize the author's choices in writing and are able to emulate them in their own writing. A science lesson on animals can easily become a picture book that demonstrates each animal's life cycle. Students may choose to play creatively with the animal's diet as Eric Carle did. Alternatively, they may decide to set it up as a counting book but turn it into a cautionary tale. The point is they have options they would not have otherwise had without studying the author's work. Not only does the teacher model desired outcomes, but so do the authors.

Current Literature

Writing and reading link together quite well in English Language Arts, but the use of mentor texts goes far beyond writing as a response to literature. A common purpose of mentor texts is to serve as a source of inspiration for student writing. For example, if an instructor reads a book to her students about a snowy day in the

woods⁷, students can then use the book as a source of inspiration to write about a memory they have on a snowy day. However, mentor texts can work as a foundation of writing instruction that goes far beyond its use as writing prompt. According to Smith, “The writing we do cannot account for the writing we learn to do. Rather we must learn from *exposure* to writing, in other words from *reading*, and from acquaintanceship with writers. It is this vicarious learning accomplishment that is so impressive. And if we learn to write by reading it must be by reading well” (178). Using mentor texts in the classroom provides a way for teachers to model good writing for students.

Ray explains that students are naming the techniques of craft and structure that they notice in an author’s writing. She argues that it is more important for a student to recognize an adjective and its function than it is for the student to remember the word “adjective.” Suppose a class was doing a read aloud of *Harold and the Purple Crayon*,⁸ the students may notice that a color was preceding each noun. Ray would argue that it would be more important for the class to identify the concept of what is happening (the color words are describing the crayon) and to come up with their own name for the craft as it is developing. The class may call this technique something like *color word*. The teacher can always go back and teach them the word *adjective* later. What is important is that the students are observing that the description is happening and are learning grammar in context.

⁷ Yolen, Jane and John Schoenherr. *Owl Moon*. New York: Philomel Books, 1987.

⁸ Johnson, Crockett. *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. New York: HarperCollins, 1983.

While students are learning form and content from literature, they begin to strengthen their higher order thinking skills. Graves points out that when students begin analyzing their own writing in conjunction with literature they, “become more assertive in their own critical judgment of professionals and [of] their own writing as well” (65). Harste et al. take this belief further noting that students move beyond their own skill sets and begin to embrace new ideas and techniques in writing. After spending time critically analyzing an author’s work, students move beyond the meaning they constructed into new critical insights formed during the creation and analysis of those texts. When students take the strategies that they have learned through literary analysis and apply it to their own writing, they are taking more ownership of the form and content.

The use of mentor texts is still an emerging mode of instruction in the English Language Arts. While authors like Calkins and Harwayne addressed initial links to reading and writing in the 1980s, new material demonstrating how to use existing text as mentor texts for writing only started surfacing in the past decade. The value of using mentor texts in writing instruction is undisputed, but how do educators decide which books to include into their writing curriculum?

One popular (and current) resource comes from Dorfman and Cappelli’s text, aptly named *Mentor Texts*. They include a paragraph about how to choose a mentor text, but their advice is not concrete. They state, “The first criterion is that you must connect with the book and love it. Then you’ll want to look through the book to find examples of author’s craft...Next, think about how the book serves your students’ needs and connects with your curriculum” (4). While this is practical advice on the

surface, it does not help teachers make the connection between the decision processes and mentor text selection. I maintain that choosing the correct model of literature to fit the curricular needs of students is more involved than this. The theory behind using mentor texts stems from three areas of focus about writing instruction: the reading/writing connection, transactional learning, and maintaining a writing centered classroom.

Reading and Writing Connection

Historically, many school curricula taught reading and writing in isolation. Likewise, many schools taught the two subjects together, but not equally (Elbow 10). Reading, as a subject, often gets the lion's share of attention while glossing over writing with an obligatory literary response assignment. In this manner, students are not breaking down the text but merely writing about it, usually in the form of a comprehension question. Sometimes teachers skip over higher-level thinking questions. They come close, with questions such as, "Think about a time in your life when you had a similar experience as the main character." Or, "what advice would you give the character in this story?" Students are applying plot to their lives, which is a good skill to have, but they are missing the opportunity to examine why the authors made the choices they made in creating their text.

By applying what they learned from mentor texts students are enhancing what they do with their text. They get a sense for the choices there are to make in writing and how these choices affect the text. Donald Murray refers to this as participatory reading. He extends this definition, "The writer learns from the masters and from

fellow apprentices the techniques of shared craft. Later the reader turned writer can attempt the solutions of others to the writing problems encountered in an evolving draft” (2). Ray further explains that this kind of close text examination and application further strengthens the link between reading and writing. She writes:

Reading-writing connections have gone beyond written responses into actual craft apprenticeships in the writing workshop. Rather than generating ideas for *what* to write about from their reading, students are learning to take their own important topics and then look to text to learn *how* to write well about these topics. Writing well involves learning to attend to the *craft of writing*, learning to do the sophisticated work of separating *what it’s about* from *how it is written* (10).

When Ray talks about the craft of writing, she is referring to a realm of writing techniques and strategies ranging from word play to sentence structure. She calls this the act of *reading like a writer*, a term coined by Smith in his writing about the literacy club.

The act of reading like a writer requires the reader to slow down and read for craft rather than for plot. This is a hard skill to master, and is one that needs to be modeled repeatedly by teachers. They need to show students that the author carefully chooses each element of craft. An example comes from Smith:

Once more we are casually reading and once more we find ourselves pausing to reread a passage, not because of the spelling this time or because we did not understand the passage. In fact we understood it very well. We go back because something in the passage is particularly well put, because we respond

to the craftsman's touch. We have read something we would like to be able to write ourselves but also something we think is not beyond our reach. We have been reading like a writer, like a member of the club (24).

When students notice these deliberations in literature they start to envision what the writing process is like for each author. Students begin to notice what is not in the writing as much as what is in the writing. For instance, they may notice that an author chose to hyphenate a string of words to create a feeling of urgency. Students will notice that these words are taken out of their usual element and are forced together to create this mood. They will also notice that the author chose not to use an exclamation mark to convey this feeling of urgency and relied on the word choice instead. Smith further argues that the teacher needs to be cognizant of the mentor texts that fit the students' needs, stating:

[They] must ensure that children have access to reading materials that are relevant to the kind of writer they are interested in becoming at a particular moment. Teachers must recruit the authors who will become the children's unwitting collaborators. Most importantly, teachers must help children to perceive themselves as readers and writers before the children are able to read and write for themselves (26).

As Rosenblatt notes, students will need to be taught form and structure, but they also need to be able to discriminate between "the means that the author employed and the variations or reversals he has based on the traditional pattern" (47). This method of noticing what is there and what is not brings students to this level of discriminating how authors follow form and structure, but more importantly, how these authors break

away from traditional form and structure and bring in their own style to their writing. When students make this connection, they are then able to transfer these strategies into their own writing.

Before students get to this point of analyzing and applying, however, they are likely to go through a response phase in which they are apt to apply topics from literature rather than the crafting techniques. Harwayne argues that this could be due to students having not written for a period during semester breaks. Even if students are applying strategies from mentor texts in previous years it is likely that at the beginning of the school year students will return to responsive writing. She further contends that it is a perfectly acceptable starting point with plenty of learning opportunities. She asserts, “We’ve not only come to appreciate that responding to literature can help students find their own topics for writing, we’ve come to value that literature as a major resource for generating topics” (61). She goes onto explain that teachers often worry about students writing about the same topic in response to a story. If the class read about Alexander and his horrible day⁹ and then each student wrote about a bad day that they had, the teachers would often wonder if their students were completing any original writing. Each student, though, has a different story to tell. Even if students have similar bad days, such as losing teeth while out to dinner, they will still have their own personal perspectives to write. Harwayne further notes that, “our teaching has also changed because we’ve become more acquainted with the

⁹ Viorst, Judith. *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. New York: Atheneum Books, 1987. Print.

research on reader response theory. We now appreciate the fact that individual readers will each have a unique response to a text because of the individual experiences they bring to the act of reading. Readers cannot separate themselves from their reading. They cannot help but read texts in their own way” (61). This leads into the second theory of mentor texts: creating meaning.

Transactional Learning

Students do not create meaning with text in isolation. As mentioned previously, they interact with a text, filter the words and symbols through their existing schematic structures, and create their own meanings. This holds true for both reading and writing. According to Pappas et al., readers and writers go through similar processes of drafting, revising, and editing. In prewriting, readers and writers bring and utilize knowledge and experience to the text. In drafting, revising, and editing readers and writers both are engaged in creating meaning, making sense, and reading for clarity (180-181). Much of this theory comes from Rosenblatt who explores the transactional theory in which readers interact with the text by bringing their own knowledge and life experiences to the text. In essence, if students read a text about a visit with a grandparent, no two students would have the same visualizations about the text, for each would bring their own experiences to it. While one student may have a memory of spending holidays with a grandparent, another may have a different context of having their grandparents sharing their home. There is no contextual definition of what it means to have a grandparent; hence, students will have their own meanings. Rosenblatt explains:

Students (and teachers) often assume that they are merely making explicit the author's particular view of human psychology. The process of interpretation is more complex than that, however. The reader must remain faithful to the author's text and must be alert to potential clues concerning character and motive. But he must do more than that: he must seek to organize or interpret such clues. His own assumptions will provide the tentative framework for such an interpretation. He may discover that this causes him to ignore elements in the work, or he may realize that this is imputing to the author views unjustified by the text. He will then be led to revise or broaden his initial tentative assumptions" (11).

This passage ties in the concept of making meaning with the process of analyzing and applying the crafting techniques from a mentor text. Harste et al. refer to this as the authoring cycle in which students go through a circular process of reading, connecting and deciphering (52-54). They argue that reading and writing both involve the creation of meaning in which the student is cognitively searching for a unified meaning. Readers and writers search for patterns (meanings) that connect with what they know in a process that "generates learning." The authors explain, "There is in this sense no 'pure' act of reading or writing—writers talk, read, write, listen, draw, and gesture, all in the name of writing; readers discuss ideas they find problematic, listen, sketch, underline . . . all in the name of reading" because there is no "pure act" of reading or writing, "but the involvement in this process generates learning" (53).

Since reading and writing circumstances vary, the strategies students use also vary by content and context. They conclude that for students to "find literacy

empowering, users must do more than just connect; they must reflectively be able to decide what stance they will or will not take” (54). This last statement perfectly embodies the need for mentor texts in the writing curriculum. It is not enough for students to simply interact with their reading and make personal connections to it; they must also make these same connections in their writing. Through the processes of noticing, analyzing, and applying, students make the decisions regarding which crafting techniques of form, content, and structure apply to their writing. Equally important, they decide which techniques do not apply to their writing.

Harste et al. further explains that students go through an authoring cycle of reading, connecting, and deciphering. During their first and second reading of a text, they are connecting to the images, plotlines, and characters. However, the act of noticing is also a method of connecting. When students are pulling from the text what they are ready to use in their writing they are connecting to the author. They are also deciphering why the author made these stylistic choices as well as deciphering how to use them in their own writing. Smith adds to this argument that mentor texts allow students to go through this process at their own pace. He writes, “Authors—even dead ones—have this tremendous advantage over live teachers; they always proceed at the pace of the individual learner, and are able to repeat their lessons as often as the learner wants, without concern, embarrassment, or punitive threat” (196). If students can return to authors at their own pace, for their own needs, then they are truly becoming autonomous learners. As students become familiar with the act of using and returning to a mentor text, they also become self-regulated which lends itself well to managing the writing process in a writing centered classroom.

Writing Centered Classroom

Classroom climate is a third consideration central to the successful implementation of mentor texts in the classroom. Theorists and practitioners have long been discussing the implications and effects of classroom climate on student learning. As Calkins notes, “We cannot require our children to write beyond their capacity. We cannot assign them to be brilliant and original and deeply true. But we can create conditions in which this will happen” (251). The right conditions create a safe zone for students to immerse themselves in their writing, to take risks in a piece and to summon the courage to share their writing. This is a classroom that has a high sense of community in which students feel connected and secure with one another. Without the proper environment students retreat to what they consider to be safe writing.

In order to create a nurturing and supportive writing environment, students need to feel that teachers appreciate their work, but they also need what Harste et al. consider “certain kinds of classroom experiences.” These experiences can only be planned and implemented if we are “careful observers of children’s intentions and behaviors within the context of classroom experiences” (4). As educators, we are duty bound to pay attention to the needs and skills of our students and plan accordingly. If students are struggling to write a complete sentence, we cannot expect them to turn in paragraphs. Likewise, if students are writing stellar paragraphs, it would be insulting to revert back to lessons about the simple sentence. Teachers must gauge the needs of

their students, as well as their interests, and plan accordingly. Harste et al. suggest that these experiences should incorporate the following criteria in classroom activities:

- Functionality with authentic purposes for writing
- Social interaction
- Variety of context
- Transmediation between subjects
- Link form to function
- Provide a variety of audiences
- Explore the “complexity of natural communication” (11-13).

Using mentor texts in the classroom addresses each criterion. As students work with their writing either in response to literature or as a way of mimicking the author’s style, they are creating a more authentic purpose for writing by addressing a topic or technique that piqued their curiosity. Students interact with the text individually, but they also collaborate with other students through discussion, peer review, and writing conferences. They transfer meaning from the text to their own writing and back to the text again in a series of steps in the meaning-making process while deciding which forms and styles of writing work best to convey their message. This concept also comes up in Rosenblatt’s work. She writes:

If we start with form or structure, we find that we are merely talking about the particular relationships of certain human sensations, concepts, and emotions.

If we talk about so-called content, we find that we are merely dealing with the significance that arises from a particular series of relations among certain

sensations, concepts and emotions. Teaching practices and assignments should be scrutinized to make sure that students are not given the idea that the formal relations in a literary work exist apart from, and are merely superimposed on, something called the *content*. Much truer to the reality of both literary creation and literary experience is the sense of how organically interfused are these two phases of the work of art” (Rosenblatt 47).

This notion of organically infusing the literary experience of reading and writing is what Harste et al. were referring to through their criteria of literary activities. It is this reciprocal nature of reading and writing that makes mentor texts a natural fit into the language arts classroom.

Calkins insists that for students to succeed in writing they need to have a writing centered classroom. This includes significant time set aside for writing each day, as well as having a safe environment for students to write. Mentor texts help create such an environment because students are supported not only by the teacher but also by the authors studied. For many students it is scary to try a metaphor for the first time. It is not as intimidating if students have an example (or three) in front of them.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Understanding Mentor Text Instruction

In order to provide a complete picture of what mentor text instruction looks like in practice, along with an analysis of its benefits and limitations, I will now outline the specific details of the multiple case study that I conducted. A multiple case study examines the practices of the participants in order to determine a baseline for this instructional practice. A qualitative approach to this study is necessary because my goal is to describe what the practice of mentor text instruction looks like in an authentic setting.

The purpose of this study is to understand what mentor text instruction looks like among four elementary teachers within one school district. These teachers came from two elementary schools within one school district that serves a diverse population of rural, urban, and suburban students. Chapter Four will address the importance of how educators' professional experiences, teaching contexts, and perspectives influence their use of lesson design and implementation using mentor text instruction.

This study examines this process through a narrowed examination into the practice of four elementary teachers who were already in the practice of using mentor texts during writing instruction. It demonstrates how each of these teachers gravitated

toward this practice after engaging in a Professional Learning Community within their district. Though they loosely used a teaching guide as a starting point for their lesson planning, they each chose to supplement their instruction with their own mentor text selections and lesson plans.

As the previous chapter illustrated, mentor text instruction does not have a one-size-fits all definition or conceptualization. Teachers design and adapt this method of instruction to fit the curricular needs of their students, whether this involves using a new text weekly or utilizing a set of texts repeatedly during a writing unit. The methodology is created by the teacher and is dependent upon the teachers' method of interpretation and implementation. In order to explore the complex diversified space that is mentor text instruction, I developed the following guiding questions and sub-questions.

Guiding Questions and Sub-questions

Upon the review of literature, the goal of mentor text instruction was clearly the same goal among theorists: to provide a model of quality writing to serve as a basis for student analysis and to serve as a model of quality writing. As Ray and Smith argue, students need to slow down and learn to read like a writer, taking the time to notice what the author is doing with the writing and analyzing its effectiveness. A methodology for utilizing this practice is not prescribed, thus lending itself to teacher autonomy. These findings led to the development of the following guiding questions of this study: How do teachers define the concept of mentor texts? How do they decide

which mentor texts to use in their classrooms? To explore these overarching questions, the following sub-questions were considered:

- What are the critical features of a quality mentor text?
- How do teachers connect mentor texts to writing instruction?
- How do mentor texts support Common Core State Standards?
- How do the criteria of mentor texts differ from lesson to lesson?
- What designates a “good” mentor text?
- How do students respond to mentor texts as a model of writing?

By examining these questions, it became apparent that providing a theoretical and practical baseline for including mentor texts into writing instruction was the essential goal of this study. This baseline is not meant to become a prescriptive methodology for using mentor texts; rather, its intent is to provide a theoretical rationale for their use in a writing curriculum. While several existing practical and professional books outline and discuss ideas for using mentor texts, few works delve into how the practice informs curricular decisions involved with selection and implementation. A second intent, then, is to provide examples of what mentor text instruction looks like in actual practice, thus providing a beginning point for teachers.

In a time of educational reform, many states are deciding how (or if) to implement the Common Core State Standards (hereafter referred to as CCSS). The guidebooks and resources examined in the review of the literature do not address the use of mentor texts as a strategy for implementing the CCSS. While Dorfman and Cappelli’s *Mentor Texts* is rich with practical applications and sample lesson plans, the

authors do not address how mentor texts fit into the standardization of education. This is also true with Ray's *Wondrous Words* and Gallagher's *Write Like This*. This dissertation addresses this very vital gap; though it is not my purpose to advocate for or against the CCSS. Rather, the potential of mentor text strategies to fulfill the standards is a timely and important discussion.

Since the introduction of the CCSS, many publishing companies have jumped at the opportunity to align instructional design with the new national standards. However, with the adoption of these published curriculums from companies such as Pearson came a decline in teacher autonomy. As this case study seeks to explore and explain how mentor texts facilitate writing instruction, it will also seek to fill the gaps of teacher autonomy and CCSS alignment by providing a detailed snapshot of teachers using mentor texts in their classroom. In essence, this multiple case study will reveal the pedagogies and practices at play in using mentor texts to teach writing.

The Multiple Case Studies

I chose to conduct a multiple case study to provide a holistic picture of what it looks like for four elementary teachers working within one school district to use mentor texts across grade levels. The case study model was the natural choice because it allowed me to examine four perspectives on teaching the singular practice of mentor texts, which then allowed me to analyze the findings for commonalities and discrepancies. As Creswell notes a "case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving

multiple sources of information, and reports a case description and case-based themes” (73). In this case, the multiple bounded systems are the four teachers’ individual applications of mentor texts. The multiple sources of information included the interviews and observations.

I conducted a case study of four elementary school teachers within one school district, Eagle River¹⁰, who use mentor texts in their writing instruction. This case study included open-ended interviews with each of the teachers and a series of lesson observations in which I took descriptive and reflective notes. These interviews, analyses, and observations allowed me to learn about the teachers’ individual experiences and pedagogical context that influenced their mentor text instruction.

This multiple case study design allowed me to explore the singular practice of mentor text instruction within a single research site, in this case one school district, Eagle River. As Marshall and Rossman state, “Studies focusing on society and culture in a group, a program, or an organization typically espouse some form of case study as a strategy. This entails immersion in the setting and rests on both the researcher’s and the participants’ worldviews” (93). By focusing my observations within one school district, I observed the shared community within each school building. Marshall and Rossman further explain, “Sample size in qualitative research depends on many complex factors. Case studies may be of a single person... or of one organization... where a typical or representative example was selected for long-term participant observation. Sampling over time in the same site reveals roles, interactions,

¹⁰ All names have been modified to remove any distinguishing characteristics and to protect anonymity

and sentiments” (103). Since this was a multiple case study, I became a participant observer within four classrooms within one school district.

Because I chose to stay within the Eagle River district, I was able to see how the grade level instruction builds upon itself and how the students’ interactions with mentor texts evolved out of team and department planning. My primary role as a participant observer was to take notes on the teachers’ lesson delivery, observe student work, interact with students, and help students as needed. In essence, I observed the teacher and then became a second set of hands in the classroom after lesson delivery. As students began their independent work I moved around the classroom to help students as needed with their writing assignments. As a symbol of reciprocity for allowing me into the classroom, I was able to help the teachers in return by working with their students in small groups or individually as needed.

Sampling

The teachers observed for this study shared a common belief in mentor text instruction. While they chose to incorporate this practice, they also had the responsibility to ensure that their curriculum aligned district wide. In essence, the first grade teachers had to ensure that they addressed the necessary benchmarks needed prior to students moving on to second grade and so forth. This kind of curricular design, often referred to as scope and sequence, allows the teachers to plan for common learning outcomes while maintaining a level of autonomy in designing their lessons.

At the time of this study, not all teachers in the Eagle River district were incorporating mentor texts into their writing instruction. The district required teachers to cover three units of writing: narrative, opinion, and informational. The district also gave their teachers full autonomy to implement and conduct their lesson delivery. In selecting participants for this case study, I employed a combination of *criterion*, *intensity* and *snowball* sampling. Since the goal of this study was to explore how and why teachers were using mentor texts it was imperative for me to use *criterion sampling* to find participants already familiar with the practice. My role as a participant observer was not to instruct teachers on how to use mentor texts, but to document how mentor texts were in use. The criterion then became quite simple: teachers needed to already be incorporating mentor text instruction and needed to be at the elementary level.

Since not all of the school districts I looked into, nor even teachers within the Eagle River district, employed mentor text writing instruction, I deemed this study as having phenomenological aspects largely due to my participants' commonality of using mentor text instruction. This is how intensity sampling came into play as Creswell defines it as involving "information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely but not extremely" (127). In this case, the four teachers from Eagle River were already using this practice. Since they used it regularly to teach writing, it qualified as intense. However, because they combined mentor text instruction with other literary practices their use does not qualify as extreme, thus fitting Creswell's definition of intensity sampling.

Early in my search, I explored several local school districts but did not find one with a consistency of teachers who were using mentor texts. Likewise, several of the schools I contacted did not have a high level of teacher autonomy and were using scripted mentor text lessons. During this time, I also sought recommendations and referrals from local higher education experts. One of these referrals led me to a nearby school district where an adjunct professor from our university, later referred to as Jody, taught third grade using mentor texts. She in turn, was able to ascertain any interest her colleagues at the elementary level had in participating in this study. This method of recruitment is referred to as *snowball sampling*. One participant joins, and through her involvement, others become enthusiastic and willing to participate. Just like how a snowball grows when one builds a snowman, the participation pool grows as investment—and sometimes curiosity—grows.

Finally, I also relied on participants to be voluntary. Following an informal conversation with Jody, I explained my research project and she offered to poll her colleagues to determine if they were interested in participating. As noted earlier, her district, Eagle River Public Schools, allows for a high level of teacher autonomy. Teachers follow the CCSS and make sure to address each standard, but they are free to discern how best to do so. They do have curriculum guides that they adhere to, but they are free to supplement their instruction as they deem necessary. Jody invited her interested colleagues to an informal meeting where I explained my research plan and answered any questions.

In this meeting, I established preliminary criteria for voluntary participation in which the teachers had to be actively using mentor texts as part of their writing

instruction in their elementary classrooms. I also invited the principals of the elementary schools to the preliminary meeting. Only one was able to attend, but he was able to speak on behalf of the one who was absent. As I explained my project, his excitement for it grew. He then granted me immediate access to the school sites and within 24 hours both principals forwarded me a letter of permission to work on-site to observe and help in each of the classrooms. At the meeting, nine teachers attended, seven of whom expressed interest in learning more about my study.

During this process, I was also writing my proposal for HSIRB approval. I submitted my permission letters from the principals to be on-site, and created my interview questions, note taking protocol, and priori codes. Following HSIRB approval, I invited those interested to participate in this study. Out of the initial seven who showed interest, I had four teachers within the Eagle River district that were willing to have me as a participant observer in their classroom, which was the ideal number of participants for this study.

The Participants

Jody

The first participant, Jody, is a current third grade teacher whose previous teaching experience ranges from preschool through second grade. Her commitment to literacy instruction is apparent in several ways. Not only is she the English Language Arts Department Chair for her School Improvement Team, but she also teaches an elementary writing methods course at a local university. She and her students study a

new mentor text weekly as it pertains to their unit of study. Jody packs her classroom library with books designed to support independent reading, research, and writing instruction. Likewise, she covers her walls with writing strategies that she discovers with her students as they analyze them within a mentor text. For example, when her students studied informational writing she had the students identify and describe different styles of leads they encountered in their readings. As the students dictated their findings, she wrote each style on a poster board and then displayed them in the classroom throughout the unit. Jody is the one who introduced the concept of mentor texts to her school district, leading voluntary professional learning communities geared towards its conception and implementation.

Cathy

The second participant, Cathy, is a veteran first grade teacher whose career spans sixteen years of teaching primary grades. She uses a reading and writing workshop model for her instructional design and utilizes mentor texts as she feels the need develops in her units. When she models reading a mentor text to the class she pauses to complete a think-aloud in which she models her thought process to her students, asking herself questions about the characters or making predictions about the plot. She keeps her mentor texts on display for her students to see and reread independently. When watching her interact with her students it is clear how invested she is in each child. Her classroom is instantly welcoming. Her students are always smiling and eager to share their work with visitors. Her walls are not completely covered, but she places plenty of posters and chart papers thoughtfully around the

classroom showing writing (and math) strategies that she and her students clearly developed as a class.

Her students work in literacy centers run centers in the morning called The Daily Dive—which is her personal take on the Daily Five. Students rotate between listening to an audio book, completing independent math worksheets or Ipad lessons, independent writing, brainstorming, and word decoding. For the word-decoding, brightly colored index cards have letter combinations written on them. Cathy tapes them onto the walls all around the classroom and students move around the classroom, copying the words and sounding them out. This also allows students to move and work out their wiggles during this activity. In the front of her classroom is a bright carpet divided into six rows of colorful squares that becomes the students' carpet center and each square represents a students' seat. This is where students have their mentor text lessons.

Pamela

The third participant, Pamela, is also a first grade teacher. At the time of this study, she was in her 13th year of teaching first grade. Over the course of 23 years in the classroom, her teaching spans third grade through sixth grade. Like Cathy, she utilizes a workshop approach to her ELA instruction. The two teachers like to conduct team planning and often coordinate their lessons and unit plans. Pamela uses mentor texts weekly, sometimes daily, depending on the needs of her students, often working with her students to dissect a familiar text to analyze its text features. Her classroom is bright and colorful with an underwater motif. On most days, a science project of some

variety sits on a table near the door. Pamela packs her classroom with bins of picture books that students use for independent reading, research, and as mentor texts for writing instruction. One particular highlight of her classroom is a loft she built to serve as a reading nook for her students. Like Cathy, Pamela's students complete the Daily Dive workshop each morning. Her classroom has the same index cards on the walls that students decode for one of their stations. Also like Cathy, Pamela's students sit on the same carpet in their designated spaces for their mentor text lessons.

Sarah

The fourth participant, Sarah, is a fifth grade teacher. She is an experienced teacher, but she feels like a new teacher, as this is her second year after a ten-year leave. Her approach is different from the other four participants in that she uses mentor sentences. At the time of this study, Sarah and her fellow 5th grade teachers taught in a team format in which she taught social studies while her team partners taught the other subjects, including writing. They were not implementing mentor texts into their curriculum. She, however, after meeting with Jody, became intrigued by the concept, especially on a micro level. In this practice, her students analyze one sentence from a text for five days, analyzing it from multiple perspectives. Further explanation of this practice is in the following chapter. Sarah also packs her classroom with a student library. She has two tables near her desk that are always covered with projects that her students are working on: from poster boards to timelines, storyboards to Venn diagrams, Sarah is believer in project-based learning.

In the mornings, her students examine mentor sentences and she then invites them to share what they notice. Her students stick to a routine. On Mondays, they copy the sentence and share their observations. Tuesday is a day for examining parts of speech. On Wednesdays, they revise the author's sentence, looking for ways to improve it. Thursday is a day for writing an original sentence in the same style as the author. On Fridays, Sarah reads a new book to her students and they take guesses as to which sentence will be the next week's mentor sentence.

After identifying the teachers for this study, I began my data collection process. In conducting this study, I utilized two data collection methods: open-ended interviews and observation field notes, both of which I will discuss in the following sections. I began by sharing with the teachers an overview of my purpose and goals for this study that led to informal conversations regarding their position within the district and how their curricular designs were relevant to my study.

The Interviews

A key part of this case study was the conduction of interviews with the teachers. Though the primary methodology of this study is to follow the case study format, the fact that these teachers are making the conscious decision to use mentor texts lends itself to some elements of a phenomenological study. According to Marshall and Rossman, this includes "three in-depth interviews ... The first focuses on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second focuses on present experience; and the third joins these two narratives to describe the individual's essential experience with the phenomenon" (148). Out of respect for the limitations to

the teachers' time, and in order to maintain a level of convenience for the teachers participating in this study, I conducted two in-depth interviews rather than three. Time is a precious commodity for my participants. Each of them were already busy before and after school with department meetings, staff meetings, grade level meetings, plus any other committee work they voluntarily take on. To interview with me, each of them willingly sacrificed a planning time or lunch break, or even both. As such, I decided to make things easier for them, to break my three interviews into two interviews. I conducted the first one before I began my observations and the second one after they were complete. The first interview focused on the teachers' experiences with the use of mentor texts. The second was a combination of present experiences and the participants' narrative as recommended by Marshall and Rossman.

In the first open-ended interview, I ascertained the participants' background with mentor text instruction by asking them to tell me how they learned about the practice and how they use it in the classroom. I established an interview protocol to maintain consistency among the participants' interviews by digitally recording them for accuracy and transcription. Another part of this protocol was to label each interview. At the beginning of each recording I stated an overview of the upcoming interview, stated the date and the participants' names, institutions, and grade levels.

I used the methodology of guided interviews to help maintain objectivity by keeping my opinions out of the interviews. These interviews were set up as open-ended in which the participants were free to explore the answers to the questions fully. I brought a predetermined list of questions for the interviewees to answer, but was free to incorporate follow-up questions and to let the participants take their answers in their

own directions which often led to rich conversations about the topic of mentor texts. Prior to each interview, I reminded my participants that they were free to skip any questions they did not wish to answer and that they had the right to drop out of the study at any time.

I designed the interview protocol for the first interview to seek the information needed for the aforementioned topics. Following is a sampling of prompts from the interview protocol per topic area. (See Appendix A for the full interview).

- **Defining Terms:** 1) How would you define a mentor text? 2) How would you define the practice of using mentor texts in the classroom?
- **Pedagogical Practices in Place:** 1) On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very little and 10 being very much, how comfortable are you with using mentor texts as a method of writing instruction with your students? 2) Where did you first hear about the concept of mentor texts? 3) What, if any, mentor texts do you use in your classroom? 4) What led you to choose that/those particular texts? 5) How often do you use mentor texts in your classroom?
- **Pedagogical Planning:** 1) Where would you look for a new mentor text? 2) If you needed a new/different mentor text, what would your process of selecting one look like?

The first interview focused on capturing how each participant defined the concept of mentor text instruction, establishing their pedagogical practices for using mentor texts, and ascertaining their procedure for selecting and implementing new texts into the curriculum. From these interviews, I gained an understanding of the role that mentor

texts play in each participant's lesson planning and gauged the level of autonomy the participants had in designing their writing curriculum, which were two important focal points for this study.

Learning about the participants' familiarity and utilization of mentor texts helped illustrate the content of this study as I asked interviewees about their teaching practices, what drew them to this methodology, and how it showed itself in their teaching. It also lent itself to the purpose of this study as participants described their background in learning about and understanding mentor texts and described, briefly, how they used them in their classrooms whether it was weekly, daily, or as needed. Likewise, I indicated whether the teachers incorporated a new mentor text each time or returned to a previously used one.

The second set of interviews examined the participants' practice of mentor texts, delving into the mechanics of incorporating them into the writing curriculum. Additionally, I probed into the role that mentor texts play in standardization and Common Core State Standards. From these interviews, I assessed the degree of mentor text integration into the curriculum and compared it to the recommendations of some of the leading theorists. Likewise, I delineated the level of autonomy the teachers had both within their districts and within their writing curriculum. Furthermore, the interviews provided a snapshot for non-practioners as how to begin the mentor text process. As with the first set of interviews, a sampling of prompts divided into topic areas are as follows:

- **Current Pedagogical Practice:** 1) What is difficult about using a mentor text?
2) How do students react to mentor texts? 3) Do they notice what happens in a

text? 4) Do they ever return to a text on their own? 5) What is your favorite mentor text and why? 6) What percentage of writing instruction would you say mentor texts use in the writing curriculum? 7) Do they lend themselves well to the writing workshop?

- **Standardization and Reform:** 1) How do Common Core State Standards affect mentor texts, and vice versa? 2) Do you find that mentor texts work well with standardization?
- **Considerations:** 1) What is the biggest benefit to using mentor texts? 2) What advice would you give to someone just starting out with mentor texts?

The questions and topics formed in this interview addressed the purpose of this study. One of the primary goals of this study was to elucidate the value of mentor texts in writing instruction and provide a model for teachers unfamiliar with this practice. As participants explore their current pedagogical practices, key strategies emerged for utilizing the texts which are discussed in Chapter Four.

These interviews gave me a sense of what to expect in the observations. A full analysis of the participants' responses is in Chapter Four. However, as the participants described their beliefs about mentor text practice, I understood their sense of commitment to it. As they talked me through how they incorporated the texts into their lessons I insight into their teaching methods and had a sense of what to expect during the observations.

Observations

A second key feature of this study was observing my participants in their classrooms over a three-month period. My initial goal was to observe teachers three times each week during their writing instruction time. Jody, the third grade teacher, and Sarah, the fifth grade teacher had more structure to their daily routines that made this goal possible. Since their students were older, they were able to stick to a stricter timetable each day. Jody held her writing time every day at 1:00; Sarah held hers at 10:00. With this structure in place, I was able to observe both teachers three times each week.

In teaching first grade, Cathy and Pamela, had more variation to their daily routines. Part of this was due to the age of the students, who by nature require more frequent breaks and changes in routine. Another part was due to the structure of the first grade team schedule. The teachers rotated recess duty and the only day that I could visit both teachers was on Wednesdays. Due to the frequent changes in first grade scheduling, testing, field trips, and rotating recess times, Cathy and Pamela decided that it would be best for them to limit the observations to one day each week.

I relied on observation to capture how my participants utilized mentor texts in their classrooms. According to Marshall and Rossman, “Observation is a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry. It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings” (140). The authors explain how the observations may begin with an “open-ended entry [in which] the researcher is able to discover the recurring patterns of behavior and relationships” (139). Once these patterns are

established, the researcher may begin using checklists and graduate into a focused observation protocol. In this study, I met informally with the participants prior to observations in order to establish a rapport and to observe the structure and layout of the classrooms. This allowed me to view the setting through the eyes of both the teachers and their students. After the informal meeting, I began my formal observations.

For the observations, I determined a protocol for collecting information. I created a header on my note pages in which I recorded the information about who I was and what I was observing. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, I recorded a corresponding initial in place of the participants' names. If student response became a part of the lesson, which it often did, I simply labeled the student responses numerically. This assured the anonymity of the teachers and students in accordance with HSIRB protocol. I used the center of my note page to write down descriptive notes about what the participants said or did, and wrote reflective notes in the margins to use in early analysis of emerging themes.

As data arose from the interviews and observations, I kept a running list of emerging themes. I continued to focus on my guiding questions and referred to them often as themes emerged. The themes that surfaced became a central part to the analysis of this study since I was able to focus on commonalities between participants concerning the value placed on mentor text instruction. Of equal importance, I identified and analyzed how the participants viewed and utilized levels of autonomy, which is significant to future applications of this research. This process involves what Creswell names "four forms of data analysis and interpretation in case study research"

as categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, establishing patterns, and naturalistic generalizations (163).

Analytic Frame and Data Analysis

From the data collected, which will be presented and analyzed in the following chapter, I employed *categorical aggregation* as I searched the observation notes and interviews for instances of mentor texts use, looking for “issue-relevant” meanings. In the interviews, I focused on the teachers’ definition of mentor text and its practice as well as their protocol for selecting mentor texts. The data from these three questions were particularly informative as to discern how each teacher’s practice varied, lending itself to the level of autonomy as well as showing the process of creating their mentor text lessons. In the observations I looked for instances of teachers using mentor texts and student responses to them. I also looked for evidence of the students working with the strategies learned from the mentor text in their own writing samples.

Likewise, I also analyzed each occurrence of mentor text used separately and in isolation in order to pull meaning from the separate instances, which was a *direct interpretation* of the data. The categorical aggregation lends itself to analyzing and *establishing emerging patterns* that displays the use of mentor texts across grade levels within one school district. While it was important to examine the frequency of mentor text usage, it was also necessary to examine each use separately to determine its significance. For example, a teacher may use one particular mentor text multiple times. The first time may be a read-through in which the students become familiar

with the characters and plot lines. It is not likely that I would observe much interaction between students and the mentor text in this instance. However, the teacher is likely to revisit that mentor text a second or third time and direct students' attention to particular writing strategies. These latter observations contribute rich data to this study. Since the degree of mentor text usage varied each day, it became necessary to examine each observation separately.

As I searched the data for emerging themes, I consulted a list of priori codes that drew on possible themes gleaned from the literature review. The codes are as follows:

- mentor text
- CCSS
- student
- writing
- prior knowledge
- assessment
- standards
- curriculum

I found that the priori codes were highly applicable to the interviews, but not as much to the observations because the students and teachers were not talking about any of these terms. Additionally, after reviewing the interviews, a list of inductive codes (*naturalistic generalizations*) emerged which are listed in Appendix B. In the observations I was able to keep track of the number of mentor texts used, and the

number and descriptions of student responses, but the only term mentioned in the observations was “writing.” Though the teachers were clearly using mentor texts, they did not refer to them as such to their students, so I created a list of inductive codes that rose out of the observations, which can be found in Appendix C. I looked specifically for patterns in how teachers presented and referred to mentor texts in their lessons and in how students interacted with the mentor texts. As suggested by Creswell, I created a word table to display the inductive codes from the individual observations (163). This table, found in Appendix D, illustrated common features and distinguishing characteristics among the four participants. Some emerging codes that developed are as follows:

- referencing a mentor text during a mini-lessons
- asking students what they notice
- rereading
- read aloud/think aloud
- use of teacher’s manual

As these codes emerged, I collected evidence of the actions and catalogued them under these emerging themes. Once the data was collected, I color coded the emerging themes and sought out commonalities between the mentor text practice among the grade levels. During this process, I made a note of the circumstances surrounding each action, and reflected as to their significance to the lesson and to this study.

Additionally, I observed how each teacher’s practice differed noting instances such as

the amount of the text studied (whole book, selected page, selected sentence, etc) which further lends itself to the autonomy of the practice.

The findings from my study, which will be explored in the following chapter, do not suggest that all teachers should utilize mentor texts in the same manner. Instead, this study offers four in-depth portraits of what mentor text instruction looks like for the participants involved and is meant to serve as a starting point for future writing instruction. While this study seeks to determine a baseline and provide a rationale for mentor text instruction, it in no way seeks to become a generalized protocol for how mentor text instruction should be utilized in the classroom.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter investigates the four teachers in this study and their practice of mentor text instruction. Each teacher defined her concept of the practice in an interview while discussing what the practice looks like to her (see Chapter Three). After coding these interviews for common emerging themes, I spent three months observing each teacher's actual mentor text practice. While some commonalities and variances emerged during instruction, of further interest was how each teacher's autonomy emerged as they individualized that instructional practice to meet the needs of their students.

This chapter begins with a description of each teacher and her approach to using mentor texts in the classroom followed by close examination of the classroom observations. It becomes clear how the observations support the teachers' pedagogical practice of mentor text instruction, how this practice supports teacher autonomy, and what each practice looks like at varying grade levels within one district.

The Participants

This research explored the practice of four elementary classroom teachers' use of mentor texts in their writing instruction. These participants worked within one district, the Eagle River School District. The district provides its teachers with a large degree of autonomy in determining their units and lessons as long as they meet CCSS.

In this district, using mentor texts is an option, however, each of the participants are already in the practice of using mentor texts in their writing curriculum. In the Eagle River district, the concept is spreading by word of mouth as teachers collaborate and share their successes. The following section recounts how each participant became involved with mentor texts.

Third Grade

Jody is the mentor text expert in the Eagle River school district. She first discovered the concept in her local affiliate of the National Writing Project. She read the book *Wondrous Words* by Katie Wood Ray, and, as Jody says, it all clicked into place. She instantly saw the connection between reading and writing and the value that modeling good literature had on students. As the former School Improvement Team chair, she brought the concept back to her English Language Arts department and formed a professional learning communities (from this point referred to as PLCs) in which she advocated to other ELA teachers to both read *Wondrous Words* and put mentor texts into practice. This began slowly. In the beginning, there were sets of books held in the library, divided by theme that circulated amongst the teachers by grade level. This was a good starting place, but soon Jody advocated for more teacher choice in mentor text implementation and selection. Her district was supportive of her efforts to incorporate her own selections into her writing curriculum. Teachers were still free to use the library sets, but they were also free to incorporate their own choices into their classrooms. This freedom allowed the teacher autonomy in the district to grow. The district trusted their teachers to determine how to fit the needs of their

students. Since the classes met CCSS and test scores were high, the administration did not intervene in curricular choices.

The district does provide teachers with curricular materials, but teachers are not under any requirement to use them. For example, the teachers all have access to a curriculum guide created by Lucy Calkins about mentor texts called *Units of Study*. This guide provides teachers with packaged unit plans centered on narrative, opinion, and informational writing. As I will illustrate throughout this chapter, the participants used this curricular guide more as a resource for generating ideas for mentor texts to use and lesson plans to teach, but none of them used it exclusively in their curricular planning. Jody explains that the school improvement team in her building selected this guide. The goal was to bring it in as a way to unify instruction among the K-2 teachers. It is not a mandated curricular guide, but a recommended resource for teachers. She adds that since its implementation it has spread into the 3-5 building, thus unifying all elementary writing teachers. She reveals that no one in her district received formal training with the program, stating “it’s been up to the teachers to dive into it and work with it at their comfort level. Some are using it as a whole and others as parts. We wanted teachers to get comfortable with it first.” She further explains, “This is the first time the K-5 teachers have been a similar curricular path with writing.” This is significant. Not only is this the first time that the teachers had a unified curricular plan, but also this unification came from autonomy. The teachers are not required to use Lucy Calkins’s guide, nor even mentor texts at all, but they are choosing to do so.

First Grade

Pamela and Cathy are both first grade teachers within the Eagle River School District. They plan their lessons together as part of a team, thus assuring that their students meet and achieve the same instructional goals. Their lesson delivery is unique to their individual teaching style, which I will illustrate throughout the rest of this chapter, but their end goals are the same. Since they do their lesson planning together, they requested to participate in the interview together.

Pamela

Pamela and Cathy first learned about mentor texts from Jody in their PLC. Initially, the first grade team used book sets of mentor texts reserved in the library, which were coordinated to Ruth Culham's *6 + 1 Traits of Writing*¹¹, but they found that the books did not always fit the trait or the desired lesson outcome, thus, they began branching out to incorporate their own mentor text selections. For example, Pamela noticed that some books meant to teach sentence fluency did not actually have a wide range of sentences within the book. Though she could not recall the book's title, she remembered one such book intended for sentence fluency that actually

¹¹ Culham, Ruth. *6 + 1 Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide for the Primary Grades*. New York: Scholastic, 2005. Print. The Traits of Writing are attributed to Culham. She advocates that writing should be broken down and assessed into the following categories: Ideas, Organization, Voice, Word Choice, Sentence Fluency, Conventions, and Presentation.

worked better for teaching word choice. As she continued meeting with her grade level team and her language arts team, with Jody, she gained new ideas about incorporating her own mentor texts into her lessons.

Currently, Pamela incorporates mentor texts weekly into her curriculum. She finds that by introducing a new text each week she is able to expose her students to a variety of writing. She actively searches the internet for mentor text ideas and works to ensure that the text selections meet the learning goals and needs of her students. Typically, she reads a mentor text to her students multiple times. The first reading allows students to familiarize themselves with the plotlines and characters, however, during later readings, she prompts her students towards making observations about the author's writing. Then her students write their own piece incorporating what they learned from analyzing the mentor text.

Cathy

Like Pamela, Cathy also learned about mentor texts from Jody. She also noticed that the library sets of mentor texts were not matching her students' learning goals. She further explained that many of the books intended lessons often missed their mark. A book meant to teach students how to write a strong conclusion actually had a weak one. Alternatively, a book designed to show students how to write with similes was not one that her students connected with nor did it have similes that were accessible for her first graders to understand.

Cathy enjoys mentor texts, particularly the opportunity it provides her to share books with her students. In her classroom, she often matches a set of books to a unit

of study, such as narrative writing, and then returns to the books as needed. She prefers to return to a familiar text to lift out the layers of quality writing. One week her students may analyze a book for its use of writing about a small moment. Weeks later, she may return to the same book to demonstrate the author's use of multiple characters. Cathy's focus is not to incorporate a new text each week, as Pamela does, but rather to create a familiar cadre of texts that her students are able to return to for multiple writing lessons.

Fifth Grade

Sarah is a fifth grade teacher in the Eagle River School District. In fifth grade, the students rotate among a team of teachers, so Sarah only spends part of the day with her own group. During the rotations, Sarah is responsible for teaching social studies to four sets of students, including her own while the other teachers on her team are responsible for teaching writing, science, and math. Though Sarah is not responsible for the writing instruction, she feels strongly about the concept of mentor texts, so she decided to incorporate an abbreviated version into her students' morning routine, called mentor sentences. Like Pamela and Cathy, Sarah first heard about mentor texts from Jody in their PLC. Since Sarah had time restrictions with her morning class work, Jody recommended the book *Mechanically Inclined*¹² by Jeff Anderson. This book blends the concept of teaching grammar in context through mentor text instruction. From this book, Sarah learned about the mentor sentences, in which

¹² Anderson, Jeff. *Mechanically Inclined*. New York: Steinhouse, 2005. Print.

students conduct a close examination of one sentence each week. She focuses on grammar, but also encourages her students to name any writing techniques that they notice.

Sarah divides the practice into a daily routine. First, Sarah reads the mentor text to students on Fridays. This allows for quality read aloud time, plus the students enjoy guessing which sentence from the story is worthy of becoming the mentor sentence. On Mondays, Sarah presents the sentence to the students. They copy it into their notebooks and then she invites them to make a list of what they notice about it, focusing on writing techniques--perhaps they see a metaphor, alliteration, or dialogue. On Tuesdays, she once again invites students to notice the author's choices in the sentence, but this time the focus is on grammar. Are there vivid verbs? Perhaps they notice the verbs are present tense or future tense. Maybe they see a string of prepositional phrases strung across the page. On Wednesdays, Sarah invites her students to revise. She asks them to rewrite the sentence changing nouns or verbs, or expanding the sentence as they deem necessary. On Thursdays, she invites the students to imitate. Keeping the structure of the original mentor sentence, students write their own original sentence. This is the students' favorite day of the process, for they get to share their creativity.

Sarah likes to incorporate a new mentor text each week, and does not return to them. Since she was using mentor sentences as a way to reinforce grammar, she discerned that students did not need to revisit a text to explore its layers. Instead, her students needed exposure to many texts so that they could encounter the ways authors vary their sentence construction by also varying their use of conventions. For example,

one author may incorporate long lists of adverbs in modifying a character's actions while another author writes sparsely within a quotation to demonstrate a young character's point of view. Likewise, an author like Dr. Seuss can demonstrate parts of speech to students while using creative words, while an author like Jane Yolen uses precise nouns and verbs without the use of modifiers. By studying the grammar conventions of multiple authors, students are able to experiment with sentence length and complexity.

The Interview

After interviewing each participant, I transcribed and coded the recordings for emerging themes that addressed the guiding questions mentioned in Chapter One. After transcribing each interview, I numbered each line of text and then read through the interview multiple times, isolating segments of information that lent itself to the priori codes mentioned in Chapter Three. I then looked at the isolated nuggets of information and created a list of emerging themes. The following section breaks down the data gleaned from the coding process and presents the findings of this study.

What are the Critical Features of Mentor Texts?

As I worked on Chapter Two, I found a variety of explanations of what mentor texts are, as well as an array of advice for its implementation. It therefore became clear that first step of the project was to discern how each teacher defined mentor texts as illustrated in Figure 1. Jody defines a mentor text as a piece of literature that is an example of good writing. She clarifies that the mentor text can be the whole work, but

Jody	• Literature that exemplifies good writing
Pamela	• Any kind of text used to teach writing
Cathy	• A work of children's literature that anchors writing instruction
Sarah	• Text with depth to be used in students' own writing

Figure 1 Mentor Text Definitions

can also be merely bits and pieces of text. In her class, she asks students to look at specific things that the writer did well. For example, when her class studied writing strong leads for their informational writing, they examined the opening pages of six books. As she read, she asked her students to be on the lookout for what it was the author did that captured their attention. As students notice the authors' techniques, they discuss them with Jody and with each other, determining what it is about that technique that was successful. Then, Jody calls upon her students to try what they noticed in their own writing. After examining the leads, she and her students made a classroom poster that listed the name of the lead and a quick description of it. She then asked students to write three different leads for their research topics based upon the list they created in class.

Pamela defines mentor texts as any form of children's literature used to teach a component of writing. Sometimes it is an entire book; other times it is just a page. She also pointed out that any written document can serve as a mentor text, and that

mentor texts can come from teachers, too. For example, in Pamela's class, her students were also examining strong leads for their informational writing. Instead of looking at books, though, Pamela and her students looked at three editions of *Scholastic News* that publishes in a big book size for easy display. Together, Pamela and her students examined the feature articles and made a list of what they noticed in the lead sentences. Most of them began with a question; a few began with a fascinating fact. Students then tried writing their first sentences of their informational papers as a question.

Cathy agrees that any written document could serve as a mentor text; however, she prefers to use children's literature. She thinks of it as an anchor that helps ground her students into studying and learning themes of writing. For example, in Cathy's room students looked at a variety of leads in narrative books, and then made a class list of leads used by authors. Rather than reading each of the books in their entirety, Cathy read the opening page from each book. One reason is because it allows for more writing time during the lesson, but it also keeps the students focused on just the lead paragraphs and minimizes the chance that they become lost in the story and forget to pay attention to the authors' techniques. A third reason is because students have time to see a wide variety of writing styles that they can incorporate into their writing, or at least identify in another mentor text.

Sarah defines a mentor sentence as a section that comes straight from a text that students can structurally use in their own writing. She utilizes them to support something that students are already studying in reading, writing, or social studies. For example, Sarah's students recently finished studying adjectives, so their mentor

sentence was one that had several adjectives within it. Students noticed them right away since adjectives were fresh in their minds, and were able to continue working with adjective meaning and placement as they revised and imitated the mentor sentence. Likewise, if Sarah finds a book that supports her social studies curriculum she brings that in as her mentor text as a way to reinforce the content of her unit as well as the grammar in context her students studied. For example, the book *John, Paul, George, and Ben*¹³ by Lane Smith supported her unit on the American Revolution while also providing students with examples of bold print, dialogue, proper nouns, and adjectives.

What is interesting here is the variance between each teacher's definitions of a mentor text. Jody and Cathy both define it as literature. This signifies that the text must be a published work. While Cathy specifically notes that the mentor text should be children's literature, Jody's definition leaves it open to any literature. In my observations, she kept a balance of children's picture books and nonfiction books to demonstrate narrative, opinion, and informational writing. Cathy, on the other hand, solely used fiction narratives as mentor texts in her classroom. While it is unclear if Jody intentionally left out the word *children's* as a qualifier for the literature, it does give her space to incorporate mentor texts outside of the picture book realm.

Sarah's definition refers to a text that has a great deal of depth to it. She is looking for texts that have rich plot lines and interesting characters—stories that her

¹³Smith, Lane. *John, Paul, George & Ben*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 2006. Print.

students are eager to read. Without the depth of the text, the students are apt to lose their engagement with their task of analyzing, revising, and mimicking the weekly mentor sentences. Though she did not specify that the mentor texts needed to be children's literature, this is what she uses with her students, particularly narrative selections.

Pamela uses a fair amount of children's literature in her classroom as mentor texts, but she is also quick to incorporate other genres. For example, she had her students analyze the book talk section of the television show *Reading Rainbow* and then create their own book talks based on their observations. This activity motivates students to consider what about a book captured their interest and then write about it persuasively. Technically, her students did not analyze a written piece of text, yet they were still able to pull from the video elements of persuasive writing that they then used to create their own book talks.

How do Teachers Connect Mentor Texts to Writing Instruction?

Throughout the interview, it quickly became apparent that this question led to complex answers. There is not one simple methodology to connecting the instruction to the text. Instead, each participant directed me towards the benefits and limitations of the practice as well as providing their own advice to its implementation.

Benefits

During the interviews, one of the questions I asked each participant was to explain the benefits of using mentor texts in the classroom. Each teacher quickly

answered this question without any hesitation. However, as I code d the interviews, I found that the teachers often talked about the benefits of mentor text instruction without any prompting. The following section illustrates each teacher’s beliefs about the benefits, which can also be seen in Figure 2.

Julie	Pamela	Cathy	Sarah
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps students envision their writing • Students are able to identify techniques in other books • Students see quality writing models • Students connect with an author 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrates well with other subjects • Students respond well to literature • Increased exposure to literature 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages students to experiment with writing • Allows for student discussion • Quality modeling of text • Students' enjoyment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows for grammar in context • Students collaborate • Students learn from each other • Builds community

Figure 2 Benefits of Mentor Texts

Jody sees many benefits to using mentor texts in her writing instruction. She believes that it helps students see how they can write without just copying. She understands that the act of reading like a writer is an advanced skill, but she observes that by third grade they enter her classroom with a basic ability to notice what authors are doing with their text. This is partly because some students have worked with this strategy before, but also because cognitively they are more suited to this text awareness. Jody observes that students are able to pick out elements of writing that

she and her students discuss in class. For example, if her students are learning about similes they are more likely to notice an author's use of similes in a mentor text. In other words, they are reinforcing what they learn. Furthermore, Jody argues that her students make a personal connection with the author, primarily through a connection to the story. When students feel engaged with the plotline, they are more willing and eager to return to the text to examine the writing strategies the author used. Likewise, students make personal connections to stories. Perhaps a book reminds a child of a family vacation she went on with her family, or a student may identify with the feelings of the story's protagonist. If students can identify with an element of the book, they are also more likely to identify with the author's writing style. For example, if a book contains similes that a child does not understand or cannot connect with, she is less likely to engage in a lesson that returns to that story with the purpose of examining its similes. It becomes important, then, to include a variety of mentor texts into writing instruction in order to help students find a book with which they can connect.

In first grade, Pamela sees the biggest benefit to using mentor texts as its ability to integrate with other curricular areas, especially when students are working with informational text. She further explains that using mentor texts is "total language arts" because of the potential to incorporate reading, writing, spelling, and grammar into one unit. As she explains it, "[Teachers] get more bang for their buck."

Likewise, mentor texts can easily adapt into other subject areas. When Pamela's students were working on informational writing, she brought in books about cows for students to use as both a resource and a model. She captured the essence of mentor

texts perfectly saying, “People read to write, and they write to read.” Moreover, Cathy noted, that, quite simply, the students enjoy mentor texts. They love having their teachers read to them, and they like interacting and discussing the text and then work on their own writing.

Cathy, on the other hand, feels the biggest benefit to using mentor texts as how it encourages students to experiment with their own writing. If the students (with teacher guidance) notice that a story is set on a windy afternoon, they become more likely to try using a similar beginning sentence in their own writing. Likewise, in Cathy’s classroom, she read *Punctuation Takes a Vacation*¹⁴ to her students. Then, they brainstormed a list of punctuation marks that the students remembered seeing in books. First graders focused on the period, the question mark, and the exclamation mark. After a quick mini-lesson on the function of each, Cathy asked her students to return to an older piece of writing in their folders and look for places to try out punctuation. She emphasized repeatedly that it was perfectly fine if their marks ended up in funny places, and that they only needed to try it out. She added that with mentor texts she feels justified with reading aloud to her students more than she did in previous years simply because students have to know the text before they can analyze it. With the increase in standardized testing she felt, in past years, that if she spent too much time reading aloud to her students that she was taking away needed time from

¹⁴Pulver, Robin and Lynn R. Reed. *Punctuation Takes a Vacation*. New York: Holiday House, 2003. Web. 4 Mar. 2015. Print.

another subject. Now, with mentor texts, she feels as though some of that oral literacy time is back in her classroom.

Sarah's incorporation of mentor sentences allows her to teach grammar in context as her students study parts of speech and grammatical structure in authentic texts. Her students, she finds, are more engaged in this method of instruction than they ever were with isolated grammar activities. She noticed that the more her students interacted with mentor sentences over the course of the year, the more in tune they became to noticing and sharing the parts of speech they noticed. With her invitations to revise and imitate, her students build a classroom writing community in which they feel safe and encouraged to take risks in their writing. She also feels that it is facilitating a literary environment since she consistently sees her students returning and rereading each week's mentor text, which often leads to impromptu student-led book conversations.

Mentor texts also lend themselves to collaboration among teachers. While a number of guidebooks exist, what is of utmost importance for teachers who are new to mentor texts is that there is not one correct way to use them in writing instruction. It is important to start slowly and maintain dialogue with others. Each teacher studied advocated that practitioners need to choose their own pace. Some teachers like to incorporate a new mentor text each week while others prefer to work with only two or three per unit and have their students return to a text multiple times. Both approaches have benefits to students as long as they are taking the time to read like a writer and notice what the author is doing stylistically with the writing, as well as have the opportunity to incorporate those stylistic choices into their own writing.

Limitations

While the four teachers were quick to name and discuss the benefits they perceived to mentor text instruction, they were also quick to name some of the limitations of the practice. The inclusion of discussing both the pros and cons lends credence to the teachers' advocacy for mentor text instruction as they provide a fair assessment about its strengths and weaknesses, as discussed in the following section, and can be seen in Figure 3.

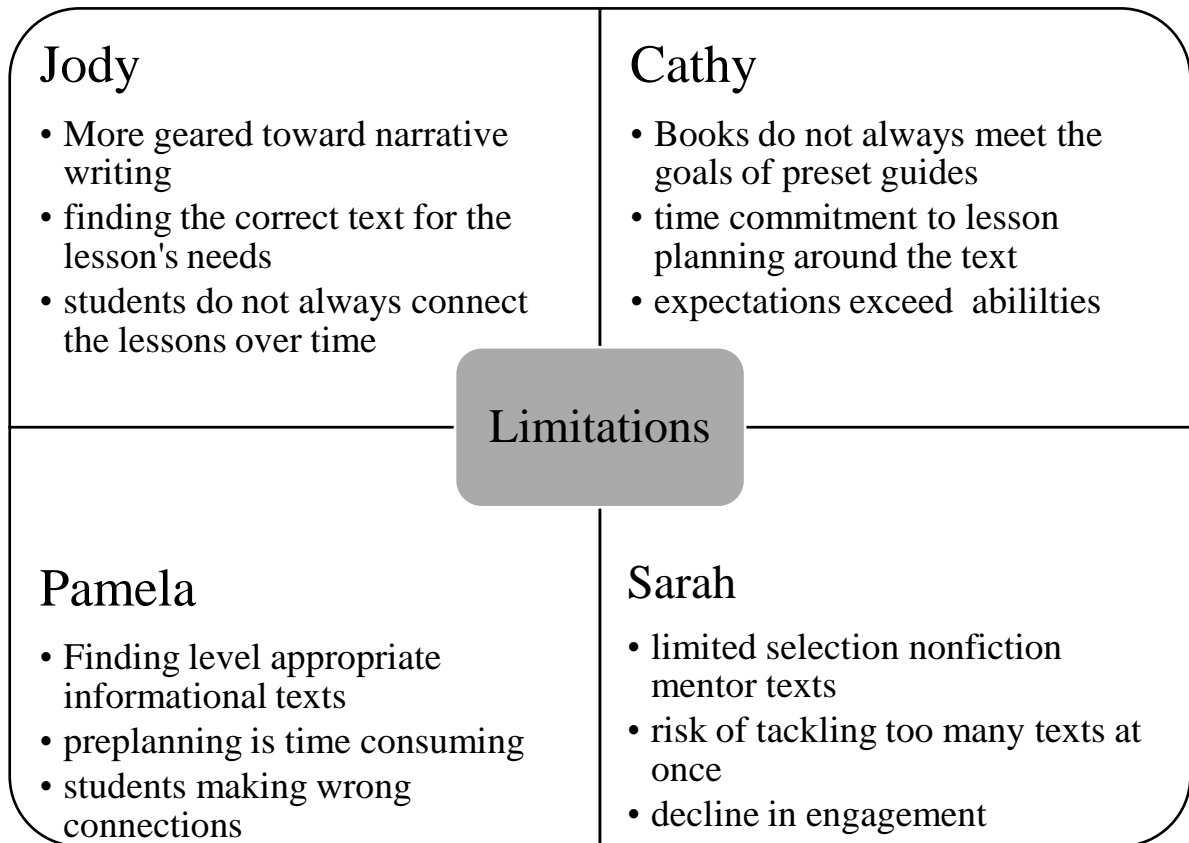


Figure 3 Limitations of Mentor Texts

Though Jody is a proponent for mentor text instruction, she recognizes its limitations. She notices that the practice lends itself most easily to narrative writing, at least at the elementary age when her students are studying picture books a large portion of the time. As mentioned earlier, she first learned of mentor texts after studying *Wondrous Words* by Katie Wood Ray. One of Ray's arguments is for teachers to create their own list of mentor texts based upon books that they feel naturally drawn to, in essence, their favorite authors. According to Ray, there is a reason for this desire to gravitate towards particular books and authors, particularly their style of writing, whether it is the choice of an interesting topic, a commanding use of dialogue, or rich character descriptions. Jody prefers texts that feature clever word choice; in particular, she likes Cynthia Rylant and Mem Fox. Like all the teachers I interviewed, Jody had a difficult time naming just one mentor text that serves as her favorite, but she was quick to name her favorite authors and favorite genre. Sometimes, though, she begins with the lesson plan first, and determines the skill that her students need learn, and then finds a book that fulfills that need. Another reason to include *Wondrous Words* as a beginner's source is that the book has a rich annotated bibliography of picture books to use, specifying skills to teach with each book. Ray, and Jody, both advocate for this two-prong approach to incorporating mentor texts, but it has its limitations, especially with teaching narrative writing.

As mentioned previously, the majority of books that Jody is familiar with are picture books. One wish of hers is to incorporate more chapter books into her mentor text repertoire, particularly for her advanced readers. Likewise, with picture books, it is harder to find suitable texts that lend themselves to the other two units of study in

Eagle River’s writing curriculum—opinion and informational. This is not to say that it is impossible, but the options are far more limited. Another limitation Jody runs into is being able to find the mentor text she needs when she needs it. With mentor texts, one has to rely on a strong library collection, or otherwise invest money into creating a classroom library.

One more limitation to mentor text instruction is that students are tempted, especially in the beginning, simply to copy from the author--a concern that Ray addresses as well. As Jody notes, though, this limitation actually becomes a benefit as it allows teachers and students to address higher level thinking skills as students learn how to imitate, but not copy. For example, an author may begin a biography with a question such as “Did you know...?” which is a common lead for informational writing. When students borrow this format for the beginnings of their research papers, it is not an issue of copying, or plagiarism, because they are not taking the text word for word and submitting it as their own. Rather, they are learning a repertoire of writing styles that will shape and enhance their own personal writing style.

The first grade team noticed several of the same limitations in their classrooms. As mentioned previously, they began using mentor texts with the Read like Writers set of books housed in the library and shared among all first grade teachers. However, what they discovered is that several of the books did not match the goals they were teaching. Cathy often was searching on her own for books that better suited the needs of her students. As she continued to branch out towards other books, she discussed this with her first grade team and they eventually phased out the Read like Writers book sets and used their own mentor text choices.

Pamela found many good choices for the narrative writing unit; in particular she loves the book *Salt Hands*¹⁵ by Jane Chelsea Aragon as a mentor text for teaching small moment writing. However, one limitation she discovered is the lack of mentor texts available for teaching opinion and narrative writing that are at an appropriate level for her first grade students, for most of them are either too complex or not complex enough. Instead she turns to other sources, such as the *Scholastic News* subscription her classroom has. She also incorporates multimedia to serve as a mentor text. When her students were studying opinion writing, one of their tasks was to write a book review for their favorite book. Their mentor text was an episode of *Reading Rainbow*. At the end of every episode, children are on the screen give a short book talk about their favorite books. They tell the title and author and give a brief synopsis without giving away any spoilers, and end with an enticement to get other children to read their book. After watching an episode with her students, Pamela looked at the I pads her students use during center activities, and was inspired to have her students create their own book talks. Together they watched the book talk section of a few more episodes and made a list of the types of information they saw in each book talk. The students wrote their own pieces and I had the pleasure of recording them on the I pads. This then became an option for center activities; students could listen and watch each other's book talks which then, pleasantly yet unexpectedly, led to the formation of small book clubs at the first grade level.

¹⁵ Aragon, Jane C. *Salt Hands*. New York: Puffing, 1994. Print.

Though the teachers are free to incorporate their own mentor text selections and lesson plans, as mentioned earlier, they do have a teacher's guide available to them written by Lucy Calkins. While they do enjoy some of the lessons and book ideas she presents, Cathy believes that Calkins focuses her attention on narrative writing, as does the children's book industry. She would like to see Calkins include more book selections for informational and opinion writing that are appropriate for first graders.

Another limitation Cathy mentioned was the time involved with using mentor texts with first graders. It takes a lot of planning to find the books she needs and to ensure they match the lesson outcomes she needs to teach. Likewise, she feels that students are assessed in so many areas, which takes up class time, that teachers begin to feel guilty if they spend too much time reading aloud mentor text after mentor text.

According to Ray, teachers should read a mentor text multiple times to students. The first read through is reserved for enjoying the story while subsequent read-throughs are the time for noticing what authors are doing within the text. However, that kind of time is not a luxury that they feel they have in first grade, partly due to the nature of first grade children. They need to change activities more often than older students do, so reading multiple mentor texts more than once does become a time commitment. Likewise, as Cathy points out, many of the mentor texts, as well as Calkins' lessons, look at a character's small moment, which is one of the components first graders must learn about narrative writing. However, the books string along several small moments to tell a character's complete story. According, to Cathy, first graders simply are not yet capable of that. They can write out one small moment. They

can even focus in on it and provide many examples and details; however, they do not have the articulation yet to incorporate multiple small moments to tell a complete story. This makes the concept of transferring an author's ideas and writing techniques more difficult for students. The draw of using a mentor text is the push it gives to higher level thinking as students analyze and emulate the authors' writing styles-- higher level thinking that first grade students do not yet have.

Sarah's students, being fifth graders, were able to transfer authors' ideas into their own writing. However, she also noticed the same limitation as the other participants. There simply are not enough nonfiction books available that make quality mentor texts. Another limitation she discovered is keeping her students engaged. She found that her students are excited on reading day, noticing day, and imitation day. They love interacting with the sentence on Mondays because she invites students to share what they notice. This brings a low risk level to participation. However, on Tuesdays, when students focus on noticing grammar, they are less likely to share. The stakes are slightly higher on Tuesdays because this time, there are right and wrong answers, especially if they notice an element of grammar that is not there. Wednesdays, in particular, are harder for her students because their task is to revise the author's sentence. Sarah observed that many of her students struggle with this simply because they do not feel they have the authority to correct the author. If the author is portrayed as the expert, then who are they to revise the author's writing? Thursdays, however, are their favorite days. The students have free reign to write any sentence as long as it follows the grammatical structure of the mentor sentence. The

fifth graders view this as an opportunity to compete with each other to create the most outlandish sentence that still makes sense.

One other limitation that Sarah ran into with mentor texts and sentences was on the teachers' side. One of her colleagues discovered that teachers at other grade levels were repeating books and lessons in from previous grades. In fact, I saw the book *I Wanna Iguana*¹⁶ used for opinion writing in three out of the four classrooms I visited. Sarah's concern, though, was not the repetition of lessons and books, but that teachers were upset about it. She believes that it does not matter if they are repeated. The books, she believes, are so rich that the lessons can be adapted many ways to fit each grade level's need. She adds that the teachers all have the same goal. They want their students to learn a certain style or technique. Moreover, if someone repeats a lesson, it is not the end of the world, instead it simply means that a concept is reinforced and has the opportunity to make students stronger.

Each state has a set of standards that each school district adheres to, whether it is Common Core or state designed. Likewise, each district has specific goals it wants students to meet. Determining why a mentor text is necessary is key. As each of participant demonstrated, mentor texts are beneficial for using as examples of the three genres that students have to work with in K-6 instruction: narrative, opinion, and informational. In the CCSS, each genre is broken down further. For example, in informational writing students have to incorporate strong introductions and conclusions into their writing. The teacher would then want to see mentor texts that

¹⁶Orloff, Karen K. *I Wanna Iguana*. New York: Putnam, 2004. Print.

demonstrate each of those features. Therefore, it is not enough for teachers simply to gather a collection of books they enjoy. They need to find appropriate books that will allow for a close analysis of the writing to support the desired outcome in student writing. This leads to another drawback to Ray's plan: time.

Finding an appropriate mentor text takes time. It is true that a teacher could pull random books off the shelf and analyze them for their instructional needs. Alternatively, they can turn to other teachers that are already using mentor texts to find out which ones work for students' instructional needs. As teachers become used to working with mentor texts, they will begin to notice what is happening in each text; they will begin reading like writers. This allows teachers the freedom to pull in their own text choices, but it is a skill that develops over time.

Advice

In the interviews, I asked the participants what advice they have for teachers who are new to mentor text practice. One piece of advice that came up consistently was to talk to other teachers. When teachers discuss their successes and challenges with the practice, they help each other discern what worked well for a particular lesson, genre, or age group. They help each other navigate around potential pitfalls of using a text with which students have a difficult time connecting. Each teacher also had her own ideas for new practitioners to help facilitate the mentor text process. This information is in Figure 4.

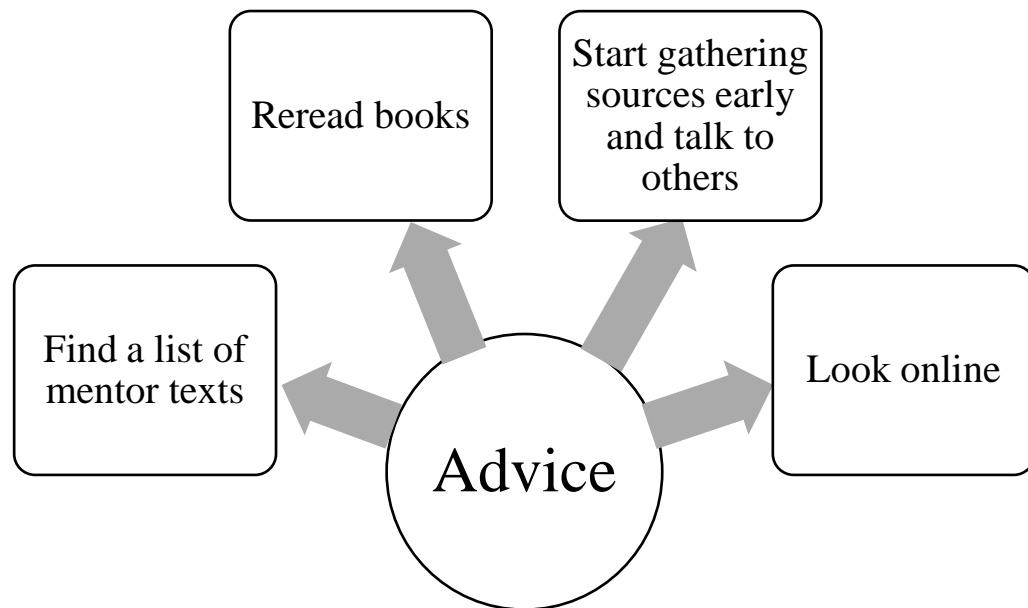


Figure 4 Advice Shared Among Participants

Jody has rich advice for teachers who are new to mentor text instruction. First, she advises finding a list of mentor texts to look through. She recommends the resource books *Mentor Texts* and *Wondrous Words* as good starting places. Both books contain extensive bibliographies of mentor texts. The first, *Mentor Texts*, includes lesson plans that match the text to the element of writing taught to students. The second, *Wondrous Words*, has two chapters that serve as an extensive annotated bibliography that also match texts to elements of writing techniques. However, Jody is also quick to point out that there are multiple ways to use a mentor text and that her students retain more writing strategies if they revisit a book often.

For example, Jody and her students read, reread, and spent time noticing crafts of writing in the book *I Wanna New Room*¹⁷ several times during my observations. In

¹⁷Orloff, Karen K. *I Wanna New Room*. New York: Putnam, 2010. Print.

one lesson, they were looking at the kind of reasons the main character gave his parents for needing his own private bedroom. The students analyzed and labeled the reasons as telling or showing, creative or practical. They did this in preparation for a persuasive writing project in which they wrote letters to their own family members. In another lesson, they examined the parent characters' counterpoints for making the main character share his room with his little brother. The students did this in preparation for anticipating their own parents' counterarguments and provided rebuttals in advance, which is an advanced lesson in rhetoric. A third time the students examined the stylistic design of the letters the character wrote to each other, ranging from formal to informal with proper greetings and salutations. They were analytically looking at matching form to context while also examining the appropriate language and voice usage for the characters in the story. Rather than examining three different mentor texts, Jody chose to have her students return to one mentor text that they knew well. When students are familiar with the story, they are able to focus their attention to noticing what the author is doing in the writing, rather than on the plot. This is the technique discussed in Chapter Three that Ray and Smith call "reading like a writer." This is a phrase that Jody uses in her class prompting her students to slow down to notice what the author is doing.

When reading like writers, Jody recommends following Ray's advice about naming writing techniques. In the spur of the moment, as students notice an author's craft, she lets the students put a name to it. For example, when Jody's students studied science magazines for strong leads, she allowed her students to create a name for the lead as they discovered it. One lead began, "Slowly and silently, the snake slithered its

way across the starlit street.” One student named it an alliteration lead because six of the words began with the letter “s.” Another student wanted to call it an onomatopoeia lead because of the word “slithers.” A class debate ensued as students justified their rationale, and Jody let the class take it to a vote. In the end, alliteration won, but Jody firmly pointed out that the lead could be considered to be both alliterative and onomatopoeia. What is important in this example is that by having the power to name the technique, students are more likely to remember it when they apply it to their own writing than if Jody had simply named it for them. Her final piece of advice is that there is not a right or wrong way to use a mentor text.

Cathy also advises using a mentor text repeatedly if possible. Though she sometimes feels limited by time, she does implement this advice in her classrooms. During one lesson, she wanted her students to practice writing leads that specified a setting with a focus on a day and the weather. Such as, “It was a rainy Tuesday morning...” She found that students were doing well with naming the time of day (morning, evening, etc.) and they were doing okay with naming the weather or the day of the week, but they were not grasping the idea to incorporate all three into an opening sentence. She brought in a set of mentor texts that the students studied earlier in the school year when they practiced writing small moment stories. She knew that the students would recognize the stories, which could also trigger their memory of narrative writing. Since students already knew the stories, she was able to share the first page of each book, and asked her students to pay attention to what three things each author included in the opening page. The act of returning to familiar mentor texts also cut down on the number of student requests to finish the stories.

Pamela's advice was to start gathering materials in the summer and to look for mentor text ideas online. She often turns to *Pinterest* for book ideas as well as the site *Teachers Pay Teachers*, a lesson-sharing site where people upload their lesson plans and share them at a minimal cost, usually around \$1.00. Her other strategy is to look on *Amazon's* website. When she finds a book she likes for a unit, she types it into *Amazon's* search engine and then scrolls to the bottom of the page where there are book recommendations based upon her search. Cathy found many of her mentor texts through these recommendations. She further advises to talk with team members and find out what books worked well in their classrooms.

For those who have never worked with mentor texts before, both Cathy and Pamela advise teachers to start small. Cathy emphasized that for a unit, one does not need to start with 10-12 mentor texts, which can be overwhelming. Instead, she recommends finding one or two good mentor texts and revisiting them often.

Sarah echoes Cathy and Pamela's advice to begin with a small collection and to look for sources online and from other teachers. She uses a website called *Ideas by Jivey*, which is one teacher's professional blog site for using mentor sentences. This website has a number of free lessons and book lists, as well as a few low cost downloadable ones. She also believes that the whole process of finding and incorporating mentor texts can be overwhelming, so she advises borrowing other teachers' ideas and lists before personalizing the lessons.

The initial immersion into mentor text usage is difficult. Ray is one of the foundational writers about using mentor texts in the classroom. Her advice to teachers is to find books that they are already familiar with and find ways to use them as

mentor texts in their classrooms. While this is sound advice, it is not practical for anyone new to the practice of using mentor text instruction. Gathering books that one is familiar with is fairly easy, but then what? How does one decide what can and should be taught about writing with this book? How does one design and deliver such a lesson? Though Ray's advice provides a starting point, each of the teachers I work with argue that a new practitioner needs more concrete examples of how and what to incorporate into their instruction. Each of them mentioned looking online to see what other teachers are using. Not only what they are using, but also how they are using, and why. Perhaps the why is the most important component?

How do Mentor Texts Support CCSS?

In a time of high standards during educational reform, many states are at various stages of addressing the Common Core State Standards. Here in Michigan, all schools are ensuring that their lessons cover each standard. Since the CCSS do specifically mention mentor practice, I wanted to know the participants views on how well the practice covered these standards. All four teachers agree that mentor text instruction supports CCSS.

Jody explained that the CCSS divides writing into three genres: narrative, opinion, and informational. Though each teacher wished that there were more informational texts available for their students, they each agree that mentor texts easily lend themselves to those three genres. Cathy further explains that the CCSS have an open-ended manner, thus allowing for teacher autonomy in lesson delivery.

All four teachers utilize mentor texts to match the writing standards in CCSS. For example, the first writing strand states that students will “Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or name the book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply a reason for the opinion, and provide some sense of closure.” Pamela’s students did this in their persuasive papers about their favorite color after reading *Red is Best*. Her students introduced their color as their topic. They stated their opinion that it was the best color, and then they provided a reason for their choice. They practiced writing a closing sentence, thus meeting each criterion in the standard.

Similarly, Jody’s student composed “All About _____” books complete with chapters. Their third grade CCSS standard states that students need to “Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.” The strand is then broken down into the following sub-strands:

- Introduce a topic and group related information together; include illustrations when useful to aiding comprehension.
- Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details.
- Use linking words and phrases (e.g., also, another, and, more, but) to connect ideas within categories of information.
- Provide a concluding statement or section.

Jody’s class did this with mentor texts. They first spent a couple days in the library analyzing informational texts to see what they had in common. Students paid

attention to text features and text organization. Then Jody brought the students back into a whole group to discuss their findings. As the students shared, Jody made a class list of characteristics central to informational texts. From here, students began browsing through both the school library and Jody's own classroom library for topic ideas.

Once students selected a topic, they began collecting facts on graphic organizers. On these graphic organizers, students divided the information into sections that they deemed relevant. For example, one student studied an animal, so he organized his information into its diet, its habitat, its distinguishing characteristics, and its role in the food chain. Another student studying a historical figure would need different criteria to organize her information. Surely, she would not want to write about Harriet Tubman's place in the food chain! Instead, this student organized the information into her early life, her role in the Underground Railroad, and the significance of her bravery. The only part that Jody provided was a graphic organizer divided into four boxes. In these boxes, the students thematically grouped their facts. Students spent several days on this part of the research process. Jody met with each student frequently to make sure they each had topic headings that were neither too broad nor too specific and that worked well with their topic. Some students ended up with five or six sections, while others only had three. This also demonstrated to students that there are multiple ways to organize informational writing beyond the standard five-paragraph essay.

Once students had their section headings and facts collected, they worked on placing them in a logical order. For example, one student who researched the panther

decided to write the chapters about the panther's role in the food chain and the panther's dietary needs next to each other since they linked together. It followed a more logical progression than if he wrote about the panther's natural habitat and distinguishing characteristics in between those chapters. Likewise, it made sense for a student writing about President Lincoln to organize her sections chronologically, rather than beginning with his presidency and then backtracking to his early life. Jody's students spent a lot of time peer conferencing with each other, giving each other ideas of areas to expand, and asking each other questions about the topic. They also spent time revising their writing, looking at sentences and playing with ways to rewrite them and reorganize them.

After a few days of revising, Jody did a final edit with the students, and then they turned their research into two projects. First, they typed their own "All About" books complete with chapters and a table of contents. Some even chose to include a glossary. Once their books were complete, they also created a PowerPoint presentation. This was another lesson in revision, for Jody instructed her students not to transfer their whole text from their books to their slides. Instead, they were to write out the key points in bullet form and find stock photos that helped illustrate their points. The lesson on stock photos helped students learn where to look for photos that are available in the public domain and served as a lesson on citation and plagiarism.

Mentor texts support Common Core Standards. The main goal of the CCSS is to provide teachers and students with a set of goals and standards that would be universal across the nation. This allows students to progress through each grade with the same knowledge standards and would help with college and career preparation as

well as support students who move to different states to have baseline knowledge to keep them at grade level. A second goal of the CCSS, however, is to provide flexibility to teachers to incorporate methods and materials to address each standard as they deemed fit. This sounds like a win-win situation, however with the incorporation of CCSS came the adoption of many textbooks that happened to align to the standards and the new tests. Textbook programs come with curriculum guides that provide teachers and districts with prepackaged lesson plans. This removes any amount of autonomy the teacher has in the classroom, especially if it is a paced and scripted curriculum.

The Observations

How do the Criteria of Mentor Texts Differ from Lesson to Lesson?

The second part of the data collection came from observing each of the classes during their writing instruction time. From the observations, I noticed a variety of themes that supported what the teachers reported in their interviews. Jody's classroom was the most accessible. Her students wrote in the afternoons between science and math. Due to my own teaching schedule, I was only able to visit her class three days each week, but it was easy to maintain a level of continuity with the frequent number of observations.

Cathy and Pamela were very welcoming of me into their classrooms, but their schedules were more restrictive. Though they incorporated writing into their classroom every day, they requested that I visit their classroom once a week. This was

due to fluctuations in their scheduling such as music and art classes, morning recess, and rotating lunch duty. One other complication was the weather. This happened to be a particularly hard winter, which led to a large number of snow days. Though I was able to gather rich data from my observations, I did not have as many opportunities to visit their first grade classrooms.

Sarah's classroom had similar scheduling issues, but largely due to the students being 5th graders. Since it was the final three months of the school year, students were making many visits to the middle school to ease their transition in the fall. In addition, Sarah taught her mentor sentences in the morning, so with the weather, we ran into a number of school delays. When a two-hour delay occurred she moved mentor sentences to the next day, which I was not always able to attend, again due to my own teaching schedule. Since Sarah focused on mentor sentences rather than mentor texts, I will address those observations separately from the other three participants.

The information from the observations is divided into the following themes: teacher modeling, noticing, informational text, text features, opinion writing, text structure, and narrative writing. These themes emerged from coding the data.

Teacher Modeling

During their writing lessons, teachers often referred to mentor texts, but not every lesson was devoted to the use of one. One theme that emerged was teacher modeling. In the first grade classrooms, both teachers modeled their desired outcomes on a classroom easel for students to see. When Cathy was showing her students how to include the time of day into the leads of the narrative writing, she made a list of the

examples she and her students found in a variety of mentor texts. After they generated the list, she initiated a short discussion with students about how including this into the setting of their small moment writing provides strong information for the reader. She helped students by talking through a few of their own stories. One student explained that his small moment was discovering that jalapenos were hot. This student told us that as his family sat down to dinner he took a big bite out of one thinking it was a regular yellow pepper and was surprised by the heat. Cathy prodded him to expand upon his lead by trying to include the day of the week, the time of day, and the season. For example, he may write, “On a snowy Tuesday evening, I learned that jalapenos were hot.” She explained to him that even if he does not remember the exact day of the week, by including one it helps engage the reader. Likewise, she explained that by mentioning that it was evening helps clue the reader into which meal the family was eating.

Pamela’s class did a similar activity when they worked on their opinion writing. As students examined *Red is Best* for its persuasive structure, they made a list together on the easel of what they noticed happening in the text. They noticed that the first sentence names a color and states an opinion. Next, they noticed that on each page the main character provides a reason for why red is the best color. She says that her red boots take bigger steps. Her red barrettes make her hair laugh, and that her red cup makes her juice taste better. As Pamela and her students identified and listed the reasons given, they also questioned the validity of each reason. Can the color of the cup affect the taste of the juice? No, but as one student pointed out, the color of the

juice can have an effect on its flavor, since most berry flavors are red, apples is a deep yellow, grape is purple, etc.

Once they finished identifying these reasons they made note of the story's conclusion. After this, the students now had an outline of the story on their class easel as a reference. From here, students worked in small groups with classmates who had the same favorite color and together they brainstormed reasons why their color was best. Then students wrote their own version of *Red is Best*. From Pamela's modeling on the easel, students saw that they needed to incorporate a lead sentence and closing sentence, and that in the middle needed to be a list of reasons why their favorite color was the best color.

Jody did a similar modeling activity in her classroom. While her students worked on persuasive writing they followed the same procedure, but with a different book, *I Wanna New Room*. In this book, the main character is writing letters to his parents requesting that he get his own room away from his little brother. The parents write back with counterpoints, which Jody and her students analyze as well. Just like Pamela, Jody and her students created a list of reasons on the easel, but with it being an older grade, she divided her easel in half to organize the points and counterpoints. This helped students identify the form and structure of composing an argument. From here they composed a letter to a person of their choice (all of them chose a parent) requesting something special. Many chose to ask for a pet, or a vacation. One asked for a telescope, another asked for cell phone. Before students constructed their letters, they first used a graphic organizer to brainstorm a list of reasons of why they want this item and why they deserve this item. This was a chance for them to practice elements

of rhetoric. Instead of writing something like, “I want a kitten because they are cute,” they wrote sentences similar to “I would like a new kitten because I would like a chance to show you how responsible I am.” While they were brainstorming this list, they brainstormed another list of potential counterpoints that their parents might give them. A parent might say that a cell phone is too expensive. This gives the students the opportunity to argue that they could do extra chores around the house for allowance money that would help pay for the phone. By addressing their parents’ potential counterpoints and by advocating for themselves, students were able to utilize rhetoric in their appeals and several were successful in obtaining their requested item.

Reading Like a Writer

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Ray believes that for mentor texts to be successful student must slow down and read like a writer. This means that instead of racing through the text to find out what happens next to their beloved character, they instead need to take the time to see what writing strategies the author employs. Earlier in this chapter, Jody, who brought mentor texts into the Eagle River district, brought Ray’s books and beliefs to her professional learning community. Since this district relied heavily on Ray’s philosophy, I was curious to see how the teachers encouraged their students to slow down and read like a writer.

At the first grade level, Cathy encouraged her students to name things they noticed happening in the text, but they needed guidance and prompting to do so. The language they used was simpler. After Cathy revisited the books with leads that mentioned the time of day, she did not ask her students to notice what all the leads had

in common. Instead, she directly asked them when each book was taking place. As students answered for each book she made a list on the easel. Once they collected the times of day, then the students were able to notice that a pattern occurred within the stories' leads.

Similarly, in Pamela's class, she did not expect her students to notice the structure in *Red is Best* or the *Reading Rainbow* book talks without scaffolding that instruction. Instead, she prompted her students by asking them how each began, how each ended. Like Cathy, she collectively created a list of reasons from each sample with her students, and then asked her students to examine them.

In third grade, Jody often encouraged her students to notice what was happening textually in each mentor text. When her students began their informative writing unit, she began by reading to them the book *Atlantic*¹⁸, an informative book told from the ocean's point of view. After the read-aloud Jody asked the students what they noticed about the book. The students quickly answered that it was written in first person. Then her students spent 10 minutes looking through a variety of nonfiction books and making a list of what they noticed about the text. She specifically instructed them not to read the book for information, but to pay attention to what they noticed about the writing. Afterward, the class regrouped to create a list of what they noticed, which then became a resource of informational text features the students could reference during their unit.

¹⁸ Kara, G.B. *Atlantic*. New York: Puffin, 2004. Print.

After they generated the list, Jody shared with her students a second nonfiction mentor text, *Big Blue Whale*¹⁹. After reading the first page, she stopped and asked her students what they noticed. They noticed that some of the text was in a curvy shape while the bulk of the text was horizontal. Jody pointed out to her students that sometimes authors choose to do interesting things with words, which can make nonfiction writing a little more fun. In this case, the author chose to add extra factoids about the blue whales in an eye-catching font. Since her students were going to be creating their own informational books, she encouraged them to be inventive and creative with their text representation, as long as it was purposeful.

Jody also incorporated Ray's vocabulary of reading like a writer into the peer-revision portion of her writing workshop. As students' finished the drafts of their nonfiction books they spent time peer reviewing each other's writing. Prior to collaborating, Jody inquired what they thought revision was. Most students believed it was "making sure that everything is right" or "Finding words spelled wrong" or simply "reading a paper over." Jody referred them back to a poster they created as a class during the first semester called ARMS. This acronym reminded students that the act of revision was finding places to *add* detail, *remove* unnecessary information, *move* sentences to different locations within the text, or *substitute* a new word. Next she reviewed the acronym CUPS which referred to the act of editing. This technique asked students to examine the text for *capitalization*, *usage*, *punctuation*, and *spelling*. After this review, students felt confident in their task of helping each other revise their

¹⁹Davies, Nicola. *Big Blue Whale*. Cambridge: Candlewick Press, 1997. Print.

papers. Most of the students took a long time as they read each other's papers multiple times and took the time to ask each other relevant questions about their information.

Sarah's fifth graders worked with mentor sentences. As mentioned previously, she built the act of noticing into their mentor sentence schedule, so her students were familiar with the instructions. On Mondays, she gave students a mentor sentence to work with for the week. The students spent two minutes making a list of what they noticed about the sentence. Sometimes they noticed grammar sometimes they noticed figurative language. Sometimes they even added to their lists what they noticed was not in the sentence. When the students studied *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, they had the following mentor sentence: "By the time they woke up in the morning breakfast was coming down." Sarah's students noticed that this was a declarative sentence, written in past tense, and that the words *breakfast*, *time*, and *morning* were nouns. However, they also noticed that the sentence was lacking adjectives, similes, and metaphors. Sarah gave them a preview of an upcoming grammar lesson. She told them that they were going to learn that week if it was a simple or complex sentence. Then she asked her students to take a guess, which was a way for her to tap into their prior knowledge. The students were divided. Half of the class thought it was a simple sentence, but their reasoning was that it was lacking adjectives and metaphors. The other half argued that it was a complex sentence, but only because it was a long sentence. Now Sarah knew that her students did not have knowledge of complex sentences and she knew which misconceptions she would need to address.

In regards to mentor texts, only Jody and Sarah used language with the students in regards to noticing what the author was doing with the text. This is largely

due to the age of the students and their cognitive ability to think critically about the text. While it is true that the first graders did notice many things happening in the text with guidance from their teachers, it is not clear that they would be able to do this independently.

Both Pamela and Cathy simplified their language with the students. Neither one asked them specifically what they noticed. Cathy asked her students “What do these settings have in common?” Pamela asked her students, “What kind of reason is this? Is it serious? Is it silly?” Both teachers had their students go through the process of noticing what the author is doing within the craft and then use those techniques in their writing, but they used vocabulary that was more accessible to first grade students.

Text Features

The Common Core State Standards expect students to study text features as a part of their study of informational texts. Under the Reading portion of the CCSS is the strand, “Craft and Structure” which names specific text feature expectations for each grade level. Since mentor texts blend the acts of reading and writing, it makes sense, then, that each of the participating teachers chose to have their students work with these text features in their writing. A breakdown of the text features by grade level is in Figure 5. It is worth noting that the skills in each grade level are built into the following years, culminating in the fifth grade expectation for students to “compare and contrast the overall structure” among various informational sources. Each teacher modeled text features for their students with mentor texts. As noted

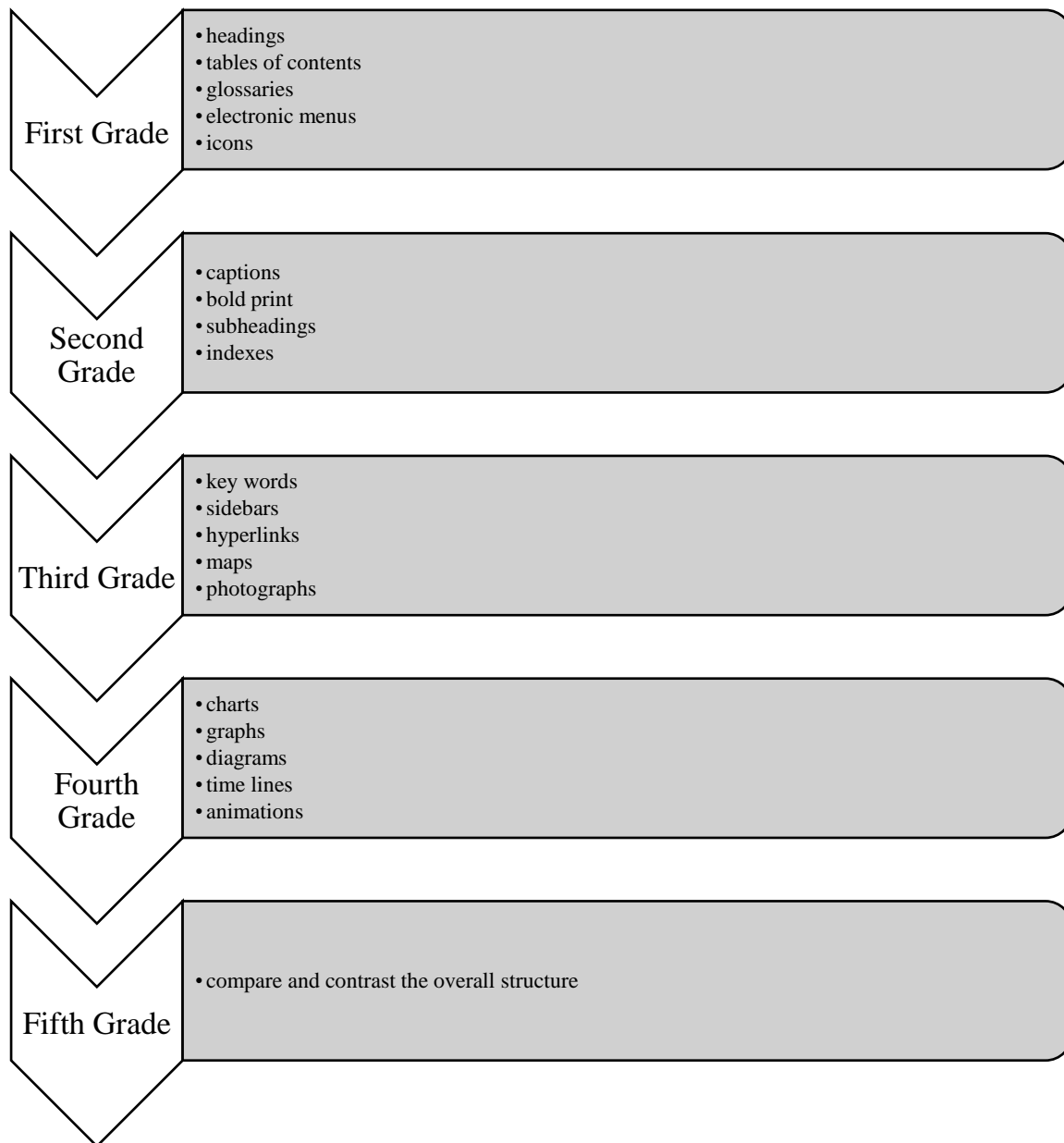


Figure 5 Text Features by Grade Level

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. *Common Core State Standards English Language Arts*. Washington DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010. Print.

earlier, Jody’s students created informational booklets for their writing unit. She had her students examine nonfiction books independently, but with the task of making a list of the text features they noticed. She encouraged them to read like a writer with a focus not on gaining information about their topic, but rather to hunt for text features. Afterwards she brought her students together and they created a list of features that they found in their books. See Table 2 for a list of the students’ findings.

Table 2

Student Generated List of Text and Genre Features for Informational Text

Text Features	Genre Features
Table of contents	Some lead with a question
Timeline	Different species (variety of information)
Index	Beginning to end of life (biography)
Glossary	Compare/contrast
Fast facts	
Captions	
Diagrams	
Map	
Photographs	

In the interview, Pamela mentioned the difficulty in finding grade appropriate informational mentor texts. As a result, she turned to the *Scholastic News* magazines her students studied during science. After reading the magazine, she and her students

went back through it over the course of several days. She pointed out captions, graphs, titles, charts, pictures, and headings. Her goal, at this point, was not for her students to begin writing with these text features, but to begin building a vocabulary for them as they transition into second grade.

Similarly, Sarah went over a similar lesson outside of mentor sentences. Much as Jody's students did with their nonfiction books, Sarah's students spent time examining magazines in the library for text features. Afterwards, Sarah gave each of her students a manipulative to utilize in incorporating and understanding text features. They glued a paper treasure chest into their writing notebooks that had an envelope flap on it in which they could store slips of paper on which they took notes about various text features. Over the course of three days, she covered font styles, diagrams, charts, graphs, captions, tables of content, indices, glossaries, maps, and photographs. Students took notes on each text feature on an index card and kept their index cards in the Toolbox that they glued into their writer's notebooks. As Sarah talked about each feature, she encouraged her students to share examples of each feature that they came across during their magazine study, and within their textbooks.

All four teachers incorporated an awareness of text features into their curriculum. In my observations, Jody was the only one who asked her students to use the text features they discovered and discussed. Sarah's students were about to embark on a cross-curricular research project with social studies. Though I did not see her students use the mentor texts for the purpose of finding, identifying, or analyzing text features, in her interview this is exactly what they did during their library time and during their social studies time.

In first grade, Pamela took time to search for a suitable example of text that used informational text features. Though her students did not use them in their own writing, they did examine a model of writing that incorporated them. This differs from Sarah's method of teaching. Sarah gave a presentation of the text features and their definitions while her students took notes. The fifth grade students did not examine the features in actual text during her lessons.

A Closing Thought

This study shows that mentor text instruction allows for teacher autonomy in curricular instruction. The process of choosing which mentor texts to use and how to implement them depends largely on the needs of the students and the strengths of the teacher. As Jody demonstrated, with proper guidance, her students are capable of slowing down to read like writers and notice what writing techniques authors are using. Not only does this increase Jody's autonomy, but it also increases student autonomy in three ways. First, her students chose their own research topic. Second, they also chose which books to look through for text features. Third, and most important, the students felt Jody's trust in their ability to find relevant information on their own. Her decision to reinforce the text features that her students found only cemented their confidence.

Cathy demonstrated autonomy by looking beyond the library shelves for mentor texts that best fit her students' needs. When she could not find a text that was suitable for informational and persuasive writing, she turned to other resources such as the *Scholastic News* magazine and the *Reading Rainbow* book talk segments. This

modicum of creativity arose from the autonomy given to her by the school district. Similarly, Sarah also used the autonomy given to her by incorporating mentor sentences into her students' morning routine. As the social studies teacher of her grade level, she had no obligation to use mentor sentences. Yet, she chose to invest time into establishing a routine with her students to teach grammar in context while boosting students' creative writing skills.

One benefit to this study was the ability to study two first grade teachers. While Pamela and Cathy liked to plan their curriculum together with the rest of their first grade team, it quickly became apparent that their teaching styles were different. While Cathy liked to include new mentor texts each week, Pamela preferred to return to previously used mentor texts and allow students to reconnect with the authors and stories. As Sarah noted earlier, revisiting a text allows for deeper findings by students. They may notice an author's use of similes one time, but notice the lack of adverbs during the second lesson.

The implications of this study extend from teachers, principals, and other administrators to English education academics, and curriculum coordinators. More information about mentor text instruction needs examination to discern how students respond. In Chapter Five, I will further discuss the implications of mentor text instruction as it applies to other key people involved in education.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This Study in Review

I set out to investigate what mentor texts mean to classroom teachers within one school district. While a limited body of books exists to serve as a guide for incorporating mentor texts into the writing curriculum, I sought to explore what the use of mentor texts looked like in an authentic setting. As a former middle school teacher, I experienced the floundering of several trends in education without proper follow-through by administration--trends that had the potential to impact our students positively such as incorporating writing across the curriculum or incorporating grade level team planning, fell to the wayside. Programs such as these had strong introductions through engaging professional development and relevant research, but without any follow-up these programs, among others, disintegrated as the teachers were left behind without any curricular support. When I first learned about mentor texts, I quickly realized that this was a pedagogical practice that can take several forms of instructional delivery, and that there would not be one right way to engage in this practice. With my personal teaching philosophy entrenched in the concept of modeling, I wanted to ensure that mentor texts were a pedagogical practice, not simply a curricular trend. Furthermore, I wanted to provide examples of what the practice looks like in the classroom, especially for those who are new to the instruction.

As a writing instructor, I committed to modeling quality writing for my students, whether through student examples, outside readings, or my own writing. I knew that the best way to help my students understand writing was to explore and analyze it. When I began teaching the elementary writing methods course, it quickly became apparent that this passion for modeling was leading me toward the path of working with mentor texts. As mentioned in Chapter One, it was a recurring thought that I could not shake. With my dedication to modeling as good pedagogical practice, I knew that I needed to further question, define the concept of mentor texts, and examine their use in the classroom.

In an earlier version of this project, I anticipated completing a textual analysis of picture books to discern what made them good candidates for being mentor texts. I soon realized, however, that much like the theorists I studied in Chapter Two, I would only be pushing my own agenda. My goal was not to preach to others that they should use mentor texts, but rather to show others how they work in the classroom; that is when it became clear that I needed to conduct a case study involving teachers already immersed in the practice. My goal was not to write another guidebook for teachers to follow, but to illuminate what the theory looks like in practice.

As I immersed myself in the scholarship that focused on mentor text instruction, I learned that the practice has deep foundational roots in educational psychology. From Bandura we understand how students learn from modeled behavior. From Vygotsky we learn about scaffolded instruction and supporting students in the zone of proximal development. From Rosenblatt we learn that students create meaning by interacting with the text and creating personal connections. A mentor text allows the teacher to

model quality writing to students while supporting them at their appropriate learning levels. Furthermore, as students engage with the text, they are creating personal connections.

The text itself serves as a model of quality writing, but it is the way the teacher incorporates the book into the writing lessons that scaffolds student learning as they progress through various levels of thinking. One way, according to Smith, is to ensure that all students have access to what he calls the Literacy Club. He argues that clubs exist in all aspects of society with the common goal of exclusiveness. People join clubs with others due to similar interests and activities whether it is kayaking, scouting, quilting, etc. The members of the club seek each other out because they have a similar interest, but they also exclude others who do not share the common interest. Smith argues that literacy is similar. Students who struggle with literacy do not see themselves as members of the Literacy Club. If they feel excluded then they are less likely to participate. Smith writes:

There is no way of helping children to see themselves as writers if they are not interested. That is why the first responsibility of teachers must be to demonstrate to children that writing is interesting, possible, satisfying, and worthwhile. But there is also no way of helping children to become writers if the teacher does not believe that writing is interesting, possible, satisfying, and worthwhile. Teachers who are not themselves members of the club cannot admit children to it (28).

This is why mentor texts are important—they provide teachers with an entry point into the Literacy Club. The elementary methods course I teach is a required course for

education students, therefore it is common to have students who are math or science majors and do not feel like a member of the Literacy Club. My approach is first to build a strong community and then, with my students, explore various forms of pedagogy but we also situate ourselves as writers. We bring a new piece of writing to class each week, which always stem from a mentor text. The student feedback each semester consistently acknowledges that my students feel more comfortable with the idea of teaching writing because 1) they have a tool that they can use to facilitate writing skills with students, and 2) they are able to see themselves as writers. They feel like they are members of the literacy club, some for the first time, and this gives them the confidence to continue their career path.

Once students become entrenched in the analysis of the writing, they begin to internalize the writing strategies and internalize them into their own writing. Graves explains that when students study their writing in conjunction with the literature it helps them form a concrete conception of the craft. He writes, “Sharing the works at the same time and with the same treatment helps the children to realize what it contained in literature and in the process of composing itself” (66). These children become analytical in their questioning of literature and in examining their own writing. They begin to realize that the professional authors go through the same composition process as they do. Once students make the realization they feel validated as a writer and secure in their place in the Literacy Club.

The implementation of this process, however, is where theorists begin to vary (Dorfman and Cappelli, Ray, Harwayne) and where I noticed gaps in the information. While most authors agreed that a mentor text was an existing piece of writing, there

was no consensus on the inclusion of student writing, teacher writing, or texts that were not literature based. My goal in Chapter Four was to articulate that the definition of mentor texts is fluid. I also could not locate studies advocating in one way or another for mentor texts in conjunction with CCSS. Again, I turned to my data in Chapter Four to illustrate the role mentor texts can easily play in mastering national standards. Finally, I could not find one defining list of mentor texts for teachers to use, which further solidifies my argument that the definition of mentor texts is fluid and that teachers need the autonomy to select their own texts. Though Ray and also Dorfman and Cappelli both provide extensive book lists of suggestions, I found that these titles were not always suitable to the lessons (or the participants) I needed to teach, nor were they always easily accessible. This finding is echoed in the interview portion of Chapter Four. This also illuminates the notion that mentor texts lend themselves towards a high level of teacher autonomy.

I conclude this study by summarizing my key findings and making recommendations for future use of mentor texts in the classroom, as well as for future variations of this study. These findings and recommendations are important for the teacher who is new to using mentor texts, to the teachers who need to revitalize her writing instruction, to the teachers who need to advocate for increased teacher autonomy, K-12 administrators, teaching candidates, and educational policy makers.

What this Study Shows

Due to the limited size of this case study, no generalizations about teachers, standards, or education can be made here. This is an inherent limitation of this study,

and indicates a place where further studies can provide more information. However, the findings from this study are important in igniting the discussion about the role of mentor texts in writing instruction.

First, this study shows the importance the individual teachers place on mentor text instruction in their classrooms. Each of the participants *chose* to incorporate this practice in their classrooms. This was not a district directive, but a choice that these four teachers made together in a professional learning community to model quality writing to their students. As each teacher demonstrated during her interview, the actual practice of this instruction looks different between classrooms, thus lending itself to teacher autonomy. Just as students thrive when given choices in their work, so do teachers.

Incorporating Mentor Texts

Even though the Eagle River district provides each teacher with a mentor text curricular guide, teachers are not required to use it. It is merely there for their benefit as a resource if they choose to engage with mentor texts. As Sarah indicated in her interview, the more autonomy teachers are given, the more the practice spreads through the district. In her district, it began with Jody's involvement in her local affiliation of the National Writing Project. As she learned about mentor texts, she brought the concept back to her district, beginning with her school improvement team and her professional learning community. As she and the other teachers began using mentor texts, other teachers became intrigued and expressed interest in learning more about the practice. The teachers who are using mentor texts are finding success with it,

which is measurable by the quality of student work, the level of student engagement, and the maintenance of high standardized test scores. As the success builds, so do the teachers' enthusiasm for the practice. Each year more teachers within the district are choosing to work with mentor texts.

Though the use of mentor texts is spreading through the Eagle River district, it is worth noting that the initial immersion into mentor text usage was difficult. Katie Wood Ray is one of the foundational writers about using mentor texts in the classroom. Her advice to teachers is to find books that they are already familiar with and find ways to use them as mentor texts. While this is sound advice, it is not practical for anyone new to the practice of using mentor text instruction. Gathering books that one is familiar with is fairly easy, but then what? How does one decide what can and should be taught about writing with the book? How does one design and deliver such a lesson? Though Ray's advice provides a starting point, each of the teachers I worked with argued that a new practitioner needs more concrete examples of how and what to incorporate into their instruction. Each of the teachers interviewed mentioned searching online to determine what other educators use, how they use texts, and their reasons for incorporating mentor texts into their teaching.

Supporting Standards while Maintaining Autonomy

As mentioned in Chapter Four, the primary goal of the CCSS is to provide teachers and students with a universal set of goals and standards at a national level. Where I taught middle school, a significant population of students migrated between Michigan, Arkansas, and Texas. As a result, when students returned in the spring it

was rare for them to be at the same place as the rest of the students. Quite often they returned advanced in some areas and behind in others, simply because each state had its own set of standards that its school districts followed. With the conception of the Common Core, students have a better chance of learning the same information and skills regardless of their geographic location; the achievement gap shrinks across the nation.

A second goal of the CCSS is to provide flexibility to teachers to incorporate methods and materials to address each standard as they deem fit. As stated in Appendix A of the CCSS:

Variables specific to particular readers (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to particular tasks (such as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed) must also be considered when determining whether a text is appropriate for a given student. Such assessments are best made by teachers employing their professional judgment, experience, and knowledge of their students and the subject (4).

This sounds like a win-win situation, and if curricular decisions were left in the hands of teachers, it would be. However, the alarming number of prepackaged, pre-aligned curricula devised by publishing companies took away from teacher autonomy. In Michigan, many teachers were apprehensive about making the switch from Grade level Content Expectations (GLCEs) to CCSS, especially since their lessons aligned to the GLCEs. Would the roll out of the CCSS mean that they would need to realign all of their existing curricula? Another emerging question was whether the existing curriculum was rigorous enough to meet the needs of the CCSS across subjects at each

grade level. As teachers felt this uncertainty districts began adopting the prepackaged product that the publishing companies were selling as miracle salve. When districts spend money on a new curricular package it is with the expectation that their teachers will use it, for the purchase of new books is quite expensive—especially across all subjects and grade levels simultaneously. Therefore, the adoption of the CCSS also brought a decrease in teacher autonomy.

Another common issue is the CCSS’s use of exemplar texts. Appendix B of the CCSS includes a list of texts deemed appropriate for each grade level. It is not expressly stated that these are required texts for students, but rather that students should be reading lists with similar text complexity. In fact, the document specifically states that teachers should use their own expertise in selecting literature. However, as Kathy Short points out, many districts are incorrectly interpreting the exemplar list as a mandatory reading list. She explains, “This representation of text exemplars as a mandated reading list, rather than as examples of text complexity, is highly problematic and creates a context in which students are restricted to books that are dated and lacking in diversity.” This again removes any autonomy the teacher has in curricular design; this is where mentor texts are crucial to the English Language Arts. Barbara Moss, editor of *Voices in the Middle* further clarifies:

Despite the clear wording that these books are not a recommended reading list, speculation abounds about the role the text exemplars will play in schools and classrooms...many librarians, teachers, and literacy experts fear that the text exemplars will become a new canon for literacy instruction, a kind of national reading list (48).

Further exacerbating this concern is the lack of diversity, not only a lack of cultural diversity, but also a lack of canonical diversity. If school districts begin reading the text exemplars as a prescriptive reading list, where is the room for new literature? A prescribed list removes autonomy not only with teachers, but also with students. Such a list sends a message to teachers that their curricular decisions are not trustworthy. Moreover, students also lose any degree of autonomy to make choices in reading selections.

With mentor texts, however, teachers are choosing which texts to examine, which elements to examine, and how they want their students to use the information they are learning from a close analysis and synthesis of each author's writing. This practice is a true blend of reading and writing skills.

As each participant demonstrated, they had the freedom to incorporate mentor texts into their classrooms in a manner that they deemed most appropriate. Jody, Cathy, and Pamela chose to use mentor texts to teach their three units of writing: narrative, informational, and persuasive. Jody's students examined a blend of fiction and nonfiction; Cathy's students revisited mentor texts several times during the school year; and Pamela's students examined picture book alternatives. Sarah, however, chose to incorporate mentor sentences as a way to teach grammar in context. Each of these teachers addressed a required element of the CCSS, but they had the freedom to discern which methodology was best for their students. Additionally, at the third and fifth grade levels, Jody and Sarah's students also had the freedom to choose their own mentor texts when discovering text features.

Furthermore, while the number of guidebooks about mentor texts is increasing, what is of utmost importance for teachers who are new to mentor texts is that there is not one correct way to use them in writing instruction. It is important to start slowly and talk to others already involved in the practice. Each participant advocated the need for practitioners to choose their own pace for mentor text instruction. Some teachers, such as Cathy, prefer to incorporate a new mentor text each week. Others, such as Pamela, choose to work with only two or three books per unit and have their students return to those texts multiple times. Both of these formats have benefits to students as long as they are taking the time to read like a writer and notice what the author is doing stylistically with the writing.

The Audience: Who Should Care about Mentor Text Instruction?

The primary audience for this study is all educators. As this study indicates, mentor text practice has several benefits to writing instruction. Each of the participants agreed that the end goal of the practice—student analysis and synthesis of an author’s writing strategies—are higher level thinking skills. Is this not the ultimate goal for our students? With mentor texts, students are not simply participating in rote recitation of grammatical structures, nor are they forever writing the same five-paragraph essay. Instead, they are analyzing what makes writing unique at an individual level, as well as what common characteristics writing may share across genres and purposes. Through mentor text instruction, teachers are providing students with a repertoire of writing skills and strategies that these students would not utilize in the standard issue five-paragraph essays.

As I think back to my own teaching experience I recall what it was like to survey textbook programs for our English Language Arts Department. Each of them, regardless of the publishing company, had two things in common. First, they each led with a list of state level benchmarks and standards that their curricular guide addressed at each grade level. Second, they led students through the writing process, but without any proper modeling of desired outcomes. The textbooks usually were divided into four sections: narrative, persuasive, informational, and poetry. Each section began with a writing prompt designed to tap into students' prior knowledge. Then the texts proceeded to tell students exactly what form of prewriting they should use, what their first and final drafts should look like, and exactly what belongs in each style of writing. An informational paragraph needed a thesis statement. A poem needed figurative language. A narrative memoir needed dialogue. While these are sound pieces of advice about what is necessary in writing, these books attempted to make writing into a cut-and-dry piece that is either right or wrong. Either the writing has a simile or it does not. This form of instruction, however, does not allow for student creativity, nor does it allow students to take risks in their writing.

For example, one textbook series used in my district divided each unit into cookie cutter lessons. Each unit began with what the publishing company considered a student-writing sample. The memoir unit, for example, included a story about a trip to the beach. At first glance, it would appear that the publishing company was including a mentor text, but without any degree of analysis, it became nothing more than a writing sample. Writing samples are helpful for students to discern their teacher's expectations of what the finished product should look like, but to be a true

mentor text, time needs to be spent analyzing what techniques the author is using in the writing, and what makes them effective.

After the writing sample, students were given a prompt to consider and a prewriting activity to gather ideas. As a teacher, I appreciated the textbook's incentive to provide my students with a range of prewriting options as this helped students discover which activities worked best for their learning style. However, students and teachers would have more autonomy if the textbook provided multiple prewriting strategies to try. A web may work for a memoir for some students, but perhaps drawing a picture would work better for others. Similarly, a T-chart is helpful in comparative writing, but so is a Venn diagram. By forcing students to complete only one prescribed activity we are limiting students' creativity and engagement.

After the prewriting activity, students began their drafting. With this particular textbook, students were expected to spend a day drafting their writing and then spend another day peer editing their papers before writing a final draft. Each textbook I viewed included their own version of a peer editing form for students to fill out during peer conferences. The goal of the form was to help students stay on task and engage in meaningful discussion about their writing, but they often missed their mark with closed-ended questions such as: did my paper make sense? Were you able to understand my main topic? Does it have a strong introduction? These are all questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" which does not lend itself to any form of discussion. Instead, it becomes a check sheet for teachers to mark as completed.

If the textbooks revamped the way they used their writing samples, they would be able to create a more inclusive writing process for students, such as utilizing the writing samples as mentor texts with student (and teacher) analysis. As teachers guide the students through this process, they are also modeling for students how to ask questions about the writing. When we take the time to ask students what they notice is happening with the text, we are forcing them to slow down and to read like a writer. We ask questions that begin with the words “how” and “what” such as: How does the author communicate emotion? What does the author do with their choice of words? How does that affect the overall message? How would the text change if the author chose harder or easier words? Would this change the voice of the character? If we model these questions for students, then the students in turn can use them during peer conferencing. These types of questions force the students to dig more deeply into what is happening with the text rather than simply editing for conventions, which is what many peer-editing forms ask students to do.

Five years later, I am still observing the same phenomenon with textbook companies in that they are telling teachers what to teach instead of inspiring teachers to create their own lessons in response to their students’ needs. The participants for this project from the Eagle River District use the *Units of Study* series developed by Lucy Calkins in conjunction with the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project. Though this is a strong way for teachers to familiarize themselves with mentor text instruction, its design as curricular series has the potential to fall into the same traps as other textbook series. While the Eagle River district had the freedom to use this series

as a resource, other districts do not have the same amount of autonomy to choose their own lesson material.

Another local school district uses this series as well; however their teachers must follow a strict pacing guide as well as read the script that is included with the series—a script that is designed to demonstrate to teachers what the lesson *could* look like in the classroom. These teachers have zero autonomy in designing or implementing their writing lessons.

A study by Croco and Costigan found that “scripted lessons and mandated curriculum not only deprofessionalized [teachers’] work but also depersonalized the human connections nurtured by more student-centered curriculum and pedagogy” (521). They continue to explain that with scripted lessons, “beginning teachers ... (who were often career changers) found the scripted lessons oppressive and insulting to their developing sense of professionalism” (526). When teachers are given curriculum mandates in which they are not allowed to think for themselves, what message does that send to students?

My study shows that as teachers use mentor text they gain confidence. With mentor texts, though curriculum guides are beginning to surface, in its truest sense the practice is not a program. It is a method of instruction through which teachers and students collectively analyze text, then they synthesize their findings into their own writing. By providing teachers with the autonomy to make their own mentor text—as well as lesson—choices, administrators and curriculum coordinators would be able to instill that sense of trust back into their teachers. Having access to a curricular guide, like the participants in Eagle River, allows teachers to implement mentor texts through

a scaffolded approach. Just as teachers scaffold their students, the curricular guides have the potential to scaffold the concept of mentor texts for teachers. As Cathy and Pamela demonstrated, once they are familiar with mentor texts their confidence with them grew. With this confidence came an increase in autonomy to choose their own mentor texts to ensure a proper curricular fit for their students.

A common mantra used in writing instruction is to ask students to “show, not tell.” We want our students to describe the scenery in their memoir piece so vividly that we feel like we are there when we read it. Jody’s students spent a few days expanding the sentences in their informational writing, stretching them with details to make to help the reader visualize their research topics. The student who researched hissing cockroaches described the perfect kitchen conditions in which they love to nest adding words like “dust filled corners” and “chasing the crumbs under the fridge”—words that send chills down the readers’ spine when envisioning their own homes.

Likewise, we want a student’s rationale for his opinion to be so passionate that we cannot help but agree with the student’s stance. If we truly want our students to show us rather than tell us, then we owe it to them to show them what quality writing looks like rather than tell them what should be in it. Yes, a simile can add a strong dimension to a piece, but if used too heavy handedly, then it can also detract from the piece—especially if forced into the writing simply as an item on a checklist. Pamela’s students wrote convincing arguments for their book talks, naming specific characters or plot points that grabbed their attention using phrases such as “if you like books about trouble makers then be sure to check this one out” or “I like this book because the girl learns how to take care of a puppy just like I did last summer.” Neither of

these statements contains a simile nor any other form of figurative language, but at a first grade level they do capture the essence of the student's voice as they make a personal connection to their choices.

With mentor texts, we are showing quality writing to students. More importantly, we are asking the students to discover with us what it is that makes the writing great. Perhaps we will discover that it does boil down to that carefully placed simile, but this discovery will have a stronger impact on students when they are the ones to discover its use and its effectiveness. This is not to imply that we need to let students drive the entire writing curriculum dependent on what they notice, for there will be times when it becomes necessary for teachers to guide students towards what needs to be noticed. However, we can still make this an authentic learning process for students.

This study has a number of potential audiences; administrators, teacher educators, and ELL teachers would benefit from this study to bolster their writing curriculum and instruction. Administrators should pay attention to mentor texts, for they are a cost effective way to introduce students to quality reading while bolstering their writing repertoire. Not only could school districts save money from avoiding prepackaged curriculums, but they would also build teacher autonomy by letting their teachers choose which mentor texts to incorporate.

A pattern in many school districts is to use a top-down approach to curriculum adoption. Textbook and/or curriculum adoption begins with a curriculum coordinator and possibly includes a few key members of the school improvement team representing the subject area. Together they preview a variety of options, looking for

a magic curricular piece that will make everyone in the district happy. Unfortunately, these decisions arrive without consulting the very teachers who would be using these guides. The rationale behind this procedure is understandable—the district wants its students to share in a common learning experience as they progress. However, when a book or guide is mandated, it removes the teachers’ autonomy, and instead instills a sense of mistrust that the teachers are not capable of making their own curricular decisions.

Bilingual and ELL teachers are another audience that would benefit from using mentor texts. For example, *A Ball for Daisy*²⁰ is a wordless picture that tells the story of a dog, Daisy, who loves to play with her ball at the Dog Park, but one day another dog stole her ball and popped it, making Daisy very sad. The next day, the other dog’s owner brings Daisy a new ball and she is overjoyed. It is a simple story easily inferred from the illustrations, which is a way for ELL students to connect with a story’s plot line. From the pictures, students can easily identify what is happening in the story and write a plotline to go with the book. Perhaps the student can tell the story orally in her second language, but can only write it in her primary language. This is a good starting point for teachers and students as they study literary elements and language acquisition. Not only would students feel honored and supported with their language acquisition process, but they would also feel engaged with the learning when it is a

²⁰ Raschka, Christopher. *A Ball for Daisy*. New York: Schwartz & Wade Books, 2011.

Print.

story they can connect with. It is hard to connect with a fill-in-the-blank worksheet. It is much easier to connect with a story in which the student has a similar experience.

Due to Jody, Cathy, Pamela, and Sarah's openness in sharing their beliefs, as well as their journey towards this practice, they are able to maintain open conversations within their grade levels and buildings about what they believe to be best practice in writing instruction. As each of them noted, their journey took the path of a voluntary professional learning community in which they chose to incorporate mentor texts into their classrooms. They chose this because of one teacher's excitement and dedication to modeling quality instruction and quality writing.

This kind of curricular reform is the best kind of reform, as it is not mandated from the top down, but is implemented due to the teacher's desire to keep an open mind in seeking ways to connect with students. It is important to note that the teachers in this study possessed the autonomy needed to supplement their writing instruction, as they deemed most necessary for their students. It is equally important to note that there are other teachers in the same district who chose to not to incorporate mentor texts. This was their decision, and it supports the autonomous environment. It is the trust constructed between the community, the administration, and the teachers to act in the best interest of students.

The goal of this study is not to mandate the use of mentor texts in all writing classrooms. Rather, the goal is to advocate for modeling as teaching practice, as well as advocating for autonomy. Just as our students engage more with their learning when provided with choices within their assignments, teachers also become more passionate about what they teach when they are able to incorporate what they believe.

This study offers a glimpse of what the theory of mentor texts looks like in practice with the hope that it will inspire teachers to find ways to connect reading and writing for students while building their higher level thinking skills.

Specifically, this study offers four unique points of view of what mentor text instruction looks like in various classrooms and grade levels. As Sarah illustrates, the role of modeling with texts can be easily adapted to meet the needs of the class, subject, and students. Since her fifth graders rotated between three teachers, she is limited as to how much time she can spend with her home group with mentor texts. Hence, she incorporated mentor sentences. Not only does this help her with time limitations, but it also allows her students to conduct a close analysis of one sentence. This analysis is an important skill for her students to have as they head into middle school.

This study also illuminates how students interact with mentor texts. We can see that as they become more familiar with using books as models that they are able to examine the texts critically to discern what qualities of writing the authors use. As illustrated in Pamela and Jody's classrooms, the students are able to analyze the rhetoric the authors use (even if they do not yet understand the word rhetoric) and apply it to their own writing. I can tell a group of students to write a persuasive essay about what their favorite color is and why. I do not think, though, that I would get rich creative reasons for their choices, nor a structurally sound argument, without first analyzing a book such as *Red is Best* with them first.

Recommendations for Further Research

While this study seeks to determine how teachers use mentor texts in their classrooms, and how they choose which ones to implement, it does have its limitations. This study only examines the process of four teachers within one district. It should not be inferred that these findings would be transferrable to other teaching contexts. The information gathered from the four participants is not enough to pinpoint trends in other English Language Arts classrooms. These findings are unique to this district, particularly due to the high level of teacher autonomy and the high participation in professional learning communities. Without those two variables, the findings could change significantly. In fact, the data gathered would make a strong study for the effect of either variable on teacher motivation.

Another variation of this study could include a study on the effectiveness of mentor texts through a review of the students' work in conjunction with the teachers' desired outcomes. Perhaps including students directly through conversation and interaction could determine how they are progressing with mentor texts. Are they seemingly engaged? Are they returning to a particular text as a resource? Are the lessons more meaningful or authentic than they would be if a mentor text were not involved? A portfolio assessment would allow teachers to determine if students are retaining the writing skills that they studied with each mentor text.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct a study at the secondary level. We heard from each participant that it was hard to find suitable mentor texts for nonfiction writing. At the secondary level, would the same issue hold true? Would

studying a mentor text increase students' ability to critically analyze a text? Would it have any impact on their college entry scores? At the secondary level students are expected to write in-depth informational and persuasive essays. Finding a suitable mentor text could prove more challenging depending upon the expectations. On the other hand, if students have an engaging mentor text (whether an example essay or another form of writing,) students could transfer writing skills between genres.

In closing, mentor texts have the potential to play a major role in a students' learning throughout their entire educational journey. While this study illustrated how four teachers embraced the practice in their classroom, it would be beneficial to see how this practice impacts students in other areas of their academic lives. With a broad base of books to incorporate, it is possible to use mentor texts across the curriculum and across grade levels. There are no bounds to what a mentor text can do to stimulate a child's writing and thinking.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Preliminary Interview Questions

Defining terms

1. How would you define a mentor text?
2. How would you define the practice of using mentor texts in the classroom?

Pedagogical practices in place

3. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very little and 10 being very much, how comfortable are you with using mentor texts as a method of writing instruction with your students?
 - a. Where did you first hear about/learn about the concept of mentor texts?
4. What (if any) mentor texts do you use in your classroom?
 - a. What led you to choose that/those particular texts?
5. How often do you use mentor texts in your classroom?

Pedagogical planning

6. Where would you look for mentor text?
7. If you needed a new/different mentor text, what would your process of selecting one look like?

Post-interview questions

In the classroom

1. What is difficult about using a mentor text?
2. How do students react to mentor texts?
 - a. Do they notice what happens in a text?
 - b. Do they ever return to a text on their own?
3. 3. What is your favorite mentor text and why?
4. What percentage of writing instruction would you say mentor texts use in the writing curriculum. Do they lend themselves well to the writing workshop?

Standardization and Reform

5. How do CCSS affect mentor texts?
6. Vice versa?
7. Do you find MT work well with standardization?

Considerations

8. What is the biggest benefit to using mentor texts?
9. What advice would you give to someone just starting out with mentor texts?
10. Any final thoughts about the use of mentor texts.

APPENDIX B

Inductive Codes from Interviews

Author

Book

Chose

Example

Katie Wood Ray

Literature

Lucy Calkins

Noticing

Read

Support

Whole

Word

Writer

APPENDIX C

Inductive Codes from Observations

Address students as “writers” and “authors”

Examine text features

I Do—We Do—You Do

Identify writing strategies in mentor texts

Modeling

Refer back to the text (both teacher and student)

Refer to past units

Slow down/notice

Student attempt

Students examine books

Students work with partners

Teachers models Mentor Texts

APPENDIX D

Word Table of Inductive Code Patterns

Participant: J		Participant: C	
observed (key words used)	# times observed	observed (key words used)	# times observed
"Look at how it's written"	1	[teacher model on easel]	4
"reading like a writer"	1	[uses a mentor text]	7
"See how the authors wrote it"	1	3 facts/fingers	2
[student revising]	7	authors	2
[students browse MT]	2	ending/conclusion/hand	2
[teacher modeled on easel]	8	examples from book	1
[teacher uses student chosen MT]	1	good lead	6
[used MT]	11	information	4
audience	1	MT in small groups	1
biography	1	one way authors use...	3
describing	2	onomatopoeia	2
end/conclusion/closing sentence	4	opinion	3
hand model	3	personal narrative	2
informative/nonfiction	3	punctuation	1
lead	2	small moment	5
notice	7	start with a questions	2
opening sentence/paragraph	1	text features	1
opinion	3	photograph	1
organization	1	map	1
persuade	2	notes/documents	1
planning	2	bold print	1
reasons	5	time of day/describe the day	4
reread MT	1	topic/thumb	2
sequence words	2	writing	2
showing	5		
student sharing	3		
telling	3		
text features	4		
text structure	1		

APPENDIX E

HSIRB Approval Letter


WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY



Human Subjects Institutional Review Board

Date: February 5, 2014

To: Karen Vocke, Principal Investigator
Christy McDowell, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair 

Re: HSIRB Project Number 14-01-31

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled "Mentor Texts Theory into Practice" has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project (e.g., *you must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under "Number of subjects you want to complete the study."*) Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: February 5, 2015

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