

# I Know This To Be True...: Perceptions of Teachers in One Rural Elementary School Regarding Writing Scores

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*This study is set in an elementary school located in a rural, Appalachian area and considers the reasons that teachers attribute to student success on state writing assessments as well as to what reasons they attribute their students' lack of success in moving beyond an average ranking. In considering these reasons, patterns emerge in the data that prove intriguing. For example, one pattern indicates that teachers link the lack of student success to aspects beyond their control. These aspects include student home life, socioeconomic levels, and parental attitudes toward school. The second emerging pattern shows that teachers couple their own teaching practices with student achievement. Such indications have great implications for future studies in that the perceptions of teachers may be key in utilizing the results of standardized assessments.*

At three o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon, teachers in a small, rural, elementary school, located in the Appalachian region of Tennessee, gather in the library for the outcome of the latest standardized test scores. Although the results have yet to be announced, some teachers frown, others glare, a few look at their feet, and one nationally recognized teacher dabs at her eyes. The new principal addresses her faculty and commends them for all of their hard work. While recognizing their dedication she is confused as to the hostility mounting in the room: Some direct their anger toward her and others toward each other. A fourth grade teacher huffs that third grade teachers need to cover more in their curriculum, and on down the line the accusations run.

During the weeks that follow, teachers have grade level meetings, but are reluctant as a group to address any of the targeted areas for improvement by the state department of testing. In individual conferences with the principal, teachers whose students consistently do well on standardized tests explain that they keep their teaching strategies to themselves for fear others will assume they are bragging. Some even contribute their success to luck while insisting that they are "not really that good." On the other hand, teachers whose students have consistently scored low on standardized tests for five or more years find fault with the test, the test procedures, the students, and even the school schedule. In fact, several teachers, who have consistently low test scores over a period of years, use this information as evidence to show that the "low" students are always assigned to their classrooms. I know this to be true because I was their principal.

With such an experience firmly planted within my background, I was intrigued when presented with the opportunity to observe in Kentucky, where the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) has played a major role in not only the reform of writing assessments, but writing practices as well. To closely consider reasons for which teachers, in one elementary school, give for their students' writing success on state mandated tests as well as to reasons why their student writing scores have not moved beyond an average state ranking, I interviewed twenty-seven educators

and observed in a rural Kentucky elementary school. This elementary school, also located in the Appalachian area, had similar demographics to the one where I served as principal.

## **Education Reform in Kentucky**

Research involving literacy and rural students, particularly Appalachian students, is significant because other research involving minority students generally excludes mention of the Appalachian population, concentrating instead on African-American students, English as a Second Language (ESL) students, or students in urban locations. Perhaps the most important of these studies, conducted by Heath (1983), took a close look at language development in an Appalachian setting and provided a foundation to better understand parental and community influence on children's literacy. With this in mind, it is important to note that according to the Appalachian Research Center at the University of Kentucky, parts of Kentucky, many within the Appalachian region, have an illiteracy rate as high as 48% (U.S. Department of Treasury, 1999). Maybe in response to or in spite of this finding, KDE has played a significant role in deciding the following: (a) what writing standards are adopted, (b) how students' writing is assessed, and (c) what teaching practices are employed in teaching writing. These decisions regarding writing are reflected, if not initiated, by the 1990 legislative act known as the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). As a former KERA board member, a member of Governor Wilkinson's task force on education reform, and the Secretary of the Education and Humanities Cabinet in 1988, Foster (1999) argued that the changes prompted by KERA were based on the premise that "we wanted educators to understand that the education policy of Kentucky is to set high standards for all children and then find creative ways to help them meet these high standards regardless of their social, economic, ethnic, or racial background" (p. 65).

With Kentucky recognized as 48<sup>th</sup> in the nation in regards to student achievement, in late 1999, KDE began the process of changing and identifying new writing standards for its K-12 students in 176 school districts and 1,249 schools (Prichard Committee, n.d.; KDE, 2005, Nov.). Out of approximately 40,000 Kentucky teachers, eighty-eight teachers were commissioned to draft, based on current research, written performance standards for the following writing levels, low to high: novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished writers. After a May 2000 survey, in which 32 percent of 3,000 teacher respondents indicated that they were “very comfortable” or “comfortable” with the process, the Kentucky Board of Education introduced the new writing standards throughout the commonwealth (KDE, 2005, June).

This emphasis on writing in Kentucky is reflected in statewide high stakes assessment. Early in the reform

movement, reformers agreed that standardized tests provide limited information on individual students’ writing abilities (Kohn, 1999; McDaniels, 1998; Smith, 1998; Stuhlmann, et al., 1999). Based on research showing that “observed, measurable outcomes may be the least significant results of learning,” reformers advocated a different approach, promoting assessment as an “ongoing component of instruction,” both formative as well as summative (Culham, 2003, p. 11). As a result three forms of writing tests were adopted at the state level: (a) standardized tests at 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grades that include a writing section; (b) 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade on-demand writing questions; and (c) portfolios in kindergarten through fifth grades (Alan, 2001; Hillocks, 2002). Portfolios must include samples of transactive, narrative, and expository writing as well as letter writing, and each writing sample is evaluated based on a rubric developed by KDE (2005, March). (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1**

<p><b>NOVICE, Level 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited awareness of audience and/or purpose</li> <li>• Minimal idea development; limited and/or unrelated details</li> <li>• Random and/or weak organization</li> <li>• Incorrect and/or ineffective sentence structure</li> <li>• Incorrect and/or ineffective language</li> <li>• Errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization disproportionate to length and complexity of writing</li> </ul>
<p><b>APPRENTICE, Level 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some evidence of communicating with an audience for a specific purpose; some lapses in focus</li> <li>• Unelaborated idea development; unelaborated and/or repetitious details</li> <li>• Lapses in organization and/or coherence</li> <li>• Simplistic and/or awkward sentence structure</li> <li>• Simplistic and/or imprecise language</li> <li>• Some errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization that do not interfere with communication</li> </ul>
<p><b>PROFICIENT, Level 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on a purpose; communicates with audience; evidence of voice and/or suitable tone</li> <li>• Depth of idea development supported by elaborated, relevant details</li> <li>• Logical, coherent organization</li> <li>• Controlled and varied sentence structure</li> <li>• Acceptable, effective language</li> <li>• Few errors in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization relative to the length and complexity</li> </ul>
<p><b>DISTINGUISHED, Level 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishes a purpose and maintains clear focus; strong awareness of audience; evidence of distinctive voice and/or appropriate tone</li> <li>• Depth and complexity of ideas supported by rich, engaging, and/or pertinent details; evidence of analysis, reflection, insight</li> <li>• Careful and/or subtle organization</li> <li>• Variety in sentence structure and length enhances effect</li> <li>• Precise and/or rich language</li> <li>• Control of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization</li> </ul>

*Figure 1.* Rubric developed by KDE (2005, March)

Despite Hillocks’ (2002) generally positive presentation of Kentucky’s approach to writing, he and Foster (1999) described serious concerns about the program on the part of

teachers. Some teachers did not consider teaching writing to be a part of their job description and did not have a plan on how to implement the changes recommended by KERA.

In addition, some teachers had little training on how to teach writing. When students did not score well, these teachers tended to find fault with their students' abilities rather than with their own performance (Foster, 1999). Finally, teachers complained that they were required to teach too many subject areas and did not have enough time to devote to writing. In summary, with the support and input of some teachers, KDE planned for the development and implementation of KERA, first at the state level and then at the school level. With KERA, some schools showed consistent scores over time, steady gains, or significant improvement, while other schools continued to struggle with low writing test scores.

## Methods

### *Questions*

This study presents a conundrum. On one hand, teachers in this rural, elementary school are pleased that their students' writing scores are at least in the average range according to state guidelines. On the other hand, these same teachers are frustrated that their students' scores, after five years of KERA implementation, have not exceeded an average rate according to state guidelines. Therefore, this study addressed the following questions:

1. To what reasons do teachers attribute their current student success in writing?
2. What reasons do teachers give for their students not achieving beyond an average ranking on state mandated writing tests?

Because interviews, field notes, and classroom observations can more thoroughly address these research questions by representing the varied perspectives of my research participants, I chose to employ qualitative research methods. Other factors also played a part in my decision to use qualitative means to conduct my study. These factors involved my plan for a prolonged stay in the field and the receptive nature of teachers at Mountain Gap Elementary regarding interviews and classroom observations.

### *Site*

Table 1.

### *Participating Teachers*

<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Teachers</b>
Fifth	Bethany, Mildred, Kathleen
Fourth	Betty, June, Hillary
Third	Ruth, Irma, Robin, Gail
Second	Wilma, Harriet, Carol, Maggie
First	Samantha, Louise, Jeannie, Bernice, Sally
Kindergarten	Allie, Carrie, Kyla

Mountain Gap Elementary (pseudonym) was chosen as the site for this study because it is a school with notable academic success despite its location in the Appalachian region that has traditionally been known for its lack of academic success. In fact, the standardized tests scores of Mountain Gap Elementary are in keeping with most state averages. The school was identified as a potential site through consultations with professors, staff of the Appalachian Center at the University of Kentucky, and classroom teachers.

Mountain Gap is located on the edge of Appalachia, bounded by three other Appalachian counties and one non-Appalachian county. The community surrounding Mountain Gap lies within thirty minutes of a small city of approximately 70, 000. As a result, county-wide statistics may be misleading. The county as a whole includes 93.0% white, 4.4% African American, 1.0% Hispanic or Latino, and 0.3% Native American. The per capita income of the county is \$20,808 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Approximately 75.0% of all residents, twenty-five years or older, have a high school degree. Close to 17% of the population live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Mountain Gap, however, is somewhat less diverse with a lower socio-economic status, based on the population of Mountain Gap Elementary where less than 2% of the population is of a minority background and where 50% of the students receive free and/or reduced lunch rates.

### *Participants*

Faculty participants included twenty-two K-5 classroom teachers as well as a music teacher, a physical education teacher, a guidance counselor, a family resource director, and the principal. The average teaching experience of these teachers is thirteen years. Twenty-five of the twenty-seven faculty members identified themselves as native Kentuckians, including three from the Mountain Gap community. Twenty-five participants are female, and all but one European American. One woman is African American. All teachers in this study are referred to by pseudonyms (see Table 1).

## Data Collection

### *Teacher Interviews*

Individual interviews—all 22 grade level classroom teachers (K-5), the principal, the guidance counselor, the music teacher, the physical education teacher, and the Family Resource Director—provided data on participants' perspectives. As necessary, I followed up with teachers on areas that required clarification. Finally, I conducted additional interviews with two other teachers regarding the schools' response to KERA and the history of their rural community.

### *Analysis*

I collected data from multiple sources through the application of an observation/ interview-based research design. I interviewed teachers, took field notes on classroom observations, attended school meetings, and gathered artifacts. During data collection, I noted *thematic strands* within the interview transcripts and my field notes. Based on each of these thematic strands, I engaged in *initial coding* by categorizing data and then labeling or coding them within each of these strands (Miles and Huberman, 1994). While new categories emerged during subsequent data collection, data reduction or *pattern coding* occurred as I continuously analyzed the data and found that some codes collapsed and others were encompassed in other categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). During this time of data analysis I also engaged in *process coding* which included a systematic search for “negative instances” (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Lecompte and Schensul, 1999, p. 153).

### *Findings*

The findings addressed two questions: (a) What reasons do teachers give for their students' success on standardized writing tests? and (b) What reasons do teachers cite for their students' lack of success in moving beyond an average ranking on standardized writing tests?

#### *Reasons for Students' Lack of Success*

Educators at Mountain Gap Elementary identified the following reasons for their school not yet achieving an above average writing score: (a) students' socio-economic backgrounds, (b) students' abilities, (c) the validity of the test, (d) rigid testing guidelines, and (e) the lack of a strong writing foundation. First, some educators at Mountain Gap Elementary blamed their students' backgrounds as the reason their students writing test scores remain in the average range. The principal of Mountain Gap Elementary, in fact, pointed out that because their school has a large percentage (50%) of its students qualifying for free and reduced lunches, it can be expected that its students' writing

scores will not be as high as scores at some other Kentucky, elementary schools. During this same inservice session, the principal, too, shared that the 2003 school testing data indicated a greater number of children qualifying for free and reduced lunch in the novice category than non-qualifying students in this same category: 19% qualifying students and 13% non-qualifying students. In the distinguished category the reverse is true: 3% qualifying students and 5% non-qualifying students. While acknowledging the statistics, he challenged the faculty not to use these findings as permission to give up on their students.

Second, as Foster (1999) suggested, one idea that resonated with several Mountain Gap Elementary teachers is that the cause for inconsistent test scores lies within the students themselves. As previously pointed out, such a position is a dangerous one because teachers may perceive it as permission to give up on their students. For example, one faculty member says, “I think from year to year you're going to have some students that are not as strong as the groups you've had before,” and another faculty member comments, “...[W]e have groups of children that simply have more challenges than other groups. And that is a fact of education...” During interviews, one of these faculty members argued that it should be expected that some groups of children will perform better than other groups of students since writing is a “God-given ability” or a “God-given talent.” Robin, too, commented that comparing test scores of different groups is unfair and further expounded upon the inconsistency of writing test scores at Mountain Gap Elementary.

Well, [it's] because it's a different group of kids. You can't [compare the scores]. I don't understand how they, why they look at test scores like they do...It's like comparing apples and oranges no matter what. Their IQ...it kind of gives you an idea of what they're probably going to do. And regardless what the government says, if my IQ is 132 and Susie's is 75, you can probably guess that I'm going to score better than Susie, no matter what. So it's not really fair to compare my scores to Susie's scores. What we need to do is look at what I did in third grade, and look at what I did in fourth grade, and then look at what I did in fifth grade and see if every year they're pushing me to my limits and trying to get me to increase my test scores.

Some teachers' comments adhere to the philosophy that some students will learn to write while others may not. In an interview, Mildred comments, “You may get it [writing]. You may not. That's life. It is. It is.” June, too, said: “You know, not everybody is a writer.” This attitude toward students' ability may be best encompassed in a faculty

member's recollection of a story about blueberries. She shared that the principal had e-mailed this following story to the faculty some time ago and that she had heard it at different times at staff development sessions across the state.

I wish I could remember the gentlemen's name, but I can't. The story goes, and it's true. It's a true story. There was a gentleman that was in business. And he was in the blueberry business.

It's just a story that educators have kind of passed around because when the state department first started KERA we were told they were going to organize the education like a business, make it more productive. And the thoughts...on paper sounded pretty good, you know, to organize things like a business. So a lot, I think, like business people got on the bandwagon with that.

So this gentleman started going around to the schools to speak about the productivity of blueberries in his business. And so he was speaking to several educators in this one meeting. And he was getting down the song and dance about productivity and making sure that your product is of superior quality.

He was going through all this and comparing it to education. And he said, and this is not a direct quote, but is something close to what he said, he looked out into the audience and saw this little English teacher with an eyebrow raised on one side. And she looked at him and said 'And sir, so do you grow your own blueberries?' Well, no. They're shipped to us from Maine or wherever. 'Oh,' she said. 'And when you receive your blueberries, sir, and they're not of superior quality', she said, 'what do you do with them? Do you go ahead and use them in your production?' And he said I knew then where this little teacher was going with it. And it was like she had me in the corner. And he said from then on he understood how when you're talking about the productivity in schools that you have to remember...*they ain't all blueberries* [emphasis added].

Third, Mountain Gap Elementary teachers questioned the validity of numerical scores that sometimes fail to reflect the progress and the journey of the individual student writer. Some teachers, like Gail, believe that if the test scores of the same student could be looked at over time, progress would be more easily noted. While Betty agreed that comparing

one group of students' test scores with another group of students' tests scores is not helpful to her as a teacher, she shared the following story to say that no numerical test score could come close to showing the progress that some students make in writing.

A few years ago one little boy wrote about the last thing he ever said to his papaw... I think he smarted off at his papaw. And then he didn't get to tell him he was sorry...[O]ne of the journal entries for that particular year...[was]...if you could say to [something to] somebody...[who] you might not see...again...what would it be? And the little boy wrote that he would say to his papaw...that he was sorry...I saw him not too long ago and he said that he still had that piece... and that he's working on it for his...eleventh grade [portfolio]...[H]e said of course in the fourth grade [he] didn't know a lot about details...[and] that he [had] added a lot more details to it. That made me feel good, that he still remembered a little piece in his journal from fourth grade.

A fourth reason, rigid testing guidelines, was suggested by a fifth grade teacher: "I think it [writing test scores] may have dropped a little bit because the children get stressed out with the emphasis placed on our test scores and writing scores." Betty explained that during the test she can not verbally encourage her students or offer suggestions: "But these are really just babies and a lot of them can't do that [writing] and they need you to tell them that's a good job. And you really can't." As a result, the testing guidelines make the testing environment uncomfortable for some students because it does not provide for the same type of environment in which students are taught.

Sally, a first grade teacher suggested a fifth reason as having to do with an inadequate writing foundation: "And I think sometimes we don't give them [students] the basics enough in the early grades and when they get to fourth grade they [teachers] can't do it all on their own." This same teacher, in another section of her interview, reiterates this point.

I really think it all starts in primary and we've really got to get them being writers in kindergarten and in first grade. And I don't know if we always really take the time. Sometimes I think writing gets put on the back burner. And writing is really an intricate part of learning to read, but sometimes I think it kind of gets slacked off because reading is so hard to teach in first grade. It's really difficult for them.

Finally, the teachers of the rural Mountain Gap Community gave a plethora of other reasons to account for inconsistent writing scores. One reason includes both teacher mobility and the lack of teaching experience:

We had a change...one of our experienced teachers moved onto another district level job and the lady that we had replace her is an excellent teacher...[but] she was a second year teacher so she had not had the experience. And that could be a factor.

Another teacher felt that the human error might be a factor in inconsistent test results:

I feel for one thing we shouldn't always focus on blaming the teacher or the students of that year... I look at the test and the reliability of the people who score. There's always personal error.

A first grade teacher suggested that not enough time has passed to see the effects of new teaching strategies.

Well, I think that the new techniques we've started using and all the rubrics and the things that we've started using, I don't think it's reflecting that because we're still using a lot of new approaches. I think in three years you'll see that it raises test scores. I just don't think it's reflecting yet.

Another primary teacher commented that there are too many curricular foci:

...[T]hey'll emphasize, the county, they'll want you to do better in reading one year because the reading scores are down, so you really put a lot of effort to reading whereas you should put it into writing as well, but you spend more time with reading and something else gets put on the backburner.

#### *Reasons for students' success*

While all of the reasons that Mountain Gap Elementary teachers gave for inconsistent scores may be relative, the breadth of concerns indicates that teachers may feel overwhelmed and, as a result, even indecisive on what writing practices best prepare students for KERA writing tests. Throughout the interviews, however, teachers gave credit to KERA as being the determining factor in the overall success of their students on state assessments, particularly on state mandated writing tests.

Jeannie commented, "Wow...You know, before [Kentucky Education Reform Act, KERA] we worked on sentence structure and we really didn't do a whole lot of writing." In fact, before KERA, the main purpose of writing appears to have focused on good grammar, correct spelling, and neat handwriting. Harriett recalls her own writing

experiences pre-KERA: "...grammar and punctuation and that kind of thing was extremely important when I was in school." Gail sums up the pre-KERA purpose of writing: "...[I]t was just something that we were going to paste on the wall outside for good looks when the superintendent came." Carol, too, alludes to the idea that students pre-KERA did not feel ownership of their writing. In the following statement she comments on how writing was teacher directed and not student initiated:

The teacher did the corrections and you recopied it. And you didn't really have a part in the corrections. It was like you do what you think and then she'll tell you how it is. And then you recopy it and if you recopy it exactly like she does it, then it's right.

Robin further suggested, during the pre-KERA period, the processes of pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing were not taught. In the following quote, she also emphasized how writing was equated with copying or handwriting.

I think it's wonderful, the writing part, because when I was in school we never, never wrote anything unless we copied it from an English book or something like that.

Betty, an upper grade teacher, further expounded upon reasons for their students' success in writing: "We're now teaching writing as a process and actually spending more time on it." Gail also noted that KERA has encouraged teachers to examine their own familiarity with the processes of writing.

You know, I don't really think I learned the true writing process until I was in college...I just wasn't taught that, and I can see where this is going to benefit the children in the long run. And that's the one good, one of the better things that have come out of KERA.

Because KERA encourages teachers to attend to process, Wilma reflected on how teachers have refined their expectations for student writing:

And when we first started teaching we had workbooks and if the students could just write a word in the blank we thought they were brilliant. And then we got to where if they could write a sentence by the middle of second grade they were doing great. And now the first day of [school]... we want them to come in and write a paragraph or a story so [student] writing has really improved in the first few years [of KERA] because of our expectations.

Another teacher noted that because KERA forced her to examine her teaching practices, she has seen progress in her students' writings: "It (my teaching practices) really changed a lot. So, it has really helped me to focus, focus on more what the students' needs are in writing, and I've seen such an improvement with the children over the years." Robin, too, agreed that a greater emphasis is now being placed on writing: "Well, I do think that the writing portfolios require teachers to teach the writing and maybe they [teachers] weren't before [KERA], they weren't teaching the writing like they should be." A fourth grade teacher further commented that the requirements of KERA help her to focus on writing: "...I think the portfolios are really a good thing. It makes us focus on writing. And we can't get any better if we don't continuously do it, but I think probably that without those requirements a lot of us would let it go by the wayside." Another teacher commented on the amount of time that they spent on writing before the implementation of KERA: "We did very little writing before KERA. Really. We thought that reading was the way to go and we didn't necessarily include writing a great deal in our reading."

In considering changes brought about by KERA, Foster (1999) reported that some teachers are resistant to the idea of including writing as "part of their academic assignment" (Hillocks, 2002, p. 184). However, some teachers at Mountain Gap Elementary School believe that the integration of writing in all subject areas is necessary. One faculty member, for example, commented on the need to include writing across the curriculum:

One reason [that we teach writing] is that the students don't get the experience of writing about the arts in their classes because they're so busy working on other assignments in other areas, like science and social studies. We have to do so because they're required to do writing about ...[the arts] on their state tests. There is a greater emphasis being put on us to do writing in every class – even p.e., in gym. Everybody does a little writing.

Another faculty member commented that while students at Mountain Gap Elementary can talk about things that they are learning, it is sometimes difficult for them to put their learning into words. This teacher further explained that students need as many opportunities as possible to practice expressing themselves in writing.

[We teach writing in special area classes]...because our kids have a tendency at our school to be able to talk about things and speak about things and understand concepts, but they can't put it into words. They can't write about it. They can perform it, but they can't write about it. So we're trying to get them to

the point where they can express themselves, writing wise.

More to the point, because at least one of the questions on the fourth grade writing exam requires that students discuss their understanding of music, art, and/or movement, some special area teachers schedule time, during physical education and music classes, for students to practice their writing. These teachers believe such efforts will be rewarded by increased test scores. In the following quote, one faculty member commented on the results of providing opportunities for students to specifically practice their writing skills in special subject areas.

We thought it might help with our test scores. The kids could do anything that I had them to do in here and they could play instruments, you know, clap on beat, and stuff in the music room, but they couldn't express themselves, they couldn't write about it. So we thought if we practiced writing just once a week, maybe that would help. And our arts and humanities scores did go up just a little bit!

June, a fourth grade teacher, commented on some of the changes that she has made in accommodating KERA writing standards, particularly in the way of grammar:

I've said it before, but the way I was taught, you know, grammar was always a big thing, and not that it's not now, but you don't focus on grammar. You bring that in when you see the need from the students. You know, if they're not doing subject verb agreement, then you do a little mini-lesson or maybe more than a mini lesson (she laughs), but that's an area that you focus on and you adapt your lesson to the needs of your students.

Another upper grade level teacher commented that, because of KERA, she now understands and teaches her students that "there's different purposes for writing. There's different audience." Another faculty member, too, specifically credits this change in teaching writing for the purpose of identifying purposes and audiences with KERA mandates: "And because they [students] write for their [state mandated] portfolios, you know...we focus on...the purpose, the audience." However, teaching writing with a redefined purpose that does not focus on proper grammar usage was not easily accepted by some upper grade level teachers.

June, too, shared that she took additional college courses to help her to become a more effective teacher of writing. In the following excerpt from an interview, June reflected on her personal growth in writing:

They've (teaching strategies) definitely changed because the first year I was in fourth grade, you know, I did the writing portfolios I basically had no idea

what I was doing. I then took the class with Dr. Williams that next summer and I just wanted to go back to my students and apologize and say, 'I am so sorry.' Because with that class, you know, you understand what they mean by purpose, what they mean by audience. You understand so much more about what the portfolios are looking for. And it's completely changed the way I taught writing.

June, also, pointed out another effect of KERA mandated state writing assessments: "...I think I probably would not be as driven which would probably mean that I wouldn't drive my students as hard as I do sometimes in their writing."

Although teachers contribute their success to KERA, this explanation is far from simplistic. They give evidence that KERA has required that they do the following: spend more time on writing, teach the writing process, become more familiar with best practices, engage in workshops and seminar, acquire more training, change their philosophy regarding the teaching of writing.... In other words, teachers say that KERA has made the difference, but the evidence shows that the teachers have made the difference by addressing KERA mandates.

### Conclusions

Although Mountain Gap elementary teachers have a multitude of reasons for their student writing scores not moving beyond an average rating, when acknowledging that their students are at least as an average level in writing on state assessments, they specifically mention KERA. Although these teachers verbally credit KERA with their student success in writing, the more subtle indication is that by actively choosing to embrace KERA mandates, they grew as professionals in the area of teaching writing and ultimately impacted their own student success. This consideration provides interesting implications for future studies. These implications, for example, include the differences in teacher attitudes and actions in lower performing, rural schools and higher performing rural schools. Could it be, that in some lower performing schools, teachers do not move beyond casting blame outside themselves and, therefore by default, only focus on issues that they have little chance to control or effect? Could it be that in higher performing schools, teachers, although aware of factors outside their realm of control, choose to concentrate on what they can effect – such as their own attitudes and teaching? Wheelan and Kesselring (2005) suggested that there is a strong link between teamwork and student success, especially in lower socioeconomic schools. Furthermore, Green (1992) noted that teachers who hold positive attitudes regarding tests are more likely to be successful in instruction linked to these tests.

The findings from future research may, in turn, help with a design to disburse standardized test results that assist teaching faculties in focusing on what they can control – their teaching expertise. Because test scores hold a negative connotation among many faculties, learning how to disburse testing information, while helping teachers to acknowledge external factors beyond their control and yet maintain high expectations, is a worthy and timely topic. I know this to be true because I was once a teacher...a principal...and now a university assistant professor in a rural area where state mandated assessments are still a matter of concern – and frustration – in many of our elementary schools.

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