Action Research: The Effects of Self-Regulation Strategy Development on the Quality of Student Written Work

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Part A: Wondering Question

   I am a sixth grade teacher at Wheeler Middle School, a school in central Oahu that

primarily serves military dependent children. As a result of their circumstances, these students

face a high level of transiency throughout their academic careers. Whether the transiency is their

movement or the movement of their peers or family members, they have very unstable lives and

circumstances. As a result, a lot of the students that I am working with have had varied

educational experiences, with different systems and types of teachers. I have students who have

attended schools in Kansas, Texas, Washington, and Hawaii, all in the six years that they have

been students. This inconsistency in their education is reflected in the quality of their writing.

While I have some students who have tested as college and career ready, I have other students

who have a 250 lexile score (1050 lexile is on grade level, 250 is about first or second grade) and

little to no concrete methods for creating quality writing. Initially, I set out to answer the

question, how can I teach my students to accurately write their thoughts to create coherent

written work. At the general level, this is ideally what I am aiming for. I find that my students

can often explain what they are trying to say to me in a very effective way, but when prompted to

write their thoughts down, they get lost in translation. I felt that this was due to a lack of

procedure and process for writing skills. Upon speaking to my professor, Professor Bingaman,

about a possible revision of my wondering, I decided that I wanted to focus my wondering even

further, narrowing it to "how can I improve my students' mechanics in their writing?" This

wondering was a lot more specific and a lot more measurable and I felt that it was a question that

I could research and answer with ease. When I set out to find information on this topic, I

searched for keywords such as *writing strategies in middle school grades, improving writing of*

middle school age children, improving writing skills, and writing improvement in middle school

students. A recurring topic that I found as I was researching was the concept of self-regulated

strategy development, or SRSD, this was an all-encompassing idea for explicitly teaching strategies to students so that they can monitor their writing. As I read more about SRSD, I felt that this was something that was actionable, measureable, and achievable, that I could present to my students. My wondering is now "how can self-regulation strategies improve the quality of my students' writing?" For my action research, I am going to explore the use of self-regulation strategies by students after explicit instruction and direction, to improve their writing skills.

Part B: Literature Review

When I first set out to answer my wondering I was looking for an answer to the question "how can I improve the mechanics of my students' writing?" As I explored literature on the topic of improving writing skills for my middle school students, a recurring term was popping up called Self-Regulated Strategy Development, or SRSD. As I read more about SRSD, I started to realize that it was not only an actionable, measurable tool that I could use to improve my students' mechanics, but it was also a tool that I could use to boost their confidence in their abilities, and their abilities to transition into self-directed learners. Through my search for more information on SRSD I found three articles that helped to explain what exactly SRSD is, and how it has been implemented and studied in the classrooms of other middle school educators. Two of the articles focus on using SRSD to improve the skills of low-achieving students or students with learning disabilities, the other is a general assessment of the impact of SRSD on students' writing skill improvement.

Steve Graham, Karen R. Harris, and Linda H. Mason's 2011 article titled *Self-Regulated Strategy Development for Students With Writing Difficulties* gives the reader a basic understanding of what SRSD is and why it is a useful resource for improving students' writing abilities. Graham et. al describe how "Students with writing difficulties often struggle with the

planning, composing, and revising skills required for effective writing… SRSD has had significant and meaningful effects among students with learning disabilities (LD) in both elementary and secondary settings" (p. 20). The realization of the different steps that go into the creation of the writing, and how I would have to find a way to approach my students' writing helped me to realize that the concept of SRSD is one that I could see being effective in my classroom. The purpose of SRSD is to increase students' awareness of the process of writing and having them employ metacognizance to their writing processes. This article describes the concept of SRSD to be any strategy that is structured and practiced with students to improve their abilities in writing and to have the students be cognizant of the process of writing and what they are doing step by step. This will improve students' writing abilities due to their increased understanding of the writing process and their ownership of their work. It is important to note, however, that even in the context of the classroom and the movement towards students' increased comfort with SRSD and strategies to increase writing skills, the students need to feel assured in what they are doing and develop consistency and confidence in their writing abilities. This article closes with the quote:

> "It is important that students are not provided a more advanced stage of strategy instruction until they have mastered needed skills. Writing mechanics such as grammar, spelling, and handwriting should not be explicitly taught or remediated during prewriting, planning, and composing and are best saved for revision. Teachers should avoid overemphasizing student errors. "(p. 26)

This is important to note because while we are working with students to improve their skills, and assessing their abilities, we are also helping our students to build skills and confidence in their writing abilities and we need to make sure that we are giving our students as much non-

judgmental writing practice and emphasizing that the work they are doing is for self-recognition and improvement.

The 2009 article *Teaching Low-Achieving Students to Self- Regulate Persuasive Quick Write Responses* by Linda H. Mason, Elizabeth Benedek-Wood, and Lauren Valasa, discusses how SRSD can be effective in improving writing skills when employed through quick writes using SRSD strategies to have students "(a) [reflect] on prior knowledge, (b) [recall] specific information, (c) [summarize] content, or (d) [express] thoughts, opinions, reactions, or questions" (p. 304). When employing these strategies to written work, and enforcing the requirement that students be metacognizant of what they are doing by reflecting, summarizing, and reacting to other works and their own works. Employing SRSD strategies to quick writes can be beneficial to improving students' confidence in their writings. Mason et. al describe how "By eliminating rules for writing mechanics, students are encouraged to write freely by focusing on the given topic rather than on writing conventions. Additionally, a quick write may appeal to students who struggle with writing more than writing an essay would because the activity entails writing for only a short amount of time" (p. 304). While quick writes and a lack of required writing convention may appeal to students, this may only further the gap between the students who are confident, able writers, who will trend towards writing much more than their peers who are less confident and less able. This is where applying an SRSD strategy to writing skills can increase the abilities of all students to write at a more advanced level. Beyond quick writes that can be low-pressure but low-rigor, SRSD strategies have also been proven to be effective in persuasive writing. Mason et. al discuss how "SRSD instruction has been proven effective in teaching persuasive writing for a range of writing tasks from quick writes to essays (Harris et al., 2003; Mason & Cramer, 2008)" (p. 305). Persuasive essays are one of the primary tools that we

are focusing on in my sixth grade class due to the necessity of improving students' abilities to make claims and back them up with evidence whether that is in an argumentative, persuasive, or expository form. SRSD articles have an array of options for strategies that can be used for improving students' writing skills.

Steve Graham's 2009 article *Teaching Young Students Strategies for Planning and Drafting Stories: The Impact of Self-Regulated Strategy Development* focuses on the actual implementation and process of teaching the students how to self-regulate and develop their

Table 1
Strategies for Planning and Composing

Stories	W-W-W, What = 2, How = 2
	Who is the main character?
	When does the story take place?
	Where does the story take place?
	What does the main character want to do?
	What does the character do next?
	How do the characters feel?
	How does the story end?
Persuasive for developing writers	5-Part TREE
	Topic sentence
	Reasons: 3 or more
	Ending
	Examine your TREE parts
Persuasive for older writers	8-Part TREE
	Topic sentence
	Reasons: 3 or more
	Explanations for each reason
	Ending
Persuasive for adolescents	10-Part TREE
	Topic sentence
	Reasons: 3 or more
	Explanation for each reason
	a counter reason and refute
	Ending

strategies. Strategies for self-regulation are introduced and explained throughout most literature on SRSD. The table on the left from the 2011 Graham et. al article shows some examples of effective strategies for planning and composing written work using self-regulation methods. Steven Graham's 2009 article identifies how "with students in grades 4-12, explicit and systematic strategy instruction had a strong impact on improving the overall quality of students' papers" (p. 323). In teaching strategies to students, it is important to focus on the end result and the purpose of the writing assignment, "with SRSD, students are explicitly taught writing strategies for accomplishing specific writing tasks, such as composing a story or persuasive essay (Harris & Graham, 1996, 1999)" (p. 324). It's not enough to just teach the strategies, but you need to have consistency and maintenance in these strategies. The end goal is to have students constantly employing their self-regulation strategies for writing, " procedures for promoting maintenance and generalization are embedded throughout the instructional regime" (p. 324).

After explicitly teaching SRSD strategies to students to self-regulate, specifically focused on the POW strategy "(*pick my idea* (i.e., decide what to write about, *organize my notes* (i.e. organize possible writing ideas into a writing plan), and *write and say more* (i.e. make changes to increase the amount that is written)" (p. 327), "SRSD-instructed students' stories were longer, schematically stronger… and qualitatively better" (p. 327). The results of Graham's study show that explicitly teaching these strategies, and teaching them in the ways that he describes, will be effective in increasing students' abilities to create better-quality written work.

Steve Graham, Elizabeth Benedek-Wood, Karen R. Harris, Linda H. Mason, and Lauren Valasa are names that are frequently attached to research on SRSD. The work that they have done to not only define and carry out the research on self-regulation strategies, but to explicitly explain to educators how to carry out effective self-regulation strategy education to our students, has been invaluable information for those of us who are aiming to improve the quality of our students' writing. The articles that I reviewed discussed how these self-regulation strategies can be useful for students with learning disabilities or low-achieving students, how these strategies can be applied to written work from low-stress quick writes to high-quality persuasive pieces and multi-paragraph essays, and how exactly to teach these strategies and the proven efficacy of the strategies. Employing these strategies in my classroom will help me to answer my wondering and help me to improve the quality of my students' written work.

Part C: Investigating and Analyzing Data

Figure 1   POW + TREE Mnemonic Chart

POW
P   **Pick my idea**
O   **Organize my ideas**
W   **Write and say more**

TREE
T   **Topic sentence—"What do I believe?"**
The topic sentence, like the trunk of a tree, supports a belief.

R   **Reasons—3 or more**
        Why do I believe this?
        Will my readers believe this?
        Do I have a counterargument?
        Does it change my belief?

E   **Explain reasons**
        Say more about each reason.

Reasons and explanations, like the roots of a tree, provide the base for a belief.

E   **Ending—wrap it up right!**
Like the earth wraps around the tree, making it secure, an ending secures a belief.

The literature on SRSD has been very useful in helping me to identify what strategies I can and will use. One of the strategies that is repeated throughout the literature is the ideas of POW + TREE. For the planning stage of the writing, using POW, students are taught to **p**ick an idea, **o**rganize their thoughts, **w**rite and say. When prompted to do the actual writing, using the TREE pneumonic, the students are very deliberate in their writing and have a topic sentence, three or more reasons, explain the reasons, and wrap it up with an ending. This is a process that we have passively explained throughout the quarter, using the concept of a perfagraph, where there is a P1 sentence or topic sentence, P2 sentences which are the support, and a P4 sentence which wraps it up. In seventh grade, the students will be adding P3 sentences, which is explicit citations. For my sixth graders, this strategy of POW + TREE could be very useful for the development of my students' writing skills. The idea of SRSD is that it is a pneumonic device that we are teaching the students to use every time that they write. This is where the metacognizance will come into play with my students. Quarter 2 will start on October 14, that will give me ten weeks to introduce the concepts, have them memorize them, practice explicitly using the strategies with their written work, and to see them internalize these strategies. Over the course of those ten weeks I am going to be able to collect the templates that my students are filling in, test

them on their internalization of the pneumonic devices by having them recite them to me, I will see their creation of the templates for themselves, and I will be able to compare this data and their final pieces of written work to the initial written work that the produce. As persuasive essays are the style of essay that we have been focusing on most in my sixth grade curriculum, I will give them a prompt for writing a persuasive essay using the format that we are teaching them in sixth grade, and compare this to what they create at the end of the ten weeks.

Part D: Sharing Action Research

As I have learned from my research on the process of drafting a wondering, and discussions that I have had with peers about the topic, collaboration is one of the most instrumental affecters for teacher improvement. At my school, we are fortunate enough to have scheduled planning time throughout the day. I am also fortunate enough to have a few other Teach for America teachers who are going through the Johns Hopkins program at Wheeler, who understand the assignments and what I am going to work on for this class. These people, my sixth grade peers and curriculum coaches, and my coworkers who are going through the JHU program, have already actively participated in aiding my understanding and improvement of my wondering and how I can achieve it. As my sixth grade curriculum is still developing at my school, and systems are still in flux, I am seeing this as an opportunity to incorporate a system that could be used grade-wide to improve student writing skills. The research shows that by having students self-reflect and self-monitor their writing processes, they can improve their writing skills, producing more substantial work, using better mechanics, and stronger arguments.

Every Monday and Thursday sixth grade meets for structured teacher planning time, or STPT. This is time that is set aside for us to plan out our curriculum day by day and break down the curriculum from the macro to the micro. During this time, I will discuss my progress with my SRSD in my classroom and get input from my fellow teachers on how else I could be using SRSD to improve my students' writing skills. In addition to this STPT time on Monday and Thursday, we have free planning time for two periods on Tuesday and Friday, and one hour on Wednesday, all times that we can use to meet with our fellow teachers. I have a combination of new TFA teachers, and veteran teachers, who are all determined to help me become a successful teacher. There is a mutual understanding that collaboration is imperative for any job, especially education. We will be taking full advantage of the variety of teachers that we have and variety of strategies, and I will be benefiting from every opportunity I am given to discuss and improve with the help of my fellow teachers and administrators.

Part E: Timeline for Implementation

Data Collection:

I will use different sources of data that I will collect throughout this process. I will collect documents/ artifacts/ student work throughout the process of introduction of self-regulation strategies, this will mostly look like templates and outlines constructed by the students to help them to focus on their work, as well as to see the use of the strategies. My students have taken surveys in my class in the past to assess their understanding of material so I will use google forms to create surveys to give to my students to assess their understanding of the work. Another part of the strategy development process for the

students is that they retain and memorize the strategies. Documenting students' retention

of the strategies by video taping them could give me data to document their progress

throughout the development process, although I do recognize that this could skew that data

due to a level of embarrassment or similar affecting their affective filter. I will also journal

on a weblog on my website, http://chelseasinglehurst.weebly.com/teacher-inquiry-

process, to describe my thoughts and discoveries throughout this process. The most

relevant information will be a combination of the templates, student surveys, and my

reflections on their progress. By having different sources of data for triangulation, I can

focus in on drawing the same conclusion from different sources and types of information.

Calendar:

Week	Procedure
1 10/14-17	• Pre-Assessment survey of writing strategies that they are familiar with • Practice with writing • Students free write about the writing process for them and what they do when they are assigned work to write
2 10/20-24	• Introduction to POW-TREE writing strategy and templates • Practice of internalization • Practice of POW (outlining)
3 10/27-31	• Development of POW • Data collection of template usage and outline creation
4 11/3-7	• Introduction of self-regulation ex: "That was a good sentence!" "good word choice", "this could have more detail in it" • Data collection of template and outline usage and application of self-regulation and self-encouragement
5 11/10-14	• Continuation of POW and outline usage • Introduction of TREE and paragraph/ body development • Data collection of outline transfer to written work
6 11/17-21	• Continuation of POW and TREE strategies • Data collection of student internalization of POW, ability to name the steps and why they do them
7 11/24-26	• Continuation of POW and TREE strategies • Data collection of student use of templates to create written work • Data collection of student internalization of TREE, ability to name the steps

	and why they do them
8 12/1-5	• Data collection continues, by this point students have been using the POW TREE templates to demonstrate their progress and understanding of the writing process and self-regulation
9 12/8-12	• Assessment of Data • Compilation of final paper
10 12/15-19	• Present final paper

Reference List:

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