



## Improving quick writing performance of middle-school struggling learners

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### ABSTRACT

Writing performance of 279 seventh- and eighth-grade students in four urban charter schools was evaluated in comparison group pretest/posttest quasi-experimental study. Thirty-three students, identified by cut scores on a standardized fluency measure, received supplemental one-to-one Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) instruction for persuasive quick writing. Fifty-one students with scores below the cut participated as an eligible non-treatment comparison; 195 students with scores above the cut participated as a non-eligible comparison group. All students' written responses were evaluated before and after the intervention. Results of repeated measures analysis indicated that students in treatment (additional instruction time + SRSD + planned practice-testing) significantly improved quick writing performance after instruction when compared to pretest performance, and when compared to eligible comparison, with *large* effect sizes for number of persuasive elements and organizational quality and *medium* effects for persuasive quality. When compared to non-eligible comparison, students in treatment had significantly higher scores for organizational quality (*large* effects) and persuasive quality (*small* effects).

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### 1. Introduction

Many adolescents struggle to demonstrate achievement gains in writing (Graham & Perin, 2007). For these students, writing within both complex and simple formats is challenging due to a lack of the self-regulation skills and cognition necessary for producing a final written product (Harris, Graham, MacArthur, Reid, & Mason, 2011). The lack of writing skills for expressing ideas and demonstrating knowledge negatively impacts struggling students' ability to maximize content learning opportunities (Mason, Reid, & Hagaman, 2012). In secondary classes, for example, teachers often use writing-to-learn techniques such as quick writes to provide students an opportunity to recall, clarify, and question information, and to assess student understanding (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Green, Smith, & Brown, 2007). With the focus on writing across the curriculum as stated in the Common Core State Standards Initiatives (CCSS, 2012), students' ability to express ideas in a variety of writing formats is critical. Evidence-based writing instruction with additional individualized support would be expected for low-achieving adolescent writers (Graham & Harris, 2013).

Instruction for struggling adolescent writers, therefore, should direct students in "how" to think about the learning process as

well as "what" to think so that expression of knowledge and opinions is effectively facilitated (Schmidt, Deshler, Schumaker, & Alley, 1988). Fortunately, programs of research in interventions for struggling adolescent writers have provided frameworks for effective instruction (Graham & Perin, 2007; Mason & Graham, 2008). Strategy instruction in writing, for instance, can assist students by teaching them to break writing tasks into manageable subtasks. Instruction that includes an emphasis on teaching and developing skills in self-regulation improves students' self-awareness and control (Harris et al., 2011; Wong, 1980). Best practice includes scaffolded instructional sessions with planned guided and independent practice to support students' independence over time and to foster generalization (Harris, Graham, Brindle, & Sandmel, 2009). Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) instruction is one established approach for teaching writing that explicitly focuses on teaching strategies across the writing genres and tasks commonly used in the secondary classroom (Baker, Chard, Ketterlin-Geller, Apichatabutra, & Doabler, 2009; Graham, Harris, & McKeown, in press; Graham & Perin, 2007).

#### 1.1. SRSD

SRSD was designed to promote independent use of task specific writing strategies by teaching students cognitive and self-regulation strategies so they can better understand and regulate the writing process (Harris, 1982). Theories supporting effective strategy instruction (Baker, Gertsen, & Scanlon, 2002; Pressley & Harris,

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2006), meta-cognition (Harris et al., 2009), cognitive-behavior modification (Meichenbaum, 1977), self-regulation (Harris et al., 2011), motivation (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007), and Vygotsky's (1986) social origin of self-control and zone of proximal development influence SRSD instructional procedures. Flower and Hayes' (1980) iterative writing process model establishes the foundation for addressing students' deficits in planning and organizing, drafting, revising, and editing.

To facilitate low-achieving students strategy acquisition, six instructional stages are implemented throughout SRSD instruction: (1) develop background knowledge; (2) discuss it; (3) model it; (4) memorize it; (5) provide guided practice; and, (6) independent practice (Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2003). In SRSD, responsibility for strategy use and self-regulation of the writing process is gradually shifted from the teacher to the student by scaffolding instruction (Vygotsky, 1986). Instruction is criterion-based rather than time-based; students must demonstrate they have mastered a particular stage or procedure before they are allowed to move to the next phase of instruction. Students' independent strategy use is supported over time and context, booster sessions are provided as needed (Graham & Harris, 2003). SRSD fosters teacher-student dialoguing throughout the writing process and for evaluating written performance (Englert et al., 1991; Wong, Butler, Ficzere, & Kuperis, 1996). SRSD supports the self-regulated and motivational processes required to develop effective written text (Boscolo & Gelati, 2007).

In SRSD instruction four self-regulation processes – goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement – are explicitly taught and supported to meet students' individual needs (Mason, Harris, & Graham, 2013). Self-regulation that addresses a writer's environment and behavior, and is personalized, is fundamental to the writing process (Zimmerman & Reiserberg, 1997). Effective goals, such as goals with specificity, proximity, and challenge, are established with students to assist them in understanding the genre specific task to be completed and to foster effort and motivation (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Harris et al., 2011). Self-monitoring works in hand with goal setting and occurs when a student assesses whether or not the goal has been achieved and then records the result (Reid, 1996). Six basic self-instructions are used to support writing: (1) problem definition; (2) focus of attention and planning; (3) strategy use; (4) self-evaluation and error correcting; (5) coping and self-control; and, (6) self-reinforcement (Meichenbaum, 1977). Personalized self-instruction helps students regulate performance throughout the writing process. Self-reinforcement occurs when a writer selects a reinforcer or covertly self-rewards for meeting goals.

The processes for teaching strategy acquisition and self-regulation in SRSD are flexible and can be adapted to target specific writing tasks and genres (Graham & Harris, 2003). As an example, SRSD for POW (Pick my ideas, Organize my notes, Write and say more) + TREE (Topic sentence, Reasons – three or more, Examine, Ending) was designed to provide two strategies to facilitate student learning of skills required to write persuasively (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Friedlander, 2008; Mason et al., 2012). The first strategy, POW, is a general three-step planning strategy: Pick an idea or side of a topic, Organize ideas, and Write and say more by modifying and improving the original plan. TREE helps students formulate basic elements of persuasion: (1) write a convincing Topic sentence; (2) write at least three Reasons why you believe; (3) write Explanations to support each reason; and, (4) wrap it up with a good Ending sentence. The strategy has been adapted for young developing writers in second and third grade (Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Harris, Graham, & Mason, 2006) and for adult writers studying for a high school equivalency exam (Berry & Mason, 2012).

Results of meta-analysis indicate that SRSD significantly improves writing quality when compared with control conditions

(Graham, 2006; Graham et al., in press; Graham & Perin, 2007). Studies in this review focused on writing in an untimed context. Recent initiatives (CCSS, 2012) state that students should be taught to write in both short and extended time frames. To address this need, and a need expressed by special education teachers for improving students' writing performance for the inclusive content classroom, researchers sought to develop SRSD instruction with a focus on timed writing. It was hypothesized that students would learn to write within a specified time frame when (a) taught to apply a strategy to a writing task; (b) taught to use self-regulated learning procedures such as setting a goal to attend to writing a paper with genre elements within a specific time frame and to self-monitor performance in meeting that goal; and (c) provided practice for independent writing (i.e., testing performance, self-evaluating performance, teacher-student dialoguing) over time (Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2011).

## 1.2. SRSD for quick writes

Quick writes are 10-min short constructed responses to a question related to a specific topic. Quick writes support content learning by presenting a non-threatening, informal, and brief writing activity for students (Fisher & Frey, 2012). To encourage free expression, writing mechanics are not taken into account (Harvey & Bizar, 2005). Quick writes require students to think about and explain what they know through written reflection (Mitchell, 1996; Wood & Harmon, 2001) and can be implemented for a variety of purposes. In a Health lesson on safety, for example, students may write: (a) an informative response to "Describe Important Skateboarding Safety Rules"; (b) a narrative response to "Tell about a time when you or someone you knew had an accident on a skateboard"; or, (c) a persuasive response to "Should students your age wear helmets when riding a skateboard?". Quick writes benefit students' comprehension and vocabulary by encouraging students to make connections through the writing process and can help with assessment of student learning at the beginning, middle, or end of a lesson (Mason, Benedek-Wood, & Valasa, 2009).

Researchers have documented that persuasive quick writes, in particular, present a number of problems for struggling adolescent writers (Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2011). This is not surprising, given that students' persuasive writing skills develop slowly compared to writing skills related to other genre structures (Applebee & Langer, 1983). When presented with a persuasive quick write, for example, many students will write with minimal attention to developing a thesis statement (Mason, Kubina, Valasa, & Cramer, 2010). These struggling writers pay little attention to supporting their positions with detail or effective reasons. They do not elaborate or explain; therefore, their writing lacks substance. When asked to state an opinion, struggling writers often state both sides of the argument, demonstrating no clear stance (Mason, Kubina, & Hoover, 2011; Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2011). However, positive effects on writing performance have been noted when students with high incident disabilities such as learning disabilities (LD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) are provided explicit instruction and an instructional context that supports quick writing development (Mason & Kubina, 2011).

SRSD for persuasive quick writing, as a supplemental intervention (i.e., writing instruction that is in addition to students' regular writing instruction), was developed and tested in five multiple-baseline single-case design studies with middle and high school students with disabilities (Hoover, Kubina, & Mason, 2012; Mason, Kubina, & Hoover, 2011; Mason, Kubina, & Taft, 2011; Mason et al., 2010). In each study, instruction ranged from five to seven 30-min lessons for strategy acquisition plus one to five 10-min lessons for independent practice in using the POW + TREE strategy for a

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