Exploring the use of Primary Argumentative Documents to Teach Argumentative Writing

By

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Abstract

Existing research in the field has pointed to the short term and long term importance of learning argumentative writing, as well as the complexities of the genre that makes it challenging for students to understand. This study investigates the efforts made by Ontario teachers who, consistent with existing literature in the field, have integrated primary, argumentative documents in to their instruction of written argumentation. It also considers their perceptions concerning the validity of this pedagogical approach in practice, and the measures and efforts taken by the teachers in order to ensure student success in this particular discipline. The participants suggest that the integration of these texts is highly important to student learning, but also difficult to incorporate in light of a variety of challenges associated with teaching this genre of writing. However, both participants stressed the importance of collaboration with colleagues in order to ensure the most effective and consistent argumentative writing program for students.

Key Words: primary sources, argumentation, argumentative writing, collaboration
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Research Context

Developing a capacity for critical thought, as well as the ability to effectively synthesize ideas and opinions based on evidence, are vital skills for any citizen to develop regardless of their professional standing or their educational background. Ontario’s Ministry of Education has correctly discerned the importance of these skills, and has developed a language curriculum that requires students to analyze different text types, to organize ideas effectively, and to communicate arguments in a structured fashion (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006).

1.1 Research Problem

However, argumentative writing has often been a difficult subject for both teachers and students given that the complexity of its structure requires “deeper knowledge of the ways in which reading, writing, language, and content work together” (Langer, 2002, p. 3). That is, the developing such important skills are tied to an understanding of a highly complex topic that is often difficult for students to grasp. Consequently, this renders argumentation as a genre that is challenging for teachers to teach (Langer, 2002).

The skills that can be developed in students through successful engagement with argumentative writing are significant in terms of developing critical and informed citizens. However, many factors create obstacles for students when attempting to come to a thorough understanding argumentative writing, and the ancillary components that it hinges upon. Perhaps most significant to this study is the lack of exposure students have to argumentative literature. That is, the development of argumentative and critical literacy skills is often hindered by a narrative approach to instruction both on the part of teachers and textbooks. However,
instructional content that is argumentative in nature would act to facilitate a higher degree of understanding (Calfee & Chambliss, 1987). A consequence emerging from this issue is that students encounter difficulty in recognizing and relating to the discipline on a structural level. Attuning their reading in an effort to recognize whether or not they are reading a text of an argumentative structure is a challenge for students who are not given adequate exposure to the structure in general (Chambliss & Murphy, 2002). This notion is supported by Shanahan & Shanahan (2008), who state that in order to develop a student’s literacy skills, a student must engage with texts and resources that are unfamiliar to them both in content and in structure. This can allow students to build upon their foundational literacy skills outside of a familiar framework (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that the incorporation of primary documents has on learning argumentation. In light of the limitations of this study, the purpose of the paper is not to create lessons and gather quantitative data from a sample of students. Rather, the purpose of the paper aims to feature the work of teachers who teach argumentation to their students, and gather qualitative data that summarizes the successes, or lack thereof, of teaching argumentative writing through the use of primary argumentative documents. Ontario’s language curriculum encourages cross-curricular approaches to teaching argumentative writing. The document states that “teachers can use social studies reading material in their language lessons, and incorporate instruction in how to read non-fiction materials in to their social studies lessons” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 26). It seems acceptable that the curriculum, as it is written, allows for the use of non-fiction materials as both a resource and a method to teach argumentative writing. By extension, the incorporation of documents would also satisfy the inter-
level expectation in the reading strand of language education requiring students to “recognize a variety of text forms, text features, and stylistic elements and demonstrate understanding of how they help communicate meaning” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2006, p. 11). Research has shown that argumentative writing is often neglected by teachers in terms of how frequently it is taught to students (Newell et al., 2011). The language curriculum has many specific expectations embedded in its overall objectives, and time simply may not permit the effective instruction of such a complex topic. However, the incorporation of primary documents may offer an effective tool for teachers to help students develop an understanding of argumentative writing.

A further purpose of this research is to determine whether or not students will be more interested in argumentative writing through engagement with primary documents. Fuhler et al. (2006) suggest that an interdisciplinary approach between literacy and history could inspire a higher degree of interest in literary studies. Moreover, research suggests that a genuine interest in a topic is crucial in inspiring autonomous motivation. Autonomous motivation is a motivation that is developed within the student themselves, and by inspiring interest and motivation, the use of the documents could potentially lead to a more intensive and thorough engagement with argumentative writing (Deci, 2012).

The successful development of argumentative writing in students is crucial both for the student themselves, and certainly for society at large in terms of how this skill can help develop informed and opinionated citizens. For this reason, the purpose of the study aims primarily at two things. Firstly, it aims to assess whether or not teachers recognize the use of primary documents as a valuable and practical resource to draw on in order to teach argumentative writing. Secondly, it aims to get a sense of how these documents would impact students, and
determine whether or not students will develop an autonomous motivation towards the topic founded upon an apparent interest in the methods of instruction used.

1.3 Research Questions

The primary question guiding this research is: will a sample of junior/intermediate teachers in Ontario come to regard an interdisciplinary approach towards teaching argumentative writing through primary documents both valuable and effective?

- What resources do these teachers currently use to teach argumentative writing?
- How are primary, argumentative documents being incorporated into lessons on argumentation?
- What is the level of success of this method of instruction?

This study will also aim to inspire and develop critical thinking skills in students, and to raise awareness to teachers about the importance of the development of argumentative skills in their students.

1.4 Background of the Researcher

Historical literacy is something that has been very important to me since the start of my undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto. The skills that history, as a discipline, attempts to grow, as well as the richness and importance of its content, I believe, is crucial for all students to grasp. Naturally, it was disconcerting for me to hear that students view the study of history as purposeless, and that the primary documents that uphold the discipline are generally misunderstood or not observed widely.

Upon entering my first year of undergraduate education, my ability to develop well-articulated argumentative essays was quite lacking. Fortunately I had chosen a major that would develop my literacy skills beyond what I could have imagined. I attribute my successes to
engagement with texts using argumentative structures, and especially those primary documents which were necessary to foster an understanding of course material. Through exposure to such materials, I was able to transition from a student who found it difficult to develop a coherent essay, to a student who was able to complete a major research essay, and be awarded many awards along the way.

I have always been interested in education and teaching. Ever since my own teachers helped me to get on a path of successful learning, it was a goal of mine to pursue education as a career. I feel as though I have a responsibility to do the same for others, and that my own educational experience has allowed me to realize ways in which to do so. I certainly do not want students to enter their first year of undergraduate studies as ill-prepared as I felt I was. However, I think that the tools that helped me improve can be adapted and applied for students in order to allow them to develop a foundation on which to build their argumentative writing skills. In my own teaching experience, students have often held argumentative writing to be quite difficult, and it led me to question what should be done to help them have a coherent understanding of how to structure and support their arguments. Only then did I begin to see the potential value that my own experiences had in the classroom and that primary documents as an educational resource could incite some degree of change.

I believe that other forms of positive change can also emerge out of this sort of instruction. Perhaps the critical and coherent sequencing of ideas can translate in to higher performance in other subject areas. Moreover, the notion of being able to read, understand and produce arguments could create a more informed body of young people who have the ability to make informed judgements on important policies and circumstances that may arise over the
course of their lives. I think this type of argumentative literacy is important for a student throughout their lives, and that a great place to start is in the classroom.

1.5 Overview

The second chapter of this paper will review a wide range of existing literature on the topic of teaching argumentative writing in a classroom setting. A particular focus of this review will be the importance of teaching argumentation in order to develop students’ critical skills. It will also consider research that discusses the impact of exposing students to the argumentative genre. Chapter 3 will be dedicated to commenting on the interview process, and how qualitative research was used to gather the perspectives of teachers on argumentative writing. The qualitative research conducted relied on interviews with two Ontario educators who have made efforts to teach argumentation and argumentative writing to their students. Both of these teachers are ones who implement and are familiar with the overall and specific Ontario curriculum expectations related to teaching argumentative writing. Moreover, both teachers teach a grade within the junior-intermediate (grades 4-10) level. It was significant to this research to be able to compare and contrast the pedagogical strategies used by these teachers, and investigate how argumentation can be adapted to a particular grade level. The teachers also offered insights into the challenges and difficulties they encountered in terms of their own teaching and student comprehension of the subject matter.

In chapter 4, I present the findings of my research, as well as comparing, contrasting, and relating my findings to existing literature on the topic of argumentation. Following this discussion, chapter 5 allows me to reflect on my findings, and assess the far-reaching implications they have on the educational community. Moreover, chapter 5 also provides insights into the areas which further research could be of value to teachers and students who will be
engaging with argumentation in classrooms. This qualitative research study will not use any interviews from students to gather information and data. Naturally, arising from this limitation, there will be gaps in the research that may benefit from further inquiry. Nonetheless, this research offers a qualitative understanding of how teachers regard argumentative writing, and the pedagogical approaches they use to meet the needs of their students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the literature concerning the theoretical frameworks that offer definitions of argumentative writing. I also consider cross-curricular education, the integration of argumentative texts into the classroom, and professional development and institutional support for teachers. More specifically, I review themes related to historical argumentative documents and practical classroom use. I start by reviewing the literature in the area of definitional understandings of argumentative writing, and I consider which definitions exhibit consistency with the Ontario curriculum. Next, I review research on the integration of the argumentative structure into student reading in order to demonstrate the value of understanding the structure before engaging with it. I then investigate literature that considers how a subject-based cross-curricular approach to integrating such texts, especially those historical in nature, may help students grasp this complex form of writing. Finally, I consider literature that has investigated how professional development amongst teachers can supplement this approach, and what principles they should be trained on.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives of Argumentative Writing

Scholarly literature on argumentative writing has offered a wide array of perspectives on the issues, strategies and challenges that are inherent within the genre. A review of literature that approaches argumentative writing through a theoretical lens, that is, literature that attempts to define what arguments and argumentative writing is, is no less diverse and substantial. However, across the literature, scholars have overwhelmingly accepted Toulmin’s (1958) “Structuralist” definition of argumentative writing (Newell et al., 2011) as the sort of orthodox framework of argumentation through which argumentative writing may be defined (De La Paz & Felton, 2010;
Monte Sano, 2010; Nippold & Ward-Lonergan, 2010). Toulmin’s theory of argumentative writing holds that argumentation in writing essentially serves the purpose of supporting a particular position or thesis (claim), that is warranted by relevant facts, which are in turn supported by data, backing statements, and qualifications (De La Paz & Felton, 2010; Wolfe, 2011). Moreover, the structure demands that connections be drawn between evidence and the claim in order for the argument to maintain a logical line of reasoning in relation to the overall purpose of argumentation. However, while scholarship tends to agree with Toulmin (1958) in terms of what argumentation is, literature on argumentation often uses Toulmin’s model as standard to illuminate this model’s limitations, to elaborate upon divergent theories, and to suggest modifications to Toulmin’s model in order to develop a more effective understanding of argumentation. The purpose of this research is to investigate whether or not historical subject matter can be infused practically and efficiently into a classroom in order to teach argumentative writing. In light of this, it is important to develop an understanding of how Toulmin’s model is both challenged and adapted in order to determine which theory of argumentation best fits both the Ontario curriculum, and the realities of the classroom.

Bacha (2010), has identified Toulmin’s model of argumentation as the standard model for academic writing, and bases their research off of the model in terms of how argumentation is essentially a body of text that supports a thesis. However, Bacha (2010), while adopting the structure offered by Toulmin, understands that a reorganization of this structure, by using Reid’s (1988) “A, B, C” plan for argumentative writing, as a practical and efficient way for students to both maintain the purpose of argumentation in their writing, and the ability to frame their writing in to a coherent sequence of body paragraphs (Bacha, 2010). Davies (2008) similarly understands that in order to facilitate student learning, Toulmin’s model of argumentation must
be placed within a particular framework. For Davies (2008), developing a thesis driven argument is only the fifth step in a six step model that is designed to guide student towards developing a coherent argument based on their task. The argumentative stage in this model is based upon an understanding of how to develop conclusions based on a valid premise. However, while Toulmin’s focus on the warranting of claims based on data is paramount in this process, research has shown that students often find it challenging when being asked to distinguish between grounded and ungrounded warrants, and assessing the success of an argument based on these merits (Wolfe, 2011). Larson et al. (2009) highlight the importance of this distinction for student success when stating that,

...perhaps the most fundamental [argumentative skill] is the ability to distinguish warranted from unwarranted arguments. A student who cannot distinguish between a claim supported by a valid reason and one supported by a disassociated reason – or not supported at all – will be unable to critically analyze arguments and unable to produce them with much proficiency. (Larson et al, 2009, p. 340)

Some scholars, such as Warren (2010), hold that Toulmin’s model renders the identification of warrants as easily identifiable through the way in which warrants are framed as statements that make a connection between research and conclusions. However, some scholars (Wolfe, 2011) While they hold that Toulmin has provided a sound structure of what argumentation is and what it should look like in a theoretical sense, it is insufficient in itself to teach successful and coherent argumentative works.

2.1.1 The Stasis Model

Toulmin’s theory of argumentation is met a divergent theory of argumentation that, while
sharing the same notion of the purpose of argumentation, conceptualizes the process of argumentation in a different light. Toulmin’s structured relationships between data, warrants and claims are reconceptualised in to a different structure in the stasis theory of argumentation. This theory uses a hierarchical system of questions to guide the writer’s sequence of text as opposed to direct relationships between data and claims. Fahnestock & Secor (1988) hold that organizing a text that answers definitional questions, fact questions, provides insight in to causes, reasoned evaluations about the issue in question, and offers a proposal that is coherent in light of the previous questions, is that which essentially resembles the stasis model of argumentation. Literature exploring the stasis theory is quite sparse, and Fahnestock & Secor (1983) and Fahnestock & Secor (1988) seem to form the basis of the field’s research. Essentially, through the sequencing of hierarchical questions, student can acquire better a better understanding of how to organize and recognize arguments in terms of where they begin and where they end. Moreover, Fahnestock and Secor (1988) hold that the model is highly “teachable” in classrooms. They suggest that perhaps what makes the theory so teachable is the theory’s flexibility to consider to value and disciplinary subject matter; two points which they recognize as points of departure from Toulmin’s model.

The Ontario curriculum is not discriminative of which argumentative models teachers should employ in their classroom. Rather, the curriculum is quite intent that argumentation, and the language curriculum in general, should be infused with many forms of writing that exposes students to different structures and genres. While more research is certainly necessary, especially in the case of the stasis theory of argumentation, in order to develop insights in to these models as they apply to the practical realities of the classroom, principles from both, though presented in
a format that students can come to grasp, would be valuable to their development as argumentative writers and thinkers.

### 2.2 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Education

An interdisciplinary or cross-curricular pedagogical approach to education is that educational strategy which forges links between subject disciplines in order to effectively instruct multiple subjects at once (Jacobs, 1989). Literature that investigates this pedagogical strategy conceptualizes it from a variety of theoretical angles, and offers a variety of circumstances and reasons why, or why not, this method of instruction should be used. Marzano (1991) writes in support of interdisciplinary pedagogy in light of research that suggested that student performance in cognitively demanding areas of the curriculum were particularly low (Burns, 1986). Marzano (1991) holds that a major benefit for students of cross-curricular education is that subject matter develops a greater sense of meaning and relevance, and that these factors contribute to higher degrees of understanding. Marzano (1991) holds that by integrating complex cognitive operations, such as decision making, naturalistic inquiry, problem-solving, scientific inquiry and composing, into an interdisciplinary frame, students will develop the skills necessary to perform such demanding tasks.

While Marzano’s (1991) focus on interdisciplinary education is rooted in the development of higher skills and the development of meaning, Fogarty (1991) conceptualizes the interdisciplinary approach as having its value rooted in its potential to develop a student-led approach to learning. This approach would be designed to develop connections between subjects through a variety of effective means. However, literature is often dedicated to the deconstruction of the notion of subjects themselves. While Venville et al (2002) would agree with the notion of student-led learning, the authors would rather contextualize this notion within the framework of
an overall learning program rather than a discussion between subjects. The authors note how the purpose of subject based learning is often rooted in scheduling, and how, depending on social and cultural contexts, some subjects take precedence over others (Rogers, 1997; de Brabander, 2000). Therefore, in terms of creating an actual learning experience, this theorizing of an interdisciplinary pedagogy is closer to Marzano (1991) rather than Fogarty (1991). From a cognitive perspective, revolving education around central themes in order to develop higher skills, as held by Venville et al. (2002) and Marzano (1991), will give students the opportunity to receive an education that is closely aligned with insights on the cognitive development of children (Hurless & Gittings, 2008). For the purposes of this study, interdisciplinary education will be considered along these lines. That is, as a mutually reinforcing relationship, between two or more disciplines, whereby the notions of subjects are replaced by a multi-faceted learning experience.

Hinde (2005), while supporting the ideas held by scholars of curriculum integration, notes several potential problems with the practice. Firstly, it must be regarded as just that, a practice or method rather than considering integration an end in itself. Any interdisciplinary education must be carefully planned, purposeful, coherently integrated, and within the capacity of students (Hinde, 2005). Despite the potential problems surrounding this pedagogical approach, Ontario’s education ministry supports integrated curriculums, and supports its reasoning citing research, like Marzano’s (1991), that draws a correlation between the use of this practice and the development of higher order skills (Drake & Reid, 2010). While the government recognizes the challenges of this method of teaching, the ministry has clearly placed substantial responsibility upon teachers to engage with this method in an effective manner, and avoid the counter-productive practices highlighted by Hinde.
2.2.1 Argumentative Writing and Interdisciplinary Pedagogies

Implementing argumentation in to an integrated curriculum is a topic that has received increased attention in the past fifteen years especially. Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) suggest that the reason for the increased importance of critical literacy skills, that is, the ability to use higher order thinking to inform decisions and think critically, is a result of the nature of the modern western economy with its shift towards professions that are centred upon high-literacy. Shanahan & Shanahan’s (2008) focus on reading relates directly to literature in the field of argumentative writing. When reading argumentative texts, students encounter difficulty in recognizing the structure of the argument in question, or, perhaps even more concerning, are unaware that they are reading an argumentative piece at all (Biancarosa & Snow, 2008; Chambliss & Murphy, 2002). However, research suggests that the reading of argumentative texts is an integral part of argumentative writing (Crowhurst, 1990; Newell et al., 2011), and the need to integrate this genre of reading and writing across the curriculum will help students develop higher literacy skills in this regard.

Newell et al. (2011) would agree with Hyland (1990) that exposure to writing in a particular genre will help students recognize the structure, and important components used by the author. Using an argumentative exemplar from a wide range of content areas, since all content areas have the potential to develop a student’s argumentative skills, a student can effectively develop the high-cognition skills necessary for this task (Wolfe et al., 2009). Marzano’s (1991) notion of integrating decision making, naturalistic inquiry, problem solving, scientific inquiry and composing are embedded within the practice of argumentative writing. The research mentioned previously in this study regarding the benefits of interdisciplinary education on both student learning and cognitive development would therefore support the use of such a
pedagogical approach to teach argumentative writing. The Ontario curriculum, moreover, would support the use of diverse texts from a variety of content areas in order to communicate the principles of such an important component of the province’s literacy program.

2.2.2 Historical Subject Matter and Developing Critical Skills

With a survey of research that has investigated various perspectives on interdisciplinary education, and the place of argumentative writing within it, this paper will now consider research that offers commentary on the links between historical subject matter and teaching critical literacy. Student reading in a critical sense, according to Newell et al. (2011), and Shanahan & Shanahan (2008), reading is vitally important to developing skills that allow students to challenge and accept texts based on evidence, and recognize and infuse the author’s and their own voice respectively. While narrative texts undoubtedly serve to improve student literacy skills, exposing students to argumentative structure within this context would only bolster their critical skills further (Newell et al., 2011; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Historical studies, and historical reasoning, often integrates a variety of textual forms in to a single document, whether a primary or secondary source, in order to convey a certain perspective (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). Research has shown, however, that the argumentative component in historical studies in not only most prominent, but also helps student to understand that subject far better (Stockton, 1995; Voss & Wiley, 1997). While argumentation and historical studies are essentially inseparable, Monte-Sano (2010) argues that historical argumentation is discipline specific. However, historical documents, and writing about history are consistent with the claims and warrant theory of argumentative writing proposed by Toulmin (Monte-Sano, 2010).

Biancarosa & Snow (2008) hold that a cross-curricular approach to teaching argumentative writing which incorporates historical subject matter has the potential to improve
literacy skills. In support of such conclusions, Tzelepi (2004) conducted a study whereby elementary school students were presented with publications, from UNICEF for example, regarding human rights and other associated issues. By investing time to engage with such texts, the students produced far better argumentative pieces than they had produced prior having instruction scaffolded within this framework (Tzelpi, 2004). This research is illustrative of how an interdisciplinary approach, that uses publications that are historical in nature, can have a considerable effect on student writing. While plenty of research is dedicated to integrating history and argumentative writing in to a comprehensive pedagogy, to which this paper is neither averse nor focused on, little research is dedicated to investigating the effects of using primary historical documents (letters, speeches, publications etc.), that are argumentative in form, as a model for how arguments may be structured. Certainly, the research suggests that integrating history and literacy can have positive effects on student writing, but the main concern for this paper is to investigate the possibility of using a document (argumentative in form) related to the topic of study as a model for what students can recognize and apply to their own writing.

2.3 Challenges Associated with Argumentative Writing

With an understanding of what argumentative writing is, and a review of literature that details curriculum-integration and the place of argumentative writing within it, a survey of research that details the challenges students and teachers face when confronted with argumentative writing is surely necessary. Research concerning professional development will also be considered in order to provide a sense of proposed recommendations for improvement.

2.3.1 Cognitive Development and Argumentative Writing

As research consulted from the previous sections suggests, argumentative writing is a higher order writing skill that requires students to integrate many facets of writing within an
organized structure while supporting a particular position. Such requirements compelled Piaget (1926) to suggest that students, prior to secondary school, lack the cognitive capacity to produce effective arguments. While Piaget is certainly correct to identify the scope cognitive demands of the genre, research has shown that students are able to engage in effective verbal argument from quite a young age (Reznitskaya & Anderson, 2002). However, whether or not students have the capacity to transfer oral argumentative methods into a structured written argument is disputed by scholars. Dong et al. (2008) and Styslinger & Overstreet (2014) hold that verbal structures of argument, especially when learned in a collaborative context, are able to be applied to written argument. However, Gillies & Khan (2009) found that students, while exhibiting well-rounded argumentative skills in an oral context, were unable to effectively apply the same principles to their writing.

Freedman & Pringle (1985), through conducting research on argumentative writing in Ontario, assert that students are unable to translate oral arguments into written arguments effectively, since they lack exposure to the argumentative structure in their younger years. While the narrative structure can be easily translated into written text, the authors assert that the cognitive ability to do so for argument is lacking. Insights from Vygotsky’s *Thought and Language* (1962) support the notion that exposure to argumentative text will help students develop through the hierarchical cognitive system of concept formation (Freedman & Pringle, 1985; Vygotsky, 1962). Regardless, both Vygotsky’s (1926) and Shanahan & Shanahan’s (2008) ideas echo throughout the literature through the way in which a) argumentative instruction must be scaffolded in order to accommodate the cognitive demands it puts on a student and b) that argumentative writing is a cognitive task of a higher order, and incorporating all of its facets coherently is difficult for students.
2.3.2 Challenges Faced by Teachers

Naturally, given the cognitive demands of writing argumentatively, teachers are posed with the task of scaffolding instruction and giving detailed feedback in a way that the students understand. However, given the task, there is a higher degree of likelihood, when compared to other forms of writing, that students will still face difficulty either understanding the concept, or performing it in writing. In fact, one challenge teachers face is that, in light of the difficulties students face, teachers spend less time on teaching it. However, research suggests that teachers must allot adequate time for its instruction in order to help build this skill over time and as the student develops cognitively (Freedman and Pringle, 1984). Yet, teachers find difficulty in shifting their pedagogy in a way that gradually shifts them away from a position of authority and allows the students to creatively develop arguments based on their own reasoning (Berland & Reiser, 2009; Newell et al., 2011)

Teachers, however, must integrate reading and writing into a comprehensive pedagogy for teaching argumentative writing; which is often lacking based on the challenges teacher’s face with resources (Dornbrack & Dixon, 2014). However, research has also suggested that the challenges are rooted far deeper than lacking resources, scarce time, or the cognitive development of students. Teacher misconceptions or misunderstandings about argumentative writing play a significant role. Hillocks (2010) noted that teachers often teach the genre backwards by investing far too much importance in to a thesis statement as a student’s starting point, rather than developing argument based on evidence that would support this claim (according to Toulmin’s model). Moreover, teachers themselves often face difficulty when attempting to understand the appropriate measures of scaffolding all of the elements of argument, whether in the formalist or stasis model, and how all of these measures should integrate and
relate with one another (Newell et al., 2011). Moreover, teachers may not know as to what the goals of argumentation are in the classroom setting, whether in oral or written form. As a result, teachers may struggle to offer appropriate scaffolding, topics or debate questions that would otherwise be conducive to student learning (Hillocks 2010).

With regards to the challenges surrounding the teaching of argumentative writing, it is evident that the central issues are all related. That is, the cognitive capacities of students, and the appropriate scaffolding that allows for argumentative reading and writing to be integrated into the class, are issues that teachers must consider simultaneously in order to support student success. Therefore, research suggests that, especially with such a complex and demanding task for students, teachers must be highly aware of the abilities of their students in order to support them in their learning of argumentation.

2.3.3 Professional Development

A review of the literature accounting for the difficulties faced by both teachers and students has been presented in order to demonstrate the need for professional development. Research suggests the need for formal training in order to teach argumentative writing in a way that mitigates the aforementioned challenges. A proper foundation for a more effective pedagogy involves higher quality writing workshops that consider the genre as a whole, and formally train teachers with “both process and genre steps for argumentative writing” (Dornbrack & Dixon, 2014, p.8). Ultimately, the goal of such workshops would be to offer teachers a thorough understanding of the genre in order to ensure that their teaching is applicable and positively affecting development of their students as argumentative writers (Myhill, 2005). In their detailed study of improving student’s ability to write argumentatively, Biancarosa & Snow (2008) suggest a variety of ways that teachers can alter their pedagogical approaches to facilitate student
learning. Such approaches include extending the allotment of time dedicated to the genre, as well as scaffolding learning through feedback and assessment. However, in terms of professional development, the authors assert that the quality of training must be matched by frequent sessions that are held on a consistent basis. Moreover, because of the complexity of the genre, such development should also encompass the entirety of a school staff, not just language teachers.

While teachers recognize that formal training influences their pedagogy, for writing especially, the appropriate workshops to support this learning, in contrast to Biancarosa & Snow’s (2008) recommendation, is quite sparse for teachers (Collet, 2015; Gilbert & Graham, 2010). If professional development in this field is sparsely offered, and if so, not effectively administrated, teachers will not have the tools or resources to help develop this highly important critical skill in their students. Through participation in well organized and thorough writing workshops, surrounded by fellow teachers and coaches, teachers have the capability to improve writing instruction (Dierking & Fox, 2012). Through training, teachers can develop a higher degree of understanding, and subsequently apply important concepts to their teaching with the confidence. This confidence rests upon their understanding of the genre, and knowing that they have engaged with the latest research and methods towards its instruction alongside their peers (Dierking & Fox, 2012).

Traditional in-service approaches to professional development, which is risks a disconnect between professional coaches and teachers, may not suffice in creating the productive environment previously mentioned. Rather, new approaches to professional development for teacher’s writing instruction, which are more collaborative by nature and flexible to teachers’ needs, have been shown to improve instruction and increase a teacher’s comfort level with difficult subjects (Lee, 2004).
Successful argumentative writing workshops seem to be consistent with this model. After collaborating interactively with peers, developing their understanding of the topic through methods that are applicable to the classroom, personalizing the genre to their tastes, and learning from each other’s work, important concepts of argumentative writing were able to resonate with teachers (Collet, 2015). The findings from this sample of teachers showed that student writing saw much improvement following their training (Collet, 2015). Given that reading and writing must go together when teaching this genre of writing, it would be significant for professional development to also engage teachers in argumentative texts, and come to recognize the structures and elements that are necessary to composition. Nonetheless, professional development and is key to consider when attempting to improve student writing, and given its complexity and the demands it puts on teachers and students, new approaches to professional development that meet the needs of teachers are imperative.

2.4 Conclusion

This review of the literature offers insight into the importance of written argumentation as both an important academic and life skill for students. Moreover, it discusses the need for students to be exposed to the argumentative genre in order to gather an understanding of its structure and components before applying them to their own writing. Considering these factors, the purpose of this study is to investigate the positions of Ontario teachers regarding the use of primary argumentative documents in their instruction of written argumentation. The findings of this study will then be compared to the existing literature in the field.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology, presenting the methodological and procedural decisions contained within my study, as well as justifying these methods in light of the purpose of this paper. I then elaborate on the participants of the study, specifically on participant sampling, recruitment and a background of the participants. What follows is a commentary on how the data was analyzed, and a discussion that reviews the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. In light of all of the considerations made throughout the chapter, I then identify the limitations and strengths of this methodological approach.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This study uses a qualitative research approach. For the purposes of this study, this approach encompasses both a review of research in the field, as well as interviews with two teachers. Qualitative research has often been scrutinized and regarded with condescension in a society that functions on tangible and quantitative findings and outcomes (Cooley, 2013). However, over the past few decades, scholars, especially those in education, have begun to use qualitative methods more often in light of its ability to help us understand “… the complexities of everyday educational predicaments and specific sites of social interactions” (Cooley, 2013, p. 253). That is, qualitative methods have the capacity to investigate an issue or study as it manifests itself within its context, and how perspectives and personalities shape the matter at hand. Education is a field that is inherently shaped by these factors, making the field itself both a social and cultural one (Papapolydorou, 2008). Emerging out of a socio-cultural context, studies related to education find value in qualitative methods that will ultimately delve in to the perspectives, options, and practices used by particular people in a sample.
Research in education, therefore, will find value in incorporating qualitative research methods as a means of collecting data. The value is most pronounced in its capacity to elaborate on real human experiences in a socio-cultural context. For the purpose of education especially, it is important to consider that the context of the study does, as opposed to consistent numerical data, present an interpreted conceptualization of social interactions and experiences (Umesh & Sangeeta, 2013). A qualitative approach can offer a rich mosaic and deeper understanding of a particular matter, and consequently produce findings that may contrast one another (Umesh & Sangeeta, 2013). While quantitative research methods attempt to determine which lens to conceptualize a particular matter through, qualitative research attempts to develop insight into why and how the matter exists the way it does in order to gather an understanding of the conceptual lens itself. In this sense, Thorne (2000) astutely acknowledges that “qualitative researchers are often more concerned about uncovering knowledge about how people think and feel about the circumstances in which they find themselves than they are in making judgements about whether those thoughts and feelings are valid” (Thorne, 2000, p. 68).

In light of this, it is suitable that this paper should rely on qualitative research methods based on the purpose of this study and the questions contained within. This methodology allows the opportunity to experience and understand the social interactions prevalent in a small sample of Ontario classrooms in an effort to shed light on pedagogical approaches to teaching argumentative writing. Comparable and conflicting findings, whether it is between the teachers in the samples themselves, or between those teachers and existing research on the topic, may be encountered in the process. However, the purpose of this paper is to investigate pedagogy, and how it is delivered and attuned to student needs. Classrooms are spaces which are not devoid of personalities, and these personalities impact teaching. It is therefore most appropriate to use a
qualitative research method to collect data in order to deeply engage with the underlying motivations and justifications of the findings.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

Collecting data using a qualitative research method is most effectively accomplished through conducting semi-structured interviews with willing participants. If qualitative research aims at understanding human experiences, semi-structured interviews best facilitate this research in light of its capacity to immerse both the researcher and interviewee in the subject, and gather experiences and thoughts specific to the participants’ experiences (Adams, 2010). Moreover, it allows the researcher to focus on gathering information related to their research purpose, while giving them the flexibility to consider the experiences and anecdotes of the interviewee; allowing for a richer and more thorough understanding of how the research questions are relevant in a practical setting (Rabionet, 2011). Relevant and potentially important data in the interviewees’ responses, which the researcher may have been incapable of gathering if the interview was highly structured, have the potential to enrich the study beyond its initial scope. (Mojtahed et al., 2014).

3.3 Participants

Naturally, qualitative semi-structured interviews require participants. It is important for this research to gather qualitative data from a carefully selected sample of participants who meet established criteria. This criteria is purposely connected with the major research questions, and acts to develop consistency in the collection of data. Below, the criteria for the sample of participants are listed.

3.3.1 Sampling Criteria

The teacher participants will be selected based on the following criteria:
1. Teachers will have taught argumentative writing to their classes both in the past, and as a part of their present literacy program.

2. Teachers will have been employed by an Ontario school board for a minimum of five years.

3. Teachers must be teaching a grade level between 4 and 8.

4. There will be both male and female participants

In light of the purpose of this research, it is important for this paper to include teachers who have made considerable effort, and have directed appropriate time, towards teaching argumentative writing to their students. That is, in order to explore and feature teacher pedagogy in argumentative writing, only teachers who have made efforts to do so have been considered. Such teachers must also have five years of experience teaching in Ontario schools. The rationale for this criterion is twofold. Firstly, it serves the purpose to allow teacher participants the opportunity to discuss if and how their pedagogy has changed over time. Secondly, in light of the difficulties and cognitive demands that argumentative writing places on students, it is important for this sample to have the appropriate experience in teaching the subject in order to gather the most appropriate data for this research. These teachers must also be teaching a grade between grades 4 and 8. If this research is to focus on how teachers may teach students argumentation in order to develop critical skills in their students at a young age, it is important for this study to select teachers that have the appropriate grade experience.

3.3.2 Participant Recruitment

In light of my connections with a community of teachers from a variety of different backgrounds, I have had the opportunity to work with and speak to dozens of Ontario’s educators during my time as part of this community. Given that the parameters of my study are relatively
small, my sampling and recruitment relies on a convenience sampling procedure which effectively rests upon the existing and sizable professional network of the researcher (Marshall, 1996). The size and focus allows this study to ask the permission of potential participants, who meet the sampling criteria, to participate in the study (Robinson, 2014).

3.3.3 Participant Biographies

The first participant in this study is an experienced teacher of 6 years in a Southern Ontario school board. The participant is an 8th grade homeroom teacher, but also teaches literacy to the 7th graders in the school. In the past, this teacher has also taught in the junior division. Experience at many grade levels, and, at the time of the interview, acting as an intermediate literacy teacher in the school, this participant also acts as the literacy lead in the school for the junior and intermediate grades. This participant, admitting that there may be some bias in their claim, holds that language or literacy is the most important discipline for students to learn. In terms of extra-curricular activities, this participant engages themselves with the multicultural and diverse state of the school, and creates events that celebrate it. The participant is also active in the school’s extracurricular activities. Participant describes their school community as one where South Asian and Asian backgrounds are predominant, and one where middle and working class families are the norm. The pseudonym attributed to this participant is Taylor.

The second participant in this study is a highly experienced teacher who has been teaching in a Southern Ontario school board for 14 years. The participant has spent their entire career teaching 4th grade at the same school. At the school, the teacher takes on an active role in the school’s extracurricular activities. In terms of how the teacher views literacy, they expressed that it is a crucial discipline for their students to learn, and that they very much enjoy teaching it. This participant has described their school community as one that, in general, is quite affluent in
terms of the socio-economic status of the families. The participant also described the school community as one where many of the students and families would identify coming from an East Asian or Middle Eastern background. The pseudonym attributed to this participant is Riley.

3.4 Data Analysis

Following the collection of data, a process of its analysis effectively transforms and interprets it within the context of the research purpose and its major questions (Seers, 2012). The data was studied carefully, and the researcher reconceptualised it in a way that identifies the meaning of the data, as well as its implications (Thorne, 2000). Data analysis is made more effective if the collection of data and its analysis is undertaken simultaneously. This is so as to allow the researcher to constantly consider their research questions, and conceptualize the data more effectively (Dicicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In this sense, when pieces of data are compared, contrasted and coded, over-arching themes can be identified and used to analyze the data comprehensively. For the purposes of this research, transcribed interviews with teacher participants were coded, organized thematically, and compared and contrasted in a way that is conducive to investigating the significance of the data and the study at large.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Given that qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and then analyzed by the researcher, an ethical procedure was necessary in order to give the study validity. Qualitative research, for the purposes of this study, rests on participant willingness and written consent. A standard of ethics must be followed in order to ensure the rights of participants are ensured during the collection of data, its analysis, and its dissemination (Shaw, 2003). Civil rights are to be considered during this entire process, for should an interviewer compel responses from a participant without a meaningful consideration of ethics, whether this is
through censorship or exploitation of vulnerability, ethical codes are effectively broken (Fisher, 2002).

Given that the focus of this paper is pedagogical approaches to teaching argumentative writing, it was highly unlikely that the participants would encounter questions that evoke emotional responses. On these grounds, it may be unnecessary to provide a copy of the interview questions before the official interview. However, in the interests of fairness towards the participants, copies of such questions were provided beforehand in order to ensure participant comfort with the material, as well as the opportunity to clarify questions with the researcher. If a question was presented to the interviewee that was unclear to them, they may be compelled to answer it simply because it was presented before them. However, if they have engaged with the questions prior, they may develop a higher level of comfort with the material, or choose to reject this question based on the new, clarified meaning.

Rejection of a question on the part of the interviewee conforms to the moral obligation of beneficence in qualitative research. This obligation effectively protects the interviewee from any harm or feeling of mistrust in the whole process of data collection and dissemination (Orb et al., 2001). That is to say, and in the case of this study, the interviewee were reminded several times throughout the research process that they have the right to refuse questions, retract statements both during the interview and after its completion. Interviewees also have the opportunity to go back to a previous question to add or strike commentary. Moreover, the participants were asked to sign a letter of consent, which not only formally asks for a participant’s permission to be interviewed, but also included an overview of the study and its ethical implications. In addition to consent, the interviewees were told that any recordings or notes that the researcher takes during the interview will be saved on a password protected laptop, and that the files will be
destroyed after five years. This ensures a layer of privacy in addition to the designation of pseudonyms to each of the participants.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

As noted earlier in this chapter, the size of the sample of this research, while it has the capacity to offer valuable insights from a limited number of teachers, will not be able to offer large scale or generalizable insights on the matter at hand (Robinson, 2014). Moreover, in terms of the limitations of this study, the ethical parameters, which act to limit the size of the sample secondarily, do not extend to the interviewing of students. It may benefit further research to delve in to the perspectives of students on the topic, and investigate in to whether or not there are correlations or conflict between pedagogy, existing research and student voice. However, to move outside of the ethical parameters would, firstly, shift the focus to far away from teacher pedagogy, and, secondly, effectively invalidate the research as a whole (Fisher, 2002).

Yet, the strengths of this methodology will assist in bolstering the research purpose, and will deeply consider the research questions. Conducting semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to deeply engage with the qualitative research methodology through the way in which the experiences of the participants can come to the forefront of the study, and be thoroughly considered (Rabionet, 2011). Moreover, because interviews are semi-structured, participants have the opportunity to elaborate on their responses in ways that expose individual engagement with the topic at hand. This effectively offers the study a unique and deeper understanding of pedagogical approaches to teaching argumentative writing. In addition, these interviews were brief. Each participant consented to an interview that will lasted 45-60 minutes in duration. The benefit of this approach is that both the researcher and interviewee are able to remain focused on the topic at hand, rather than letting their attention or responses waver after prolonged and
intensive periods of data collection (Carr, 1994). All of these strengths allow the research to reflect a high standard of both the collection and analysis of the data.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the research methodology. The approach and procedure of the research was considered, and was followed by a detailed discussion of the strengths of qualitative research. Significant to this discussion was the rationale behind using this methodological approach, and how research has understood qualitative research methods highly valuable to studies in education. To illustrate this further, a brief juxtaposition was made to quantitative research, which renders itself incapable of delving into human experiences, especially for the purposes of this research. I then described the instruments of data collection, identifying semi-structured interviews as the means of data collection that this study would rest upon. The participants of this study were then considered, both in terms of the criteria that each participant was required to meet, as well as brief, individual biographies. A brief discussion ensued which considered the recruitment process of the participants, culminating in the justification behind selecting convenience sampling as the method of recruitment. The analysis of the data collection from my sample was then considered. Analyzing each interview, coding the contents, as well as comparing and contrasting major themes was the method selected in order to develop a rich discussion of the data itself. The ethical parameters of the study were then considered. Major issues such as the rights of the participants in terms of privacy, consent, the right to withdraw, as well as data storage were discussed. Lastly, the methodological limitations and strengths of the study were considered. This included an overview of the strengths, such as how semi-structured interviews are conducive to eliciting deep first-hand accounts of teachers. This was presented with an acknowledgement of how the small size of the research sample
represented a limiting factor to this study. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the research.
Chapter 4: Findings

4.0 Introduction

Literature in the field of argumentation stresses that students should be exposed to rich and authentic experiences to enhance their understanding of the discipline. Teachers will always have their own methods in creating these experiences and directing the form that student learning will take. These pedagogies, however, cannot be static given that the delivery of content will be heavily influenced by the students that teachers have in their classrooms. I have interviewed two teachers in Southern Ontario school boards, and both have added to this scholarship in ways that were both honest and illuminating of the many issues and successes that they have encountered when approaching this topic. The purpose of my research was to gather the perspectives of these teachers regarding the use of primary argumentative documents in a cross-curricular approach to aid in the teaching of argumentative writing. Each of the interviewees brought their own backgrounds and experiences to the interview questions, and benefits this study in terms of how diverse approaches are considered. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of my research, and provide a commentary for how the interviewees’ perspectives and experiences related to existing literature in the field. This discussion is embedded within an overarching investigation of common themes that emerged from the transcripts of both participants. Three themes present in both transcripts include barriers and challenges that teachers faced in argumentative instruction, the efforts teachers make to meet student needs in light of these barriers, and the notion of content and skill based relevance of argumentative writing.

4.1 Barriers and Challenges

This study is concerned with evaluating the opinions of a sample of Ontario teachers regarding the use of primary documents in argumentative writing programs. Both participants in
the study agreed that primary documents are valuable tools that can be used to teach argumentation. However, despite this, each of the participants clouded this agreement with repeated reference to the barriers and challenges they faced with using primary documents towards this end.

4.1.1 Cognitive Development

Both participants agreed that argumentation was a challenging topic for their students to grasp. However, the stage cognitive development of students was discussed unequally between the participants in terms of its impact on the overall challenges students faced. Taylor, throughout their interview, did not make a single reference to how cognitive development impacts their students’ capacity to write argumentatively. This juxtaposes Riley’s position, a 4th grade teacher, who made repeated references to how the phase of their student’s cognitive development was among the most significant determinants of their students’ capacity to write argumentatively. Riley, in one instance, after considering the relationship between the age of their students, and the teacher’s position regarding teaching argumentative writing, states, “...it’s important for me to deliver concepts that meet their ability”. References to the age and stage of development of their students were made throughout the interview with Riley. What was surprising in light of the research surveyed was that Taylor made no mention of age or cognitive development during their interview. This alone would qualify cognitive development to be a major point of discussion for the purposes of this study given that it was emphasized by one participant, yet omitted from the discussion by the other. However, the contrasting opinions of teachers from different grade levels does add an important qualification to the emphasis and opinions surrounding cognitive development in so far as it allows students to engage with primary documents. Taylor, while Riley made efforts to focus on it during their interview,
attributed a lot of the barriers and challenges student’s faced with the development of skills rather than cognitive development.

I considered the disparity both in age and in experiences between the students of Riley and Taylor. Yet, the teachers’ perspectives add valuable insights into how existing literature in the field can be conceptualized. Bearing in mind Piaget’s (1926) position on how elementary school students are limited by their cognitive stage of development in terms of developing effective argumentative texts, the participants of this study problematize this limitation. They do so by explicating that, at a particular age, developing arguments and recognizing argumentative structures is not necessarily limited by a student’s stage of development. Riley does indeed draw some consistency with Piaget (1926) and Gillies & Khan (2009) in so far as they discussed how their students had the capacity to engage in argument verbally, but were limited in their capacity to express argument through writing. However, Riley’s efforts and methods, which will be discussed later in this chapter, have been used to harness their oral abilities and transfer these skills to preliminary written arguments.

Yet, Taylor, in terms of their position on cognitive limitations, is consistent with Freedman & Pringle (1985) and Vygotsky (1962), who do not understand the development of argumentative skills to necessarily be subsidiary to cognitive development. For Taylor, cognitive development is not understood to be a major limitation for their students. Rather, and I consider this representative of the findings concerning cognitive limitations overall, students will be limited by the stage of their development so as long as teachers allow them to be. Understanding their capacities at their developmental stages as capacities and not limitations will allow teachers to capitalize on student strengths so as to develop written argumentation in them over time.
4.1.2 Skill Development

The development of skills, as per the interviews conducted with both Taylor and Riley, focused on those critical skills that can inform the transferable abilities of students in the thinking and writing process. Both Riley and Taylor held that such skills were immensely important to both the student’s education moving forward, and to their lives as citizens respectively. Taylor’s discussion of critical thinking skills is consistent with that of Langer (1997). In reference to critical thinking, Taylor stated that, “…we [teachers] are always asking the kids to question the world around them”. Taylor supported this statement by asserting that students are prone to either accept their world at “face value”, or simply internalize the position held by their teacher. Critical thinking, for Taylor, means having students not accept, “…the first, most basic consequence or outcome”. From this discussion, Taylor suggests that critical thinking involves elements of deconstruction, careful analysis, and the pursuit of independent thought based on evidence. Langer (1997), consistent with the participants, suggests that exposure to an array of perspectives is a crucial part of the critical thinking process. Moreover, giving students the opportunity to challenge and critically investigate existing norms and opinions that are held as truths allow students to formulate their own opinions based on evidence and reason (Langer, 1997; Pithers & Soden, 2000). Those elements of crucial thinking, including deconstruction, analysis, investigation, evaluation and reasoning, that train students not to accept “truths” at “face value” but rather develop their own thought, are critical skills that both Riley and Taylor stressed in their discussions.

Advanced thinking skills, for Riley, were held to be an immense challenge for students in terms of how they could examine a text critically, and then, in turn, write critically or argumentatively themselves. Riley held that the “over-arching” advanced skillset was
challenging for them to teach, and was also a challenge to students in terms of how the critical skills were lacking. To help develop this skillset, Riley has often used perspective based activities as a way to exercise critical skills. Particular methods included discussing multiple perspectives that individuals may have to a single text.

Taylor explicated the significance of these skills by holding that such skills, in terms of how they develop critical thinking, were, “probably the most necessary thing to teach”. Taylor, like Riley, found that critical questioning skills were a challenge for their intermediate students. A mainstay of Taylor’s pedagogical approach was to develop the skills that students need to question their world, and to conceptualize their everyday with a critical eye. Moreover, the student’s capacity to be independent thinkers was important to consider in terms of the development of these critical skills. Internalizing and abiding by what whatever arguments are presented, for Taylor, was a major challenge for students that needed to be overcome by the equally challenging task of developing the skills to undo this. Consistent with Riley’s methodological approach to developing these skills, Taylor holds that having students write about their perspective on a particular issue is a good way to allow students to get to know their own perspectives. In turn students develop a sense of what perspective means based on the relationship between their own and those of others.

Developing skills, for both participants, was understood to be something important to student learning, but also a challenge that teachers and students faced when teaching and learning argumentative writing. This demonstrates consistency with Langer (2002) who asserts that the skill based challenges faced by students hinder the capacity of teachers to explore argumentative texts with their students. However, both Taylor and Riley were keen to develop these skills through exposure to argumentative structures whether in oral or written forms. Such
practices relate to research that suggests that the developments of argumentative skills are negatively impacted by a more predominant use of narrative forms of literacy education (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Riley did indicate that, in their experience, students encountered difficulty when attempting to understand a text or a task through higher order skills and critical thinking. This is consistent with Langer (2002), who holds that the complexities of the genre, and the higher order skills necessary to understand and communicate through it, are a barrier that both students and teachers will struggle with when encountering argumentation. However, insights from the participants of this study do indicate a significant divergence from the literature in so far as there are challenges surrounding the development of skills. That is, the participants are responding to them in ways that conceptualize the student on a continuum of learning rather than being fundamentally limited by a particular skill set. Indeed, while the teachers discussed their challenges within this realm, their discussion of the challenge was focused less on a fixed skill-set of their students, but rather, one that considered growth.

4.1.3 Student Sensitivities

Taylor, in two instances, raised the issue of student sensitivities during their interview. Taylor claims that the cultural composition of a school may serve as a limitation in terms of the types of topics that can be discussed. Argumentative writing, for Taylor, is hinged upon students practicing their free speech in relation to contentious issues. However, such issues can be, “taboo” according to Taylor, and must be considered when planning argumentative activities. Methodologically, Taylor has opted to gradually introduce new, controversial topics to avoid discontent within the classroom and the wider community.

The second consideration of student sensitivity, within the context of argumentative writing, was the anger or frustration that may arise within students if they feel as though they
have been cheated after coming to understand that sources of information cannot be taken for
granted. Taylor stated that, “...when they start finding out that people don’t always tell the truth,
or that writing and opinions are fuelled by many different things, they may start getting upset”.
Taylor holds that this may motivate students to begin to embrace argumentation as a way to
communicate their own opinions; however, it may also cause them to produce writing and ideas
that irrationally grounded in emotion.

Literature in the field, in terms of the content or subject matter that would be associated
with argumentation, holds that an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach towards argumentation
will allow for meaningful tasks and a higher degree of understanding (Marzano, 1991). Taylor,
in this instance, makes a case for equity, diversity and the relationships in the classroom.
Knowing the students in both on a cultural and personal level, allows teachers to integrate texts,
ideas and materials that not only demonstrate relevance and meaning to the students, but also are
sensitive to the complexities of their lives. Having students take positions on issues that may
offend or impact the mental health of themselves and others, is certainly not conducive to the
creation of safe learning environments. With a keen consideration of the students present in the
classroom, teachers can ensure that cross-curricular approaches to education enhance
understanding, and also ground these experiences in authenticity and safe environments

4.1.4 Lacking Resources

In terms of the availability of resources that were available to aid in the instruction of
argumentative writing, both Taylor and Riley agreed that there were challenges in terms of
acquiring the most appropriate materials. Consideration of this particular challenge illuminates a
correlation between the participant’s emphasis on inadequate resources, and their emphasis on
the challenges posed by cognitive development. Riley reiterated throughout their interview that
acquiring appropriate grade-level materials that could serve as genre specific tools and examples for instruction were not readily available. Riley held that, “finding real texts that would be appropriate examples for their level is hard”. This intersection between the developmental stage of their students, as well as the materials necessary to meet this stage, was frequently alluded to by Riley over the course of their interview. Taylor also offered a commentary on how the availability of resources impacted their instruction. Taylor held that, with regard to teaching argumentative writing, “the most challenging thing was finding relevant materials”. Relevant materials, in this sense, were discussed as both appropriate to the grade level, and being current and relevant to the lives of students. Having a resource that provided real and authentic texts that are grade appropriate, similar to Riley’s perspective on this particular challenge, was something that Taylor understood to be valuable to their program.

The literature surveyed for this study often drew a correlation between exposure to argumentative texts and the ability of students to transfer the mechanics of these texts to their writing (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). However, Dornbrack & Dixon’s (2014) research offers a point of consistency with the challenges faced by the participants in this study. That being a discussion of the benefits associated with resources that can be easily integrated into the classroom. The literature consulted for this study has often demonstrated a preoccupation with what would benefit students, or what they need in terms of using argumentative texts to improve their argumentative abilities. However, scarce attention is paid to the needs and concerns of the participants of this study in terms of the availability and accessibility of appropriate resources.

The findings related to the barriers and challenges students and teachers face in argumentative writing have implications for the use of primary argumentative documents in its instruction. In terms of cognitive development, Riley, in their interview, suggested that
questioning a text through the use of critical skills was beyond their stage of development. However, Riley, in light of lacking resources, also suggests that a resource with grade level appropriate argumentative texts can be used to improve students’ written argumentation. For Taylor, the stage of development of their students is less important to teaching argumentative writing through texts than the critical skills that can be developed through exposure to such documents. In communicating his understanding of critical skills, Taylor held that a variety of elements that make up critical thinking include a student’s capacity to question and critique. These skills were then associated by Taylor, to the impacts of student exposure to argumentative texts, and texts that convey multiple perspectives. Both teachers suggest that using argumentative texts is a viable pedagogical approach in light of how it is conducive to fostering success in this genre for students. However, cognitive and skill based development, as well as lacking resources, seem to render the task of thoroughly integrating these materials into classroom practice a rather difficult one.

4.2 Meeting Student Needs

In light of the aforementioned challenges that Riley and Taylor faced when considering the use of argumentative materials in their pedagogy, both participants offered insights into the ways in which they worked towards meeting their students’ needs.

4.2.1 Teacher Created Resources

In their efforts to overcome the barriers associated with teaching argumentative writing, both participants discussed at length the materials that they have developed in order to meet student needs. Riley has developed creative activities and materials that aid in their instruction. Argumentative texts suitable for fourth graders are, according to Riley, difficult to find, and in light of this Riley has composed sample texts of argumentative pieces to deconstruct with their
students. Moreover, news articles that are written argumentatively, and are appropriate for the comprehension level of their students, are used as a centre piece for argumentative activities. These activities are designed to fuse oral argumentation with perspective based learning in order to deliver argumentative concepts to the students. Moreover, given the many challenges surrounding this topic, Riley has also incorporated the use of images, which they deem to be argumentative in themselves, into their program as a way to develop argumentative discussions without having to be bound to either challenging or unavailable texts.

Riley has also demonstrated consistency with Styslinger & Overstreet (2014) in terms of how teacher creativity in creativity is often necessary to develop resources that meet the particular needs of their students. In this sense, both the research and Riley’s practice agree that building in opportunities for oral argumentation can offer a solid foundation for written argument. Little attention is paid to the efforts made by teachers to create resources and tools for argumentative writing in light of the apparent scarcity. However, consistency with creating spaces where verbal argumentation, the findings suggest that is also important for teachers to have or develop resources that meet the cognitive and skill based needs of their students.

4.2.2 Staff Support

Both participants held that their colleagues were an important factor in meeting the needs of their student’s within the context of argumentation. Riley offered a strong emphasis during their interview about the role of fellow teachers in delivering their students effective argumentative instruction. Riley, on the support offer from their staff, held that,

My best resource [is] to draw on my grade partners...we all stay on the same page, we all share ideas...we go over the curriculum and we decide upon what this type of writing
should look like for grade fours, and how we can bring it about. In the process we share plans and what worked or didn’t work.

In Riley’s case, consistency, sharing materials, and an effort to incorporate many ideas into argumentative instruction is a fundamental part of their instruction. Moreover, this resource lays the foundation for group discussions in reflective practice. That is, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of what the group has created, and working towards improvement constantly.

Taylor, similarly, understood their colleagues to be an important part of how teachers can improve their pedagogies surrounding this form of writing. However, Taylor’s understanding offered insights outside of grade-specific co-planning, and into the entirety of the teaching staff can impact student learning across grade levels. Taylor places immense value in communication between teachers in light of the fact that argumentative writing is practiced at many levels. In this sense, teachers from different grades can collaborate in order to create long-term expectations and scaffolding so as to develop skills in their students with a particular end in mind.

Considering what both Riley and Taylor offered to this discussion in tandem demonstrates how grade-specific needs and planning can be both contextualized and supported within a school wide plan to develop argumentative skills. Meeting student needs, both in the short term and long term, according to the participants, can be facilitated through collaboration with colleagues. The literature in the field seems to attribute high importance to professional development and the training of teachers to improve their pedagogical approach to this discipline (Biancarosa & Snow, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Dierking & Fox, 2012). Both the literature surveyed, and the researcher of this study, seemed to under estimate or anticipate the importance of the role that a cohesive staff plays in determining how to the needs of students are met for this
genre of writing. Of the research consulted, despite its divergences from the matter at hand, Collet (2015) offers a discussion on collaboration most consistent with the participants’ discussion. The professional development case study offered by Collet (2015) saw educators at the elementary, middle school, high school, and university levels come together for professional development focused on argumentative writing. This workshop offered insights into how teachers at different levels shared what worked in their classrooms, and how to create better programs to support learners throughout their time in the school system. When we consider this type of engagement outside of the realm of professional training, but within the scope of the environment of a single school, the participants offer an important element to consider when attempting to integrate proper resources and methods into instruction. Moreover, conceptualizing learning this concept as a part of a continuum, and cooperating with one another throughout the process, as held by Collet (2015), the foundation for significant learning can be laid.

4.2.3 Providing Feedback

Taylor offered insights into how feedback is a crucial component in how teachers can meet the needs of their students when teaching argumentative writing. Exposure to argumentative sources, and writing argumentatively, according to Taylor, is supported by feedback that operates on two different levels. The first is student-centred opinionated feedback that is used to facilitate the construction of safe and inclusive classrooms, and the other is to facilitate the continuous development of a student’s argumentative skills. The student-centred feedback is embedded within the capacity to explore their freedom of speech and their ideas, and to provide oral or written feedback to topics through their own perspectives. Valuing this feedback, according to Taylor, is important so that students know that their “opinions are
accepted in [the classroom] community”. With feedback in this sense established, students feel safe and comfortable sharing their opinions with the larger group through their writing.

Feedback, in terms of student writing, is also understood to be an important way through which student needs can be met. Taylor follows a methodology whereby student-teacher conferencing at frequent points in their writing process can help students gather valuable feedback so as to improve their existing work, as well as recommendations moving forward. Using this method, Taylor has seen that the students are able to develop a sound understanding of what is required, and in turn require less of the teacher’s direction moving forward. Frequent feedback, then, serves as both a point where the affirmation of strengths, along with suggestions for improvement, allow students continuous exposure to expectations, and the ability to alter their approach in small sections rather than being overwhelmed in doing so with a full, final product.

Taylor’s discussion surrounding feedback is in an interesting dialogue with Biancarosa & Snow (2006), as well as the recommendations outlined by educators in a study conducted by Collet (2015). Meeting the needs of learners, according to Biancarosa & Snow (2006), is founded upon descriptive feedback and assessment that focuses on the improvement of students’ skills and understanding of the genre. Taylor, in their discussion, outlined a system whereby scheduled conferences with the students at frequent checkpoints offer formative assessment to the student via descriptive feedback. The recommendations outlined by Collet (2015) assert that the development of skills, and instruction strategies that are conducive to student success in the genre, are a far more effective use of a teacher’s time as compared to delivering extensive feedback to a student based on an entire finished product. The methodology employed by Taylor offers the opportunity for students to learn through feedback, while minimizing the time needed
to debrief the feedback for each individual student. Moreover, according to Taylor, this method gives students the skills they need to write independently to the point where teacher intervention becomes less necessary as students familiarize themselves with the expectations.

The value of integrating argumentative texts in to classrooms is best exemplified by Riley’s creation such texts for their fourth grade class. In this case, Riley demonstrates the importance of not only argumentative texts that is, those texts which are argumentative in structure and meaning, but also appropriate texts that are specific to the grade-level of the students and their needs. Riley, through this practice, suggests that the use of argumentative texts positively impacts student capacity to write argumentatively. Integrating these texts, compels them to develop their own appropriate and specific texts in order to meet student needs. Additionally, both teachers assert that collaboration amongst staff is a highly important element in their instruction of argumentative writing. Through the collaborative development of strategies and ideas, as well as the co-creation of units, the participants suggest that researching, selecting and developing appropriate texts could be more efficiently managed towards the end of improving student writing. Each participant stressed the value of collaborating with their colleagues. The potential for applying this resource towards the end of incorporating texts in to the classroom, and developing consistent feedback methods to facilitate formative assessment strategies based on the texts collectively, can allow teachers to more effectively meet the needs of their students.

4.3 Content and Skill Based Relevance

The participants made reference to how content and skill based relevance are major considerations when giving argumentative instruction. Each participant offered valuable insight into how materials, or content, must be relevant to the lives of the students, as well as how this
content is made relevant based on the degree of their skill. Both Taylor and Riley offered both divergent and similar insights into how relevance should be considered alongside argumentation.

4.3.1 Conceptions of Challenge

A particularly striking divergence between the two participants was apparent in their conceptions of challenge. The researcher anticipated challenge to be spoken of within the context of the obstacles that students face when attempting to grasp the fundamentals of argumentative writing. Considering their 4th grade class, Riley conceptualized challenge by associating it with the higher order skills that were required of students when reading or writing argumentative texts. That is, seeing challenge as an obstacle that students must overcome in their pursuit of learning. For Taylor, however, when considering their 7th grade class, conceptualized challenge through a different lens. Challenge was regarded as less of an obstacle, and more as a means to developing skills. Taylor held that, “… it’s that discomfort that makes them better writers and makes them better readers”. In terms of higher order skills and exposure to argumentative texts, this paper does not attempt to suggest that Riley does not regard challenge as something which is beneficial to student learning. In fact, one could argue the opposite in light of the discussions surrounding cooperation between staff, which can prepare students for intermediate grade levels. Rather, Taylor was explicit in the way in which challenge was understood to be a necessary component in student growth, and defined challenge in ways that was both unexpected to the researcher, as well as scarcely considered in existing literature. An important consideration of this paper, then, is the multiple conceptions of challenge and the intricacies of how challenge can be conceptualized in one way or another.

In terms of the literature consulted, notions of challenge were often understood within the context of limitations. The literature held that argumentative writing was a challenge for students
in light of inadequate exposure to the structure (Chambliss & Murphy, 2002). In addition, when presented with this structure, students are often unaware that the text they are encountering is, in fact, argumentative (Biancarosa & Snow, 2008). Yet, reading argumentative writing is understood by experts in the field to be a fundamental part of educating students to be argumentative writers (Newell et al, 2011; Crowhurst, 1990). The literature, then, while conceptualizing challenge in terms of limitation, also implies, when seen together, the sort of growth that Taylor discusses when they conceptualize challenge. Taylor, in this sense, demonstrates consistency with Shanahan & Shanahan (2008) who assert that the development of student literacy is founded upon exposure to materials that are unfamiliar to them in both form and structure in order to incite growth.

4.3.2 Student Engagement

Student engagement, for both participants, was a central part of how they sought to integrate argumentative texts into their instruction. Student engagement, in one sense, was discussed in terms of how activities must interest the students, perhaps with a more interactive component attached to it. Riley held that cross-curricular approaches to teaching argumentative writing have the capacity to make learning the discipline more meaningful and engaging. They also used primary argumentative texts, such as news articles, and the teacher would verbalize a hypothetical opinion to the article. Riley discussed how purposefully outlandish teacher created verbal responses incited a level of enjoyment when students interacted with the texts and with writing their responses to them. Riley similar to Taylor, was also keen to conceptualize student engagement in terms of relevance to the students. Relevance, in the sense that the expectations were relevant to their abilities as readers and writers, as well as having activities and materials
that were meaningful to the lives of students, was also strongly considered by both Riley and Taylor.

For Taylor, student engagement based on the relevance of the texts and activities to the lives of students was a crucial part of developing argumentative reading and writing skills in students. In attempting to illustrate their position, Taylor stated that one should avoid,

... do[ing] the basics like, ‘should we have summer vacation?’, the kids have done this for years and years and they don’t want that, they want new stuff. Keep it open and allow their interests to come through because what you’re interested in might be completely different from the kids. Let them explore and discuss their passions.

Taylor understands the passion of students to be an important resource to draw on in order to develop argumentative writing skills. The challenge of knowing you students, and making the materials they encounter relevant to their lives is a central part to Taylor’s pedagogical approach. Seen alongside Riley’s association between cross-curricular pedagogies and student engagement, passions that are developed and scaffolded in other subject matters, for Taylor, could bring out both the relevance and the authenticity that both participants were keen to infuse into their pedagogies.

The literature in the field focused less on relevance in the sense of appropriate grade-level materials, and more on student engagement through meaningful and authentic tasks that are relevant to the lives of students. Marzano (1991) offers a succinct and effective understanding of the means through which tasks can be made relevant for students. This correlates with the practice of this study’s participants, and also the purpose of this study insofar as cross-curricular approaches to argumentative writing are infused into teacher pedagogy. Marzano (1991) asserts that cross-curricular approaches to argumentation are immensely important to student growth in
terms of how it fosters a higher degree of understanding, but also how this methodology gives meaning and relevance to the task. Moreover, a cross-curricular program will also allow for student directed learning, and allow them to make the practice of this skill relevant to them based on their own opinions and interests (Fogarty, 1991). Both Riley and Taylor seem to frame student engagement in this sense as something highly important to making a complex task actually meaningful for students.

Both participants understood challenge on slightly different terms. However, seen together, conceptualizing challenge as both a barrier and a necessary component of growth allowed each teacher to position the role of argumentative texts in their instruction. Riley and Taylor’s views suggest that it is important for teachers to integrate materials that are conducive to the long-term growth of students, rather than considering challenge as something that is inhibitive. Moreover, both participants held that this can be best accomplished by ensuring that argumentative texts and topics selected are relevant to the lives of students. Relevancy in this sense can motivate students to offer their best work in light of each of the conceptions of challenge held by the teachers. Content and skill based relevancy, therefore, should be considered together when applying argumentative texts to instruction given its potential to impact student writing.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of a study focused on teachers’ perspectives of teaching argumentative writing through the use of primary argumentative documents. The study gathered data using semi-structured interviews with two teachers in Southern Ontario school boards, and their perspectives and practices were compared, contrasted, and conceptualized through existing literature in the field. The interviews conducted with the participants, and the
discussion with the literature consulted, was divided in to three major themes that emerged throughout the study. These themes included the barriers and challenges faced by teachers in teaching argumentative writing, the effort to meet student needs, and the content and skill based relevance that was considered in their practice.

Consideration of the challenges teachers faced in teaching argumentation, and integrating argumentative texts in to their practice, was understood through four sub-themes. Namely, cognitive development, skill development, and content and skill-based relevance were considered. Throughout this theme, similarities and differences in perspectives emerged between each of the participants. Similar to each participant was that they understood argumentation to be, in general, a difficult concept for students to grasp. Riley, who taught the 4th grade, emphasized the cognitive stage of their students’ development as being a challenge that both they and their students needed to overcome. For Taylor, who taught the 7th grade, the development of skills was seen as a more focal challenge of their practice. Literature in the field offered attention to both of these barriers, yet the participants conceptualized these barriers as existing on a continuum of student learning and growth, rather that the fixity of challenges as suggested by existing research. Both teachers understood the procurement of resources as a challenge to their practice, and held that grade appropriate resources that touch on a variety of engaging topics would benefit student learning.

Despite these differences that could perhaps stem from the fact that the participants taught at different grade levels, both teachers recognized that these challenges they faced were highly important to overcome. That is, both understood the skills and competencies that argumentation could instill within their students, and each participant recognized the significance that these skill had on their students’ academic life and citizenship.
In light of its significance, I identified a related theme that considers the efforts made by teachers to meet the needs of their students. Both participants, responding to the barriers they face, created their own resources and specialized activities to meet student needs. Riley, for example, used oral argumentation activities to meet the needs of their students given that, at their stage of development, students responded to it better than in written form. Literature in the field did not consider teacher creativity as a central focus in terms of developing classroom specific resources. Moreover, Taylor offered a feedback strategy they used to meet the needs of their students which demonstrated consistency with research suggesting the importance of feedback to student learning, while also demonstrating consistency with other studies which contained recommendations to spend less time on feedback (over time) and more time on developing skills and expectations. In addition, the literature in the field did not speak directly to, as mentioned in the theme concerning the challenges teachers faced, the role of staff support in schools. Each of the participants understood the support of staff members to be among their most important resources, and how communication between grade-partners and grade levels could create a plan that emphasizes consistency, student growth, and cooperation. Important to the analysis of this theme, was the unique measures teachers took in order to serve their students, and also the ways in which learning environments that span many grade levels can facilitate the exchange of resources, ideas and expectations in to every classroom.

Meeting student needs, for the participants, was best understood through ensuring their programs were founded upon content and skill based relevance. In terms of delivering content and developing skills, both participants held different conceptions of challenge. For the participant teaching the 4th grade, challenge was conceptualized as impeding student capacity to understand important concepts in the discipline; especially in light of Riley’s focus on the
cognitive development of their students. Taylor understood challenge as something that must be imposed upon students in order to facilitate their growth, understanding and ability. Each demonstrated consistency, to a certain extent, to existing literature in the field. However, seen together, it allows for an understanding of how cooperation in a school among teachers can guide students along their learning path, and scaffold success over time. The participants also saw that relevance be ensured, in terms of content, on a number of levels. Firstly, that topics and materials are at an appropriate level, and secondly, that topics and materials are engaging and stimulating to the students. The teachers’ commitment to cross-curricular pedagogies in this regard demonstrated consistency with existing literature in so far as interdisciplinary approaches to teaching argumentation offer a level of authenticity and relevance to support student understanding.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of Ontario teachers towards the use of primary documents to teach argumentative writing. The study sought whether or not using primary, genre specific texts in order to facilitate student learning is a viable and effective pedagogical approach. The study focused on a qualitative research method using semi-structured interviews with two teachers in Southern Ontario school boards to investigate their methods, opinions, and pedagogies surrounding this research question. The findings of the study suggest that, depending on the stage of a student’s cognitive development, either cognitive development itself or exposure to argumentative texts poses a challenge to both teachers and students with regards to written argumentation. However, the study moved beyond the expectations of the researcher through the insights surrounding the methods employed by the two interviewees, and their position on school-wide collaboration.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and their Significance

Key findings that emerged from this study included the barriers and challenges that students faced in argumentative writing, the response made by teachers to meet their student’s needs, and the designing of an argumentative writing program that is relevant to students based on content and skill. Each of the participants shared the opinion that developing written argumentation in students is both important to their academic life and their citizenship. However, both participants also agreed that written argumentation is a discipline that many students struggle with due to the complexity of the genre. In light of this, both participants offered examples of how their efforts to meet student’s needs manifest themselves in their programs.
Consistent with existing literature in the field, both participants discussed how the stage of cognitive development of their students, as well as the level of their writing skills, impacted their capacity to effectively engage with written argumentation. Both participants’ reflections were consistent with the literature in the field based on their continued attempts to integrate argumentative texts within their instruction. However, both participants added an important insight to the existing literature through their stress on the significance of teacher collaboration surrounding this genre of writing.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Broad: The Educational Community

Conceptualizing student learning as a continuum of growth, and developing pedagogies that attempt to break through the barriers and challenges that students encounter in written argumentation, is a major theme within the findings of this study. This research suggests that literacy, as a vital component of student learning, must be regarded beyond the importance of the curriculum. Considering this, the implications for pre-service teacher education may include collaboration amongst cohorts whereby teacher candidates across divisions coordinate with one another to compose units and lessons to model consistency for student growth in literacy. Argumentative writing, especially in light of the critical skills associated with it, would be an important genre to consider when simulating a school environment in preservice teacher education. Communication between teachers regarding the issues that may arise in their own classes could be shared and school wide expectations and goals set by the staff could be addressed as a whole. Taylor, in their discussion of the matter of the professional culture in schools, held that an erosion of professional relationships or, “politics”, has the potential to impede meaningful collaboration that could positively impact students’ short term and long term
development. The participants of this study suggested that a high level of collaboration between staff members is significant to such a complex yet important discipline for students to understand. Collaboration, as Taylor suggests will vary between schools, however, the participants suggest that it is among the most important resources a teacher can draw on in terms of teaching argumentative writing.

Moreover, when considering the difficulties faced by teachers and students in terms of cognitive and skill development, grade partners can collaborate in developing materials and activities so that students may grasp a sense of the argumentative structure, while also meeting the expectations that are set by the staff through the students’ intermediate and senior years. Academic success and important life skills have the potential to be developed and instilled within students over the course of their education through argumentative writing. Plans and procedures that facilitate collaboration conducive to long term goals for students is a meaningful way to ensure that students are getting the most out of their opportunity to engage with written argumentation.

5.2.2 Narrow: My Professional Identity and Practice

As both a researcher and a teacher, the literature in the field and the findings of this study will impact my instruction of argumentative writing, and also help me to reflect on how I conduct myself as a professional. In terms of integrating argumentative texts in to my own pedagogy, it is important to my practice to offer students exposure to such texts in order to guide them towards a better understanding of its form. It is imperative that students are able to read and collaboratively engage with argumentative texts, whether these texts are independently created, co-created with colleagues or contain primary, historical documents. Moreover, the integration of such materials must also be used in a manner that allows me to make such learning experiences
most relevant to my students based on their lives, skills, and the stage of their development. However, integrating real world texts may offer a more authentic means through which students may explore pressing issues in their communities. In light of this, advocating for appropriate resources that offer such texts, as well as maintaining a connection with current research and with current events will be immensely important.

In terms of my role as a professional in an educational and school community, being an avid and active collaborator in my school would be foundational for my practice. Based on the findings, staff collaboration is an invaluable resource for teachers to draw on when considering argumentative writing. However, the discussion offered by the participants suggested that, given the importance of collaboration, it should not be limited strictly to argumentation. Demonstrating a willingness to participate, collaborate and innovate in school wide initiatives and individual exchanges can facilitate the creation of an environment that is open, cordial and professional. Early on in my career, it may be difficult to establish myself as a leader in inspiriting and coordinating new initiatives. However, during this stage of my teaching, being an enthusiastic and willing collaborator who is willing to support the initiatives of others, and offer feedback to better the experiences of students, is a way in which I can be a positive influence in my school. As I develop, and come to know the culture, students, and staff of a school, I can take on a more pronounced role in school leadership. This may include starting clubs based on student’s needs, supporting staff with feedback and workshops based on research, and modelling professional relationships to new teachers. Overall, it is important to my development as a professional and as a dedicated teacher to find unique and innovative ways to collaborate and support my colleagues.

Moreover, facilitating free environments within the classroom can lay the foundation for student success. Inspiring students to develop their own perspectives on topics that matter to
them are important to how they can motivate themselves to develop their own literacy and critical thinking skills. This involves both giving the students independence in terms of bringing their experiences and interests in to the genre, but also my responsibility to introduce current and pressing societal issues to allow them exposure to a wide range of possible issues that may interest them or ignite their desire to explore further and add their own perspective to the matter.

Overall, it is important to my practice as a teacher to remain a researcher, as this will ensure that I am employing the most current methods to serve my students. Integrating argumentative texts, collaborating with my colleagues, and finding ways to best motivate and inspire each individual student will allow me to help students carry a fundamentally important skill throughout their education and beyond.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study related to the integration of primary documents in to argumentative writing instruction, recommendations emerge for how to improve student learning and teacher practice. According to the participants argumentative texts need to be relevant to students’ grade level. School boards collaborating with publishers and faculties of education can allow for the development of resource packs that offer carefully considered, primary argumentative texts related to different areas of the curriculum for different grade levels. A resource pack such as this should exist for each grade, and include diagnostic and summative assessment suggestions so that teachers can gather a sense of the needs of their students. Moreover, such a resource pack should account for the cultural diversity of Ontario’s schools, including Indigenous perspectives. To ensure relevance of the resources to students, editions of such a series should also be revised and updated in order to ensure that current events that impact the lives of students are considered. With these resources, teachers can create a solid foundation
for students to understand argumentative structures. Moreover, such a resource would offer teachers a sound understanding of which type of documents are suitable for their grade should they seek out their own texts.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

The findings of this study offer the opportunity for further research in the field in order to improve student learning. Over the duration of this study, questions did emerge for the researcher which could further advance research in the field of argumentative writing. Future studies might investigate an Ontario school which has implemented a formal, school-wide plan for teaching argumentative writing. Areas of investigation may include teachers’ use of argumentative texts in their pedagogy, as well as their opinions surrounding the level of collaboration in their schools. From such data, a research sample could be established that includes responses and methods across the spectrum. The study might also collect the methods and results of pedagogies that incorporate argumentative texts, and which draw a correlation between student improvement and learning. Nonetheless, this study has provided some insight into how teachers perceive integrating argumentative texts into their classrooms, and the measures they take to ensure that their students are afforded the opportunity to engage with them. However, it is important to consider that the limitations of this study could inform the basis of new studies in this field. For example, while the sample size of this study was small and limited to teachers, a larger sample that included the perspectives of students, administrators, and faculties of education could offer important insights that enrich our understanding of teaching written argumentation.

5.5 Concluding Comments

This study demonstrated that a sample of Ontario teachers regarded the use of argumentative texts for written instruction favourably. Both participants offered insightful
reflections and instructional strategies, and when seen together with literature in the field, the study demonstrates that while each participant regards the incorporation of such texts challenging, considering student learning on a continuum of growth embedded within collaboration amongst colleagues can bring about student success. The study explored the areas of collaboration, feedback and a conception of student learning as growth overtime rather than impeded in a particular grade level in more pronounced ways. That is, while the literature in the field and the participants agreed on the need to offer students exposure to argumentative texts, written argumentation is a difficult, higher order skill. The participants moved the discussion beyond the realm of obstacles and impediments, and in to a context whereby students grow in their capacity as argumentative writers. This is supported by the commitment and collaboration of the teachers in a school.

The stress that both the research literature and the participants placed on the genre as a key element of citizenship has significant implications for the educational community in terms of how resources, time and collaboration are directed at argumentative instruction. Providing students with the foundation to participate critically in a democracy can prepare students for active citizenship based on self and collective advocacy. Whether this manifests itself in traditional forms of advocacy through voting or participating in democratic demonstrations, or simply helping graduates to effectively analyze information they receive with a critical eye, argumentative writing has the potential to develop a more active citizen. Developing this important life skill overtime, by extension, is another significant implication that this study has on the educational community, and has a direct impact on how student needs are met, and how schools and the relationships within them are impacted.

In light of the importance of using argumentative texts, the study also offers insight on to
the reasons why this pedagogical approach may not be used in classrooms across the province. The genre of writing is complex and demanding on the students both in terms of skill and their stage of cognitive development. In light of this, teachers may find it difficult to prepare and deliver a pedagogy that puts students on a trajectory of long term success in a manner that does not impact the allotted time necessary to develop other important literacy skills in students. To exacerbate the issue, comprehensive resource packages that could benefit both students and teachers are lacking according to the participants. The reasons as to why this pedagogical approach may not be applied to classrooms could also emerge out of the relationships amongst colleagues in a school. That is, the nature of such relationships may be unconducive to meaningful collaboration amongst staff for the benefit of students.

Based on the findings and implications of this study, a recommendation to supplement teacher collaboration with a grade-specific resource pack was suggested in order to improve the instruction of argumentative writing. Collaboration between publishers, teachers, administrators and faculties of education could serve students by compiling the most appropriate argumentative texts into a single document for teachers to integrate into their instruction. The development of this resource could allow students exposure primary argumentative texts throughout their education. This comes with the added benefit of having students engage with unfamiliar perspectives, and also giving teachers the ability to review which texts students had encountered previously. Overall, the creation of such resources can offer teachers a common starting point in their collaboration. In addition, it can offer students exposure to texts that are relevant to them in terms of the content and skills required to read and produce related argumentative texts.

Moreover, the complexity of the discipline at hand should be met by professional development that is equally intricate in the way in which it prepares teachers for classroom instruction. Such
training could ensure that schools have one or two experts who have valuable insights into the discipline in terms of its content and instruction, but also in terms of how to organize a school collaboratively to allow for colleague support on a wider scale. This professional development should also model a variety of texts and how they could be integrated in to an appropriate grade level, as well as model the collaborative process that teachers could incorporate in to their own schools. Perhaps the co-teaching of a lesson created at the workshop, at many different grade levels, could incite both the process of collaboration, as well as offering teachers an understanding of the types of approaches that can best meet the needs of their students.
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Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date:

Dear ____________________.

My Name is Vincent Spano and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on the argumentative writing pedagogies of a sample of Ontario teachers. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have experience teaching argumentative writing within the Ontario. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor, Rose Fine-Meyer. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Vincent Spano

Vincent Spano
Phone Number
v.spano@mail.utoronto.ca
Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Rose Fine-Meyer
Contact Info: rose.fine.meyer@utoronto.ca
Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Vincent Spano, and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ______________________________________

Name: (printed) ______________________________________

Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn the pedagogical approaches of a sample of Ontario teachers toward argumentative writing. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on argumentative writing and cross-curricular approaches to education. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section A - Background Information

1. How many years have you been a teacher in Ontario?

2. What grade do you currently teach? Which have you previously taught?

3. In addition to your role as a teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in the school (e.g. coach, advisor, resource teacher etc.)?

4. Can you describe the community in which your school is situated (i.e. diversity, socioeconomic status)? How long have you taught at this school?

Section B - Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs

5. How do you feel about cross-curricular approaches to education?

6. How do you prioritize your language classes in relation to others, if at all?

7. How important is it for students to develop critical thinking skills at the grade level that you currently teach?

8. What are your feelings, as a teacher, towards teaching argumentative writing to your students?
9. Do you feel as though student reading can improve student writing?

Section C - Teacher Practices

10. What methods do you use when teaching argumentative or persuasive writing?

11. In your experience, what is the most challenging aspect of this topic for students to grasp?

12. What aspects of teaching this topic are challenging for you as a teacher?

13. To what extent are your students exposed to argumentative or persuasive writing for reading (in any subject)?

14. In what ways, if any, have you used cross-curricular approaches to teach argumentative writing?

15. Is the exposure and analysis of argumentative or persuasive texts integrated into your pedagogical approach to teaching this topic?

Section D – Supports, Challenges, and Next Steps

16. What kinds of support systems and resources are available to you in terms of teaching argumentative writing?

17. How do you feel about these existing resources and support systems?

18. What advice would you give to new teachers entering the profession about teaching argumentative writing?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.