

## AN INVESTIGATION OF ELEMENTARY PRESERVICE TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS WRITING

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**Abstract:** This article examines how elementary (K-6) preservice teachers (n=34) perceive writing and themselves as writers. Results may indicate limited experience discussing and/or sharing their writing with classmates and peers throughout their education for the purpose of honing their craft as writers. By better understanding the role of preservice teachers' attitudes about and experiences with writing, teacher education programs can assist preservice teachers in developing healthy attitudes toward writing. Improved teacher attitudes could potentially improve classroom writing instruction as well as elementary students' attitudes towards writing and views of themselves as writers.

### INTRODUCTION

Writing, in its many forms, is the signature means of communication in the 21st century and, as such, a crucial skill for individuals to be engaged in as learners and active participants in today's interconnected world. While the recommendations made by the National Reading Panel in 2000 emphasized the core components of teaching reading with little acknowledgment regarding the teaching of writing (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000), the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have been recently adopted by 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories, stress the teaching of writing as well as reading (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The prominence of writing in the CCSS makes effective writing instruction essential in elementary classrooms. Students who not only know how to write well, but also know how to learn through writing in all disciplines, have a greater chance of academic and career success (National Writing Project, 2013). Thus, the National Commission on Writing (2003) has suggested that schools double the amount of time most students currently spend writing. Implementing this suggestion would require writing to be taught in all subjects, at all grade levels, in a variety of formats, truly exemplifying the belief that "writing is everybody's business" (p. 5).

Unfortunately, many pre- and inservice teachers have negative attitudes towards writing (Howard, 1984; Levin, 1993; Richardson, 1992) and are not prepared to use writing with their students or are unable to help their students develop into writers (National Commission on Writing, 2003). It is possible that these unconstructive attitudes are a result of their own lack of confidence as writers. Teachers who are not confident writers themselves, do not feel adequate to teach writing (Bowie, 1996). It is fundamentally important that preservice teachers examine their own attitudes towards writing and view of themselves as writers before accepting responsibility for teaching others to write. Further, it is vital that teacher educators lead preservice teachers through the examination of their attitudes toward writing while assisting them in obtaining the knowledge, skills, and abilities to teach writing as part of a well-balanced literacy program and integrated across the curriculum.

### WRITING ATTITUDES

Attitudes brought to writing influence what individuals can ultimately achieve in writing (Musgrove, 1998/1999). Similarly, the attitudes brought to writing instruction impact a teacher's effectiveness. In Levin's study of 67 preservice teachers, 42 (63%) had negative feelings about writing and claimed to write only when required to do so. Howard (1984) reported that while teachers may not be willing to blatantly state that writing is unimportant, they did have a negative connotation of writing and seem to associate writing assignments with

extensive amounts of work. Street and Stang (2009) found no significant relationships between secondary inservice teachers' lack of self-confidence as writers and gender, years teaching, subject matter taught or grade level taught. Rather, the vast majority of these participants cited former teachers and school experiences as the most important factors that influenced their views of themselves as writers. In fact, negative attitudes about writing are most often the result of previous writing experiences (Richardson, 1992; Phillips, 1992). This is not surprising considering that preservice teachers have been exposed to years of writing experiences before they enter the university, the quality and interactions of which would certainly contribute to how they define themselves as writers (Street, 2002). In fact, attitudes have been defined as "psychological states acquired over a period of time as a result of our experiences; these attitudes influence us to act in certain ways" (McLeod, 1991, p. 98). Some teachers bring negative attitudes about their abilities to use the writing process and their teaching of it to the classroom (Richardson, 1992).

The influential relationship between teachers' attitudes about writing and their classroom practices have been repeatedly established (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Bowie, 1996; Grossman et al., 2000; Kennedy, 1998; Lapp & Flood, 1985; Mayher, 1990; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Shrofel, 1991). Gaining insights into the writing attitudes of preservice teachers is essential to understanding more fully the relationship between the learning experiences of these future teachers and their effectiveness as teachers of writing (Bloom, 1990). The research of Bratcher and Stroble (1994), who conducted a longitudinal study of teachers who participated in the National Writing Project Summer Institute, clearly demonstrates that self-confidence in teachers is crucial in order for growth in both writing and teaching to occur. Likewise, Bowie (1996) discovered that when teachers are not confident writers themselves, they do not feel adequate to teach writing or to use it as a tool. In a qualitative study by Street (2003), teachers who saw themselves as writers offered a great deal to students regarding in-class writing experiences that other teachers did not. Graves (1983) states the importance of individuals seeing themselves as both writers and teachers before entering the classroom: "The teaching of writing demands the control of two crafts, teaching and writing. They can neither be avoided, nor separated" (p. 6). Until teachers know as authors what writing is like, they will never truly be able to teach their students to write well (National Writing Project, 2013).

While it is challenging for university faculty to overcome negative writing attitudes (Street & Stang, 2009), research demonstrates that, indeed, writing attitudes and skills can be changed by effective university courses (Chambless & Bass, 1995; Franklin, 1992; Lapp & Flood, 1985; Phillips, 1992; Stover, 1986; Street, 2003; Street & Stang, 2009). Findings from two focus groups conducted with preservice teachers indicated that teacher educators should not only concentrate on building preservice teachers' confidence in the teaching of writing, but also on helping them become better writers themselves (Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Chambless and Bass (1995) suggest that if teacher educators want to influence teachers' writing attitudes, they must stress process-writing pedagogy in their courses. Acknowledging the strong influence of teachers' writing histories on their attitudes about writing, Street and Stang (2009) recommend situating writing instruction within a nurturing and sustaining learning community that focuses on sharing in-process writing and supporting each individual's identity as a writer. By uncovering and exploring writing attitudes in university settings, teacher educators can help students as they strive to accept new methodologies and conceptions of writing. As this newly gained knowledge of writing and how to teach it increases, their attitudes of themselves as writers becomes more positive making them better prepared to effectively incorporate writing into their classrooms (Lapp & Flood, 1985; Street, 2002).

## PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The writing attitudes of preservice teachers are an important consideration for a number of reasons. Most significantly, attitudes influence practice, and these individuals will soon be responsible for teaching writing in schools to students, where superior writing instruction is needed (Street, 2002). Also of note is the influence that teachers' attitudes have on the development of students' attitudes. Thus, improved teacher attitudes could potentially improve classroom writing instruction as well as students' attitudes towards writing and views of themselves as writers. The purpose of this study was to explore the writing attitudes of preservice teachers in order to inform the practices of teacher educators regarding writing instruction methodology.

## PARTICIPANTS

A quantitative, descriptive research model was used to investigate writing attitudes of elementary preservice

teachers (n=34) in the College of Education at a university located in the southeastern United States. The university is classified by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools as a Level VI institution and by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as Doctoral/Research Intensive University. Thirty-two participants were female, and two were male. Thirty participants were undergraduates, and four were graduate students. The race of the participants was as follows: 29 White, 4 African American, and 1 Asian. All participants were seeking initial teaching certificate in Elementary Education (K-6).

**INSTRUMENT**

The Writing Attitude Scale (Podsén, 1997) was used to collect data in this study. This 20-item instrument, which uses a 5-point Likert-like response scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” ascertains the respondents’ attitudes about writing and their perspective of themselves as writers. Twelve items (2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, and 20) are positive statements regarding feelings toward writing, and eight items (1, 4, 5, 6, 11, 14, 15, and 19) are negatively stated. The negative items are reverse scored for directional consistency when scoring. Possible scores range from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating a more positive, more confident attitude toward writing and one’s self as a writer.

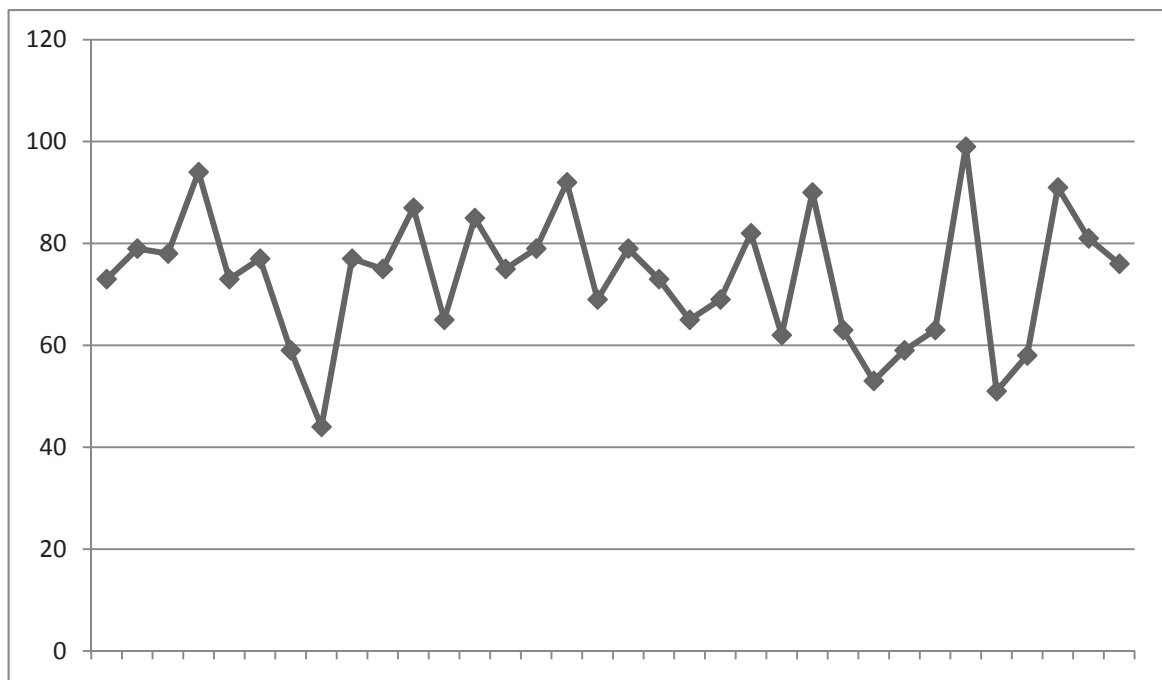
**DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The instrument was disseminated to 36 elementary preservice teachers via Survey Monkey™ correspondence at the end of their semester long internship in a public school K-6 classroom. Thirty-four preservice teachers completed the survey for a response rate of 94%. Responses to the survey items were converted to numerical data, and the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were calculated. The research question was examined using descriptive statistics to calculate frequencies and percentages. For the purpose of determining concurrence, responses for “strongly agree” and “agree” were added together. To maintain uniformity, responses to “strongly disagree” or “disagree” were added for the purpose of identifying disagreement.

**RESULTS**

Total scores on the Writing Attitude Scale, which are presented in Figure 1, spanned from 44 to 99 with a range of 55. The mean was 73.3 with a standard deviation of 13.02. The total score median was 75, and the data set was bimodal, resulting in modes of 73 and 79.

*Figure 1 Distribution of Total Writing Attitude Scale Scores*



Responses to the 12 positively stated items reported as both frequencies and percentages appear in Table 1 while responses for the 8 negatively stated items are reported in Table 2. The highest rated items were items 1 and 3 with 30 (88.2%) participants disagreeing with the statement “I avoid writing whenever possible” and agreeing with the statement “I look forward to writing down my ideas.” Other items rated at higher than 80% included 29 (85.3%) participants disagreeing with item 6 (Expressing my ideas through writing is a waste of time.) and 28 participants agreeing with item 16 (I like seeing my thoughts on paper.). The lowest rating was obtained when 20 (58.8%) participants reported disagreeing with items 7 (I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication.) and 10 (I like to have my friends read what I have written.). As shown in Table 1, participants greatest use of “I Don’t Know” as a response occurred with items 12 (People seem to enjoy what I write.) and 17 (Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.), with responses of 18 (54.5%) and 11 (32.4%) respectively.

Table 1: Participants' responses to positively stated items

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Don't Know	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. I have no fear of my writing being evaluated.	6.1% (2)	21.2% (7)	6.1% (2)	<b>42.4% (14)</b>	24.2% (8)
3. I look forward to writing down my ideas.	0.0% (0)	5.9% (2)	5.9% (2)	<b>58.8% (20)</b>	29.4% (10)
7. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines for evaluation and publication.	23.5% (8)	<b>35.3% (12)</b>	17.6% (6)	17.6% (6)	5.9% (2)
8. I like to write my ideas down.	2.9% (1)	11.8% (4)	5.9% (2)	<b>58.8% (20)</b>	20.6% (7)
9. I feel confident in my ability to express my ideas in writing.	2.9% (1)	5.9% (2)	14.7% (5)	<b>47.1% (16)</b>	29.4% (10)
10. I like to have my friends read what I have written.	2.9% (1)	20.6% (7)	17.6% (6)	<b>41.2% (14)</b>	17.6% (6)
12. People seem to enjoy what I write.	3.0% (1)	9.1% (3)	<b>54.5% (18)</b>	24.2% (8)	9.1% (3)
13. I enjoy writing.	0.0% (0)	17.6% (6)	11.8% (4)	<b>50.0% (17)</b>	20.6% (7)
16. I like seeing my thoughts on paper.	0.0% (0)	8.8% (3)	8.8% (3)	<b>61.8% (21)</b>	20.6% (7)
17. Discussing my writing with others is an enjoyable experience.	2.9% (1)	14.7% (5)	32.4% (11)	<b>38.2% (13)</b>	11.8% (4)
18. It is easy for me to write good letters.	0.0% (0)	11.8% (4)	20.6% (7)	<b>50.0% (17)</b>	17.6% (6)
20. Writing is a lot of fun.	0.0% (0)	20.6% (7)	11.8% (4)	<b>55.9% (19)</b>	11.8% (4)

Table 2: Participants’ responses to negatively stated items

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. I avoid writing whenever possible.	29.4%(10)	<b>58.8%(20)</b>	11.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
4. I am afraid of writing when I know it might be evaluated.	20.6% (7)	<b>44.1% (15)</b>	8.8% (3)	26.5% (9)	0.0% (0)
5. My mind seems to go blank when I start writing.	17.6% (6)	<b>61.8% (21)</b>	2.9% (1)	17.6% (6)	0.0% (0)
6. Expressing my ideas through writing is a waste of time.	38.2% (13)	<b>47.1% (16)</b>	11.8% (4)	0.0% (0)	2.9% (1)
11. I'm nervous about my writing.	15.2% (5)	<b>60.6% (20)</b>	9.1% (3)	15.2% (5)	0.0% (0)
14. I never seem to be able to write down my ideas clearly.	24.2% (8)	<b>48.5% (16)</b>	12.1% (4)	12.1% (4)	3.0% (1)
15. I'm not a good writer.	23.5% (8)	<b>52.9% (18)</b>	8.8% (3)	14.7% (5)	0.0% (0)
19. I don't think I write as well as most people.	11.8% (4)	<b>44.1% (15)</b>	20.6% (7)	14.7% (5)	8.8% (3)

## DISCUSSION

Participants' responses seemed to reflect an overall enjoyment of writing and a generally positive view of themselves as writers. These results indicate that participants were approaching graduation with the efficacy that should facilitate the teaching of writing in a positive light. The literacy courses focus on teaching the writing process, modes of writing, and the art and craft of writing. It can be postulated that the instructors of these methods courses were successful in teaching these preservice teachers how to meet these objectives with their students while also focusing on differentiating instruction, and helping to connect the preservice teacher's personal views of writing with the teaching of writing.

While this is an essential beginning, it should also be noted that participants were most hesitant about publicly sharing their written products and seemed most ambivalent about their feelings related to other's participation in and reaction to their writing. Combined, these results may indicate limited experience discussing and/or sharing their writing with classmates and peers throughout their education for the purpose of honing their craft as writers. An audience's response to an individual's writing plays an important part in shaping the view that person has of himself as a writer as well as providing motivation for future writing (Tunks & Giles, 2007).

Preservice teachers' probable lack of prior positive, collaborative experiences as they progress through the stages of the writing process makes it even more critical that such experiences are a part of their teacher preparation programs, most likely embedded in methodology courses. It is the connection between one's efficacies regarding the act of writing to the actual teaching of writing that must become a primary focus of preservice preparation. Critical to the process is the engagement of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (Pearson & Gallaher, 1983; Harvey & Goudvis, 2005) in university coursework. Initially, *modeling* of the flexible use of interactive process writing through publishing is vital in order for preservice teachers to gain the skills, abilities, and attitudes required. This must be followed with *guided practice*, whereby the instructor leads the preservice candidates in writing and sharing, along with *collaborating* with their peers for feedback, and working independently. Teacher educators should structure the opportunities for the preservice candidates to *share their learning* as a group, to become public authors. This process will help prepare them to provide the same type of scaffolded experiences for their future students and feel more prepared and confident to do so.

## LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Using a convenience sample of a small size limits the generalizability of the findings because there is no assurance that the participants reflect characteristics of the entire population of preservice teachers. Further, data was collected through self-report methods. It should be noted that while it is possible that participants may have been tempted to respond as they deemed was expected, this risk is perceived as minimal since the survey was completely anonymous.

## CONCLUSION

As schools strive to meet the challenge of improving student writing, teacher educators must provide opportunities for preservice teachers to improve their attitudes toward writing and confidence as writers through the courses they take in their teacher preparation programs. In the area of writing instruction, the self-confidence of preservice teachers is significant because writing is often not an activity that naturally encourages confidence in one's own abilities (Mayher, 1990). By better understanding the role of preservice teachers' attitudes about and experiences with writing, teacher education programs can assist preservice teachers in confronting, and possibly changing, negative writing attitudes brought with them to the university (Street, 2003). Just as developing a community of writers is important in the elementary classroom (Kent, 2012), it is also critical to develop a community of writers with preservice teachers. Teacher educators must develop experiences, both in the coursework and supported in field experiences, that scaffold the preservice teachers opportunity to develop into confident writers, who are then confident in their abilities to teach writing. Through these opportunities, preservice teachers becoming new teachers will likely be more self-assured in teaching writing to their students. The combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the writing process and open, healthy attitudes toward writing will enable future teachers to give their students greater opportunities to excel in writing and communicating in this Information Age.



## FUTURE RESEARCH

Examining the longitudinal impact of preservice teachers' attitudes regarding writing and their confidence in teaching writing with their attitudes and confidence as inservice teachers is an important step in establishing transfer between preservice preparation and their role as a professional. In addition, it is important to research the connection between reported attitudes about writing and view of one's self as a writer on the actual teaching of writing, and ultimately, student achievement.

In order to triangulate the data and verify self-report information, using multiple data sources to examine preservice (and inservice) teachers' writing attitudes is critical, especially given the limitations of self-report survey data. This could include observation, focus groups, and teacher evaluation by an administrator. These additional sources of data would help to strengthen the research design.

Finally, teacher education programs need to determine what assignments and practices, both in class and field-based, directly positively impact preservice teachers' attitudes toward writing, writing abilities, and view of themselves as both writers and writing teachers. By determining the most effective contributions to preservice teachers' writing development, institutions of higher education can ensure that their programs are providing preservice teachers with

The opportunities and experiences needed to improve writing instruction in elementary classrooms.

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