

Pre-Service Teachers' Apprehension and Attitudes about Writing

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Abstract

According to the National Institute for Literacy (2007), writing skill could hinder a person's professional and academic growth. Lack of writing skills can prove to be detrimental in an individual's ability to obtain and maintain a job. Resumes and cover letters are generally the first impression a potential employer sees. Without being well written, the individual is less likely to be asked to interview. If the individual does obtain the position, writing skills may be a factor in him/her keeping the position. For teachers, writing is a necessity: lesson plans, notes home to parents, permission slips, tests and quizzes, and a myriad of other writing pieces are expected from educators of every discipline. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers be able to write in a variety of styles for a multiplicity of purposes.

Introduction

Over the years, professors have asked teacher candidates to write memoirs about their previous writing experiences so that they may deal with their prior perceptions about writing in order to accept new instructional writing ideas into belief systems that they might have dismissed or not had the advisability to try (Norman & Spencer, 2005; Roe & Vukelich, 1998). Researchers have considered elementary pre-service and teacher candidates' writing histories for insights to base their literacy course pedagogy (Coia & Taylor, 2002; Norman & Spencer, 2005). The promise of writing in secondary instruction will not be realized without teachers who enjoy writing and understand its potential. Given the large number of elementary and secondary teacher candidates, it is essential that teacher educators identify course pedagogy that will best lead to improved attitudes toward writing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe elementary and secondary pre-service teachers' prior writing experiences, attitudes and beliefs about writing; changes in attitudes and beliefs about writing during required content area literacy courses and seminar classes; and their predicted use of writing in future instruction.

Methodology

In a previous study (Burks & Kraska, 2013), the researchers studied writing apprehension of a convenient sample of 14 pre-service elementary teachers to determine their level of apprehension and build a case for involving more writing activities in teacher preparation programs. The current study builds from the previous in that the researchers expanded the reach of participants to include both elementary and secondary pre-service teachers. In this study, permission was granted from professors in multiple classrooms from a private university and a public university to administer survey instruments to teacher candidates enrolled in their courses. Once consent was acquired by the teacher candidates, The Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Scale (1975) was administered along with additional open-ended survey items created by the researchers. The survey was administered in multiple classes to pre-service teachers. The participants were of multiple pre-service teacher disciplines: Elementary/Early Childhood, English Language Arts, Social Science/History, Biology/General Science, Secondary Mathematics, Physical Education, Art Education, and Special Education.

Instrument

Each participant (n=130) completed the Daly-Miller scale and the additional open-ended survey items. The Daly-Miller scale is a 26-item assessment that measures participants' level of writing apprehension. Scores range from 26 (high apprehension) to 130 (low apprehension). A mean score of 78 indicates a moderate – and healthy – level of writing apprehension. Cronbach's alpha was computed to verify reliability of the 13 items reflecting positive statements on the Daly-Miller Test and for the 13 items reflecting negative statements. Cronbach's alpha was 0.94 for the positively-stated items and 0.91 for the negatively-stated items, indicating a very high level of inter-item correlation for both sets of items.

Data Analysis

The following research questions were addressed in this study: 1) To what extent are elementary and secondary pre-service teachers apprehensive about their own writing? and 2) To what extent do product apprehension, evaluation apprehension, and stress apprehension predict overall writing apprehension for elementary and secondary pre-service teachers?

Question 1

To what extent are elementary and secondary pre-service teachers apprehensive about their own writing?

In the chart below, participants were grouped based on their degree-seeking major. All secondary degree areas (English Language Arts, Science, History, and Math) were grouped together for the purpose of comparing data to elementary candidates. Because of a low number of participants (n=8), several majors were grouped together (Physical Education, Art, Special Education, and those who did not specify a major).

An independent samples t-test showed no statistically significant difference between elementary and secondary teachers for their writing apprehension scores, $t_{(106)} = 0.69$, $p = 0.49$. The mean score for the elementary level teachers was 1.55, $SD = 0.62$, and the mean score for the secondary level teachers was 1.63, $SD = 0.61$.

The researchers found that there was no unusual level of writing apprehension among the participants. Although eight participants did have high levels of writing apprehension, they represent only 6% of the participant population (See Table 1).

Table 1. Pre-service teacher apprehension levels

Group	N	Level 1 Low App	Level 2 Moderate App	Level 3 High App
Elementary	62	32	26	4
Secondary	60	30	26	4
PE/Art/ Unclassified SpEd	8	1	7	0
Total	130	63	59	8

In addition to the Apprehension Scale, participants also answered open-ended items created by the researchers. These questions asked participants about their personal uses of writing and their feelings about teaching writing. Two of the questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Do you feel comfortable teaching writing?
2. For what purposes do you write?

For question 1, the researchers discovered that candidates who were more apprehensive appeared to be less comfortable teaching writing. This is not an unusual phenomenon as most individuals tend to choose teaching disciplines in which they feel a level of comfort with the content. The following responses to question 1 (Do you feel comfortable teaching writing?) were from participants whose writing apprehension level was high:

- “I do not. I struggle with keeping a good flow in my papers, as well as grammatical errors. I want to be a strong writer...” (Daly-Miller Score: 51 – High Apprehension)
- “Not really, nobody likes it. It is not enjoyable. Poetry yes, but a 7 page paper, NO!” (Daly-Miller Score: 58 – High Apprehension)
- “No, because it has always been one of my weak areas. I am not comfortable with my own writing.” (Daly-Miller Score: 58 – High Apprehension)

The reverse, however, appears true for participants with low levels of writing apprehension:

- “Yes. I actually tutor in writing. I’ve always been a good writer and made great grades in composition classes. Writing comes easy to me, and I am confident enough to pass along my knowledge.” (Daly-Miller Score: 110 – Low Apprehension)
- “Yes. As a professional writer, I have experience I want to share with others.” (Daly-Miller Score: 130 – Low Apprehension)
- “Yes; I have a good writers (sic) voice and I have been taught grammar, so I feel that I could help teach others.” (Daly-Miller Score: 122 – Low Apprehension)

For question 2 (For what purposes do you write?), the researchers found that participants who had high levels of writing apprehension wrote less and for different purposes than those who had low levels of writing apprehension:

- “School papers.” (Daly-Miller Score: 73 – Moderate Apprehension)
- “Only when I have to. And my thoughts when no one will see” (Daly-Miller Score: 52 – High Apprehension)
- “To communicate with others and to express my thoughts.” (Daly-Miller Score: 113 – Low Apprehension)

Implications

Implications from the study indicated that writing apprehension levels vary among pre-service teachers. Most do not experience extreme apprehension. Daly- Miller Writing Apprehension Scale creators indicate that extremes at either end can be troubling. Continuation of work should be to work on writing skills with pre-service educators and to stress writing importance.

In the Common Core State Standards, a heavy focus is placed on literacy; therefore, it is imperative that teachers have good writing skills and be confident in teaching writing across the disciplines (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2012).

Although writing is an important concept in both school and work, Daisey (2012) states that “writing instruction continues to be overlooked in this country’s 1300 schools of education” (p. 2). It is crucial for teachers to be writers so that they can share their writing experiences and justify why writing is worth the anxiety and work it entails (Augsburger, 1998).

Discussion

Good writing habits are important in every work environment. The first impression a potential employer has of an applicant is the written application. Therefore, writing is an important skill that could hinder a person’s professional growth and academic growth (National Institute for Literacy, 2007). Yet, Ada and Campoy (2004) found that too many teachers with whom they worked feared writing.

Daly and Wilson (1983) define high writing apprehensive individuals as those who attempt to avoid writing and situations that require it. Writing is generally expected in the classroom setting; however, many often do not realize writing's importance in the workplace. The current study helps to support this finding. Pre-service teachers in the current study also expressed avoidance of writing situations when it was not mandatory. Petersen (2019) notes that good writers "benefit their company by ensuring quality communications with clients, prospects and other outside interests." With this in mind, it is important to understand individuals' anxiety towards writing in order to help them alleviate that apprehension.

The concern about pre-service teachers and their writing apprehension is heightened by the requirement of edTPA for teacher certification in many states in the U.S. While the creators of the edTPA assessment argue that writing skill does not bias the scorer (Whittaker, Pecheone, & Stansbury, 2018), candidates still may feel overwhelmed because of the copious amount of writing that is required, especially if they are already apprehensive. Despite this trepidation, these new teachers should encourage their own students who have negative past writing experiences to keep writing. Keyes (1995) encourages writers to continue to write despite their doubts and believes that "the hardest part of being a writer is not getting your commas in the right place but getting your head in the right place" (p. 5). Aspects of writing which are problematic such as how to gather, analyze and organize information, as well as manage writing time efficiently (Peterson, 2008), could be identified and discussed in teacher education courses. Writing can be and is difficult for many people; however, teacher educators may intervene to help pre-service teachers make writing more meaningful, do-able and enjoyable as the following researchers suggest: Goldberg (2002) suggests that one or two word daily intentions or goals for the next day, written at the top of rough drafts, help to break down a writing task into manageable tasks; Davis (2004) recommends that when writers become discouraged that they consider dedicating their writing to someone or a cause; Clark (2006) recommends that writers surround themselves with support to keep them going, answer questions, edit, and help provide time to write; Reeves (2002) suggests that writers "hang out with other writers" (p. 4). Teacher educators may pair pre-service teachers as writing buddies throughout a semester to provide encouragement and advice to each other. Teacher educators should help their candidates examine their assumptions about writing and writers in order to help them imagine a new identity as a writer for themselves (Graham, 1999-2000).

Conclusion

Moreover, writing proposes empowerment. John Updike stated, "The humblest and quietest of weapons [is] a pencil" (cited in Roundtree, 2002, p. 46). Writing provides dignity (Daisey & Jose-Kampfner, 2002). Greenberg and Rath (1985) believe that writing "enables the writer, perhaps for the first time, to sense the power of language to affect another" (p. 12). In the classroom, it is the teacher who first models with students the rules of grammar and mechanics and teaches students how to formulate thesis statements and argue ideas. Therefore, the pre-service teacher who is preparing to be the model must be ready to do so. However, if pre-service teachers are apprehensive about their own writing, they may not be as effective as one would hope; hence, creating a cyclical phenomenon of more apprehensive writers. Moreover, teacher educators have the responsibility to model and give pre-service teachers many opportunities and experiences to write, share, and explain their writings. These activities may help pre-service teachers with writing apprehension. Lane (1993) noted that "When we model our struggles along aside [students], we wipe out the disempowering notion of perfection that teachers often unwittingly model, and we expose our uniqueness, our vulnerability, and most important of all, our humanity" (145).

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