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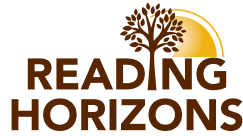


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Exploring Writing Circles as Innovative, Collaborative Writing Structures With Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

Writing circles are “small groups . . . meeting regularly to share drafts, choose common writing topics, practice positive response, and in general, help each other become better writers” (Vopat, 2009, p. 6). In this exploratory study, writing circles were employed with elementary teacher candidates in hopes of enhancing their perceptions about writing and authorship. This mixed methods pilot used a convenience sample of 28 teacher candidates in a language arts methods course. Based on interest and using writing workshop elements, weekly writing circles were formed and generated one collaborative manuscript. Afterward, 68% of candidates reported improvement in writing skills. Retrospective responses were analyzed and coded to reveal the following themes: ideas, relationships, choice, improvement, and feedback. Furthermore, 96% of candidates reported enthusiasm for using writing circles in their future classrooms.

KEYWORDS: writing circles, authoring cycles, teacher candidates, writing process

The creation of young authors is best facilitated by student participation in authentic writing experiences; the creation of positive and effective writing teachers is best facilitated by engaging teachers in authentic writing experiences (Graves, 1983, 1994; Murray, 2003; Tompkins, 2012). With the importance of writing for college and career readiness increasing (Mo, Kopke, Hawkins, Troia, & Olinghouse, 2014), and writing being recognized as the dominant mode of communication in today’s society (Brandt, 2015), the state of writing instruction is of critical importance for today’s teachers and learners. Writing instruction must keep pace with the growing demands of technology-laden and collaborative workplaces as well as address recent deficits. According to the writing portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2011), only 24% of eighth graders scored at the Proficient level, with 54% at Basic, and 20% Below Basic. As many as three-fourths of U.S. students are falling short of writing proficiency, which is deemed quite important for success in college and career settings. Therefore, in an attempt to model

the most recent pedagogical writing strategies for teacher candidates, the instructor (the first author) introduced a strategy known as writing circles (Vopat, 2009) in an elementary language arts methods course. Writing circles are “small groups of students meeting regularly to share drafts, choose common writing topics, practice positive response, and in general, help each other become better writers” (Vopat, 2009, p. 1).

In this exploratory study, writing circles were employed with teacher candidates in an effort to foster writing growth, work through the writing process collaboratively toward publication, and enhance teacher candidates’ personal constructs about the concepts of writing and authorship. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the writing circle experiences of 28 teacher candidates engaged in collaborative authoring experiences.

Literature Review

When considering the research showing that writing skills impact job promotions and that writing remediation costs American businesses as much as \$3.1 billion annually (National Commission on Writing, 2004), schools would be prudent to explore new strategies such as writing circles to promote writing growth and critical collaborative experiences. In fact, scholars examining necessary 21st century skills for future global workforces list collaborative problem-solving skills as key (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Pearlman, 2010). The following literature review highlights key theories grounding the social aspect of writing circles and an explanation of the historical context of writing circles.

Theoretical Grounding in Social Development and Social Learning

Both Vygotsky’s and Bandura’s social development and social learning theories, respectively, ground the study’s purpose (i.e., collaboration for learning) in a social environment, which in this case is a university classroom. Vygotsky’s (1978) theory suggests that the theme of social interaction plays a role in the development of cognition and learning. Further, learning is enhanced through social interaction when completed in one’s zone of proximal development (ZPD; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky’s theory established a critical zone in which an individual can exceed her or his independent progress through developmentally appropriate assistance. Applying ZPD to the writing circle innovation, assistance during writing circles is derived from two sources: (a) peers who act as mentors or mentees in their writing circle group, the “more capable peers”; and (b) the instructor who maintains the role of facilitator and overarching mentor to all writing circle groups, the “more knowledgeable other” (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 86, 89). Social development theory notes that interactions with others allow learners to absorb and strengthen their knowledge and skills more naturally than they otherwise might if they were learning independently (Bailey, 2014, p. 18). Thus, the collaborative requirement of writing circles is supported by this theory.

Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory expands the concept of observational learning or modeling in which the learners obtain new information and behaviors by watching other people. Additionally, Bandura theorized that motivation plays a large role in the learner’s actions in social learning contexts depending on the positive or negative nature of that motivation. Writing circles is an innovative instructional strategy that relies on the social and collaborative nature of writing circles as supported by the theoretical foundations of Vygotsky’s (1978) and Bandura’s work. The historical context of writing circles, presented in the following section, offers additional insights.

A Brief Historical Context of Writing Circles

Graves (1983) and Murray (2003) greatly contributed to the historical context of the authoring cycle or writing process, which is inherently central to writing circles. Originally, Peterson and Eeds (1990) offered a groundbreaking new structure called literature study groups, which were collaborative reading experiences wherein children chose, read, and authentically discussed books. Daniels's (2002) literature circles is a modern synonym for literature study groups, often operationalized with particular roles such as questioner, elaborator, and word wizard. Nonetheless, literature circles are small collaborative reading groups populated by students who chose the same book to read, discuss, and celebrate (Daniels, 2002). Research reports that literature circles raise the level of discourse even more than higher order teacher questioning and increase ownership and collaboration skills (Commeyras & Sumner, 1996; Galda & Beach, 2001). Writing circles (Vopat, 2009) appear to be a recent innovation on the beloved format of literature circles, yet they are focused on writing rather than reading.

Parallel to the work of Graves (1983), Murray (2003), and Peterson and Eeds (1990), others were focused on similar formats during this time. Short, Harste, and Burke (1996) focused on emulating the authoring cycle through authors' circles with elementary students. Authors' circles occur when young writers meet in groups of three or four to provide feedback to each other on individual drafts (Villaume & Brabham, 2001); therefore, authors' circles occur later in the writing process than writing circles. Writing circles are formed at the very onset of the writing process and involve five to seven members from prewriting through sharing and publication as young authors write collaboratively on the same piece (Vopat, 2009).

Vopat's (2009) writing circles rely on the small-group structure of literature circles as well as the power of the writing process. In this regard, one can see how writing circles have evolved. Yet, considering that writing circles are a new social learning format, no research studies of implementation with students, adults, or teacher candidates have yet been published. Therefore, the data here, although limited, provide valuable insights into developing authors through collaborative writing around a particular topic of the participants' choosing. In relying on the historical forerunners of writing circles, Vopat's intention in creating and implementing writing circles was to enhance the writing process, spur writing growth, utilize social learning theories and collaboration as motivation, and rely on the authenticity of publishing in real venues.

In the 1990s and 2000s, researchers pointed out the importance of collaboration (Ede & Lunsford, 1990; Graham & Perin, 2007a; Kim & Eklundh, 2001; Lee & Boud, 2003; National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004; Posner & Baecker, 1993; Rimmershaw, 1992), particularly writing in the workplace, often using various technologies, "in pursuit of common goals" (Rimmershaw, 1992, p. 15). As early as 2008, 85% of teens reported using electronic communication and 93% reported writing for pleasure (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008), yet writing has been largely neglected in schools despite its increased visibility. Moreover, evidence of this burgeoning trend is seen with writing proficiency as a key component in many state assessments, retention, graduation requirements, and college entrance exams. Writing circles offer the potential for teacher educators to model motivation, encouragement, and persistence through a continued, collaborative practice to problem solve and work through the stages of the writing process to produce a manuscript.

The Role of Collaboration in Writing Circles

Graham and Perin (2007a; 2007b) posit that in order to create more proficient writers and communicators, collaboration is a key reform for better preparing young writers for future realities. Specifically, collaborative writing is an effective technique for improving the quality of writing (Graham & Perin, 2007b) because writing well is a challenging task. Collaborating on writing with peers has been shown to be effective for both learning to write and writing as means of learning (Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012; MacArthur, Schwartz, & Graham, 1991; Onrubia & Engel, 2009; Storch, 2005; Yarrow & Topping, 2001). Two earlier studies with adults reported that the collaborative act of negotiating boundaries not only improved writing and collaboration skills, but developed leadership skills (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2005; Reed, McCarthy, & Briley, 2002). Through a meta-analysis of writing research, collaboration in writing was among the 11 elements of current writing instruction found to be effective in helping adolescent students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. The effect sizes for all of these studies comparing collaborative writing with independent writing were positive and large (Graham & Perin, 2007b). “When students help each other with one or more aspects of writing, it has a strong, positive impact on quality” (Graham & Perin, 2007b, p. 16).

The goal of Vopat’s (2009) writing circles is for participants to collaborate in order to create writing products. Having teacher candidates engage in collaborative writing allows for the rehearsal of lifelong skills. The MetLife Survey, an annual survey of American teachers, reported that collaboration improved teacher job satisfaction (Perkins-Gough, 2010), and that the increased collaboration is needed for effectiveness (MetLife, 2013). Teachers who said they were very satisfied were also proponents of shared responsibility and collaboration in schools. Other benefits of collaboration may arise, including learners being more willing to try to emulate peers who have more expertise because “peers provide benchmarks for monitoring one’s own level of accomplishment which may in turn increase the belief in self-efficacy” (Paris, & Turner, 1994, p. 226). When learners work with others, an obligation to meet the group’s timelines and collaborative goals persists. Finally, the feedback that comes from within the group is typically more powerfully received than the teacher’s suggestions for improving manuscripts. Situated motivation is demonstrated by more sustained effort by each individual to complete the task so as not to disappoint group members or appear to be a less capable writer (Paris & Turner, 1994; Pintrich, Brown, & Weinstein, 1994). This has strong implications for the encouragement of more collaborative learning environments for learners. An additional factor to consider in the structure of writing circles is the power of choice in the determination of a topic.

The Role of Choice in Writing Circles

Choice was identified among the 11 important elements of effective writing instruction in Graham and Perin’s (2007a) meta-analysis. Individuals appear to be motivated by choice. In writing circles, Vopat (2009) reminds practitioners of the power and motivation that are derived when participants can choose interesting writing topics, rather than being assigned a topic. Motivation “is constructed by the individual in a cognitively dynamic context” (Paris & Turner, 1994, p. 214), so choice leads to situated motivation and potential personal reward. Writing circles appear to provide the situated motivation to write. Choosing a writing topic and choosing a group encourage situated motivation because “when teachers control students’ choices and goals, it may jeopardize their feelings of self-determination and their sense of independence” (Paris & Turner, 1994, p. 224). Certainly, the format of writing circles includes the researched benefit of optimal adult learning

environments as social learning forums for knowledge dissemination and preparation for future environments. According to Vopat, the control of topic choice in writing circles was most often determined after participants chose their writing circle group. Members then work to help each other complete independent, perhaps related writing projects. In this particular study, writing circles were formed based on participants' choice of one of many topics generated by the class, mirroring the initial element of choice in literature circles. The resulting novelty that comes from a continuum of choices that present themselves as writing circle groups draft, revise, rework, and share the ideas and comments of their peers may sustain motivation and encourage learners to explore and improve their writing.

Purpose and Research Questions

To explore how writing circles shape teacher candidates' perceptions regarding collaborative writing, this mixed methods design utilized teacher candidates' end-of-semester reflections. The study analyzed the qualitative data and employed nonparametric ranked data for the quantitative component. This study explored the experiences of 28 teacher candidates in a language arts methods course who participated in semester-long writing circles, worked through the stages of the writing process collaboratively with a group of peers, and then reflected on their final published work and the future viability of the strategy for teachers.

Primarily, the data sources comprised the 28 retrospective reflections returned by the teacher candidates. The reflection (see Appendix A) explored teacher candidates' perceptions about writing collaboratively, their perceptions of the writing process, and their considerations of the power of this innovative structure for authorship. Additional data sources included field notes and observations from the instructor as well as the collaborative final manuscripts submitted by teacher candidates. The following research questions were posited:

1. How do teacher candidates report their perceptions of writing circles and collaboration?
2. What shifts in attitudes about themselves as authors do teacher candidates report after participating in writing circles?

Methods

Implementing the Writing Circle Innovation in Language Arts Methods

Because literature circles have been used for well over 20 years and writing circles are a direct innovation, implementing writing circles with teacher candidates seemed especially intriguing. On the first day of class, writing circles were introduced to the 28 teacher candidates enrolled in a language arts methods course at a southeastern U.S. university. Teacher candidates were given the task of producing a publishable manuscript by the end of the semester, working through the stages of the writing process collaboratively with a group of peers. Vopat's (2009) definition of writing circles was shared: "small groups of students meeting regularly to share drafts, choose common writing topics, practice positive response, and in general, help each other become better writers" (p. 1), including his essential elements:

- Groups of kids name their writing circle and choose their group's writing topic.
- Kids write on this topic, using any format or genre.
- Writing circle minilessons focus on circle management and writing craft.
- Kids share their writing . . . and respond to one another's writing.

- Kids think about the writing circle sessions they've just completed and jot down their reflections and notes in their writing circle notebooks.
- Writers participate in a circle devoted to collaborative revision, editing, and publication. (Vopat, 2009, pp. 1–2)

The first author, serving as the instructor and as an associate editor of a state educational journal, shared with these teacher candidates that, by the end of the semester, the writing circles could likely produce a manuscript of publishable quality. The semester also started by encouraging teacher candidates that all authors write about what they love and/or know about. During the first week, after the class brainstormed a variety of topics on the board, groups were formed around a topic (ranging from teaching overseas to recycling items for classroom use). Writing circles were formed based on teacher candidates' first or second choice of topics (Graham & Perin, 2007a; Pintrich et al., 1994). Vopat (2009) suggested that groups name themselves. The circles met briefly during the first week and were given a pocket folder with some basic supports, such as a Know–Want to know–Learned (K-W-L) handout, stages of the writing process, Spandel's (2012) six-trait self-evaluations, and editing checklists. In the first week, teacher candidates were given the assignment to each bring an article related to their choice topic that purposefully jumpstarted their references and research. Writing circles met each week to collaborate (Graham et al., 2012; MacArthur et al., 1991; Onrubia & Engel, 2009; Storch, 2005; Yarrow & Topping, 2001). Class time was used for writing circles for about 20 to 30 minutes after short, focused 5- to 10-minute minilessons with mentor texts or exemplars. Fortunately, Vopat offers an abundance of writing activities and minilesson ideas using a writing workshop format (Bogard & McMackin, 2012), some of which were used throughout the semester-long experience.

In her field notes, the instructor wrote:

In recent memory, I cannot recall any pedagogical innovation that I have implemented that has been more exciting and invigorating. I love thinking about writing circles, observing writing circles, planning for writing circles, reading writing circle drafts, teaching minilessons, setting up Google Docs, and encouraging my writing circle authors to continue developing their pieces. . . . The whole class generated a list of 10 to 12 possible ideas. And in much the same way that I form lit circles after giving book talks, I asked for a volunteer who was passionate about one of the topics on the board. Then, I proceeded to see if we had enough people to form a viable group of about five to seven members around that passionate topic. . . . Every week, my enthusiasm grew and theirs did too, as we brainstormed, brought related articles, mapped, outlined, and drafted purpose statements.

Furthermore, the instructor recorded the excitement and challenges that she observed among the preservice teacher candidates:

These teacher candidates were pumped [excited], until the point that drafting and more drafting and sharing those drafts were imminent. Writing is hard work, but the social expectations of being accountable to peers, their owning the topic, my consistent help through minilessons, and meetings in writing circles every class period seemed to pay off.

Each writing circle group worked and wrote collaboratively, receiving feedback

and participating in weekly minilessons to facilitate the completion of one collaborative manuscript with many authors. In week 3, the instructor introduced six-trait writing using Spandel's (2012) analytic categories: ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions. Candidates used the 5-3-1 self-evaluative rating system informally along the way in their writing circles to improve their piece; the instructor used these same categories to inform the weekly minilessons. The instructor offered weekly minilessons with mentor texts or exemplars on topics such as brainstorming lists of interesting aspects, organizing through subheadings, creating a statement of purpose with a writing-go-round (Vopat, 2009), writing a compelling introduction, crafting an effective conclusion, using Google Docs, and creating and echoing a title throughout the piece. Teacher candidates reviewed each other's work and shared Spandel's self-evaluative scores along the way.

As one indicator of quality, the instructor graded the final product to see if application of each minilesson was accomplished. Points were awarded based on the questions directly linked to minilessons presented, such as the following: Did the manuscript have a statement of purpose? Did the references and citations meet APA standards? Did the title, subheadings, statement of purpose, and conclusion align? Evaluative records show that all five writing circles earned 94% or above on their work. As an external indicator of quality, each of the pieces produced by the writing circles was submitted on the last day of class, was subsequently reviewed by three editors who offered some suggestions for revision, was then accepted, and later published in an award-winning state journal aimed at practitioners and administrators.

Participants

To determine teacher candidates' perceptions about participating in writing circles, a convenience sample was used. This group consisted of 28 teacher candidates enrolled in an undergraduate language arts course that included 26 elementary education majors and two exceptional education majors. All were female, juniors, and between the ages of 20 and 25 years; there were six participants of color.

Instrument and Research Design

At the end of the semester, teacher candidates voluntarily completed a Reflection for Writing Circle Participation (see Appendix A). The reflection consisted of five qualitative (open-ended) probes, three quantitative probes, and some brief demographic information.

In this exploratory study, the retrospective post-then-pre design was used with end-of-semester reflections to poll candidates' perceptions about authorship, writing circles, and collaborative writing. Originally, this post-then-pre design was chosen as a means of controlling for response shift bias (Howard, 1980). The design is less time-consuming, is less intrusive, and avoids pretest sensitivity and heightening response shift bias that may result from a pretest setting up a false overestimation or underestimation (Lam & Bengo, 2003). This instrument, given at the end of the semester, collected both before and after information at the same time so as not to sway teacher candidates' perceptions or attitudes by alerting them to the nature of the experience early on. Essentially, this exploratory study sought to determine teacher candidates' perceptions of the writing circle experience and to note possible benefits and obstacles to using this strategy.

After gathering the aggregate individual responses from the post-then-pre retrospective reflections, the third author, unattached to the class or the literature review, typed individual responses in an Excel spreadsheet. We then separately began reading,

re-reading, and analyzing responses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006) using a constant-comparative method to arrive at common themes, subsequently noting and color-coding thematic categories. Independent of each other, we preliminarily formulated and separately discovered themes, so when all three of us met to share our preliminary themes, we were pleased to find that common themes about the collaborative writing circles had indeed emerged from the data. For example, the third author had noted a theme related to working together, and the second author had noted the theme as “many hands make light the load.” Arriving at common wording allowed us to reach 100% agreement. For example, after discussion, the themes of *feedback and learning*, which we had gleaned from responses to a question about the best thing about writing circles, were collapsed into *feedback*. The themes themselves easily emerged from the data, likely because of the straightforward probes exerted in the reflections. Reflections provided important information for this exploratory study and salient feedback for teacher educators and professors seeking to implement writing circles.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are organized around the two research questions. First, this article qualitatively examines: How do teacher candidates report their perceptions of writing circles and collaboration? At the end of the semester on the day of their manuscript submissions, the teacher candidates voluntarily turned in retrospective reflections (see Appendix A). Their recollections about working collaboratively with peers noted that some individuals were initially fearful that their writing would not be “good enough” for their group. Some also reported their early reluctance to participate. Many retrospective responses stated that they typically did not enjoy working in groups, preferred working alone, and were apprehensive about sharing their writing with others. Only two people had any experience as published authors (i.e., high school newspaper or yearbook), and none had experienced writing as a truly collaborative endeavor, yet most were positively influenced by the end of the semester.

Qualitative Themes That Emerged

Based on the responses to the value of collaboration, five strong themes emerged in descending order of importance: the value of the exchange of ideas, the importance of building relationships, the power of choice, the significance of improvement of the writing product, and the value of peer feedback throughout the writing process (see Table 1).

Table 1
Teacher Candidates’ Perceptions of Writing Circle Experience

Theme	Candidates’ responses containing theme
Ideas	16 (57.1%)
Relationships	12 (39.3%)
Choice	10 (35.7%)
Improvement	9 (32.1%)
Feedback	9 (32.1%)

Note. The total is not 100% because responses could include more than one theme.

The value of the exchange of ideas. Regarding the theme of the value of the exchange of ideas, 16 of the 28 (57.1%) teacher candidates made many salient comments that provided some preliminary evidence that they valued the collaborative richness of

ideas, for example: “The best thing about joining a writing circle was having other students to turn to for suggestions and ideas.” This comment came from a teacher candidate who identified as an average writer before the experience and who ranked herself as strong afterward. Another teacher candidate noted how ideas are germinated and enhanced by the collaborative influences of others: “Having four heads to work is better than one. I was introduced to suggestions I would have never come up with on my own.” Interestingly, the instructor’s field notes from the first month of the semester included this strong concern:

Most of these students have never written anything collaboratively, which surprises me in a way. They cannot imagine this working . . . that different authors can produce something that flows. . . . I keep encouraging them, but I teasingly called them Wemberly Worried today.

With weekly group work on their collaborative pieces, teacher candidates recognized that “the best thing was being able to bounce ideas off of other people” and “getting to collaborate with others, listening to ideas and sharing.” Notably, comments such as “sharing input and discussing . . . becomes more of a reflective discussion in which broader ideas are researched further” and “getting other people’s insights” showed clear advantages over solo authored experiences as independent authors. Plus, one teacher candidate who identified as a strong writer at the beginning of the semester noted the central advantage of participating in writing circles: “having the opportunity to write with my peers and build upon our piece by sharing ideas.” These teacher candidates’ responses after experiencing writing circles for a semester provide credence to the power of this collaborative structure.

The importance of building relationships. The second theme that emerged from the data surrounded the importance of building relationships, which might be a bit surprising. Based on teacher candidates’ responses to the open-ended probe regarding the best thing about writing circles, 12 of the 28 (39.3%) made reference to the power of relationships. Many quotes referred to relationships that were forged during weekly writing circle meetings. One teacher candidate wrote, “I made a lot of new friends.” Another wrote that the best thing about writing circles was “working with wonderful, intelligent women.” University-level coursework does not always allow for opportunities to get to know others, as evidenced by these two representative responses: “I met new people” and “We got to really know our classmates and begin working with each other.”

Echoing this sentiment, other teacher candidates made reference to peers, groups, and even friends in their written responses to the best thing about writing circles: “having the opportunity to write with my peers and build upon our piece by sharing ideas,” “working together as a group . . . and friends,” and “I made great friends while working in writing circles!” Teacher candidates enjoyed the collaborative aspect of writing circles, as indicated by these statements: “getting to collaborate with others, listening to ideas and sharing,” and “The best thing about joining a writing circle was a positive outlook on groupwork, and now I have a great appreciation for all my group members and all their hard work.”

Notably, this theme of relationships speaks to the power of interconnectivity embedded in the collaborative structure of writing circles as a social learning format. The instructor’s field notes stated:

I thought it was silly (maybe even a waste of our precious class time) to make the writing circles come up with a name for their group. BUT,

Vopat was right! Creating group names built trust and joy around the process. My favorite [name] is the “Trashy & Classy” group (topic on recycling).

A later entry from the instructor read: “They appear happy when I pass out their folders with the group name on it, even though they are nervous about allowing others to read their part. We talked about the way this makes us all feel vulnerable.” One candidate’s comment reinforced this notion: “I liked interacting with people in the class.” Another simply added, “I was happy to get to know my group members.” In this way, teacher candidates’ responses provided much evidence of their affinity for the relationship building that is part of writing together in writing circles.

The power of choice. When mining the retrospective reflections gleaned from the open-ended responses in regard to what teacher candidates liked best about writing circles, 10 of the 28 (35.7%) mentioned the power of choosing their topics, their group, and working collaboratively to explore and report on that topic. The following statement sheds light on Vopat’s (2009) key decision to incorporate choice as an integral ingredient in the writing circle protocol: “I did not like having to write an essay with other classmates. . . . However, my opinion has now definitely changed . . . getting to talk to other classmates on their view of recycling.” Another comment also spoke to this strong theme of choice:

Another good thing about joining a writing circle is you get to research and learn new information about a subject you are actually interested in. I know I was interested in learning about teaching abroad. Working in the writing circles, I have learned so much new and useful information about teaching abroad. I can actually use the information . . . to pursue my career as teaching abroad after graduating.

Reading and rereading the teacher candidate responses to the open-ended probe allowed us to hone in on positive perceptions on the value of choice. First and foremost, teacher candidates straightforwardly noted this sentiment: “I think the best thing was having the freedom to choose our own topic.” When combing through the instructor’s field notes for relevant insights, this entry from later in the semester emerged:

The more I think about my students participating in lit circles and writing circles, the more convinced I become that this would never work without the element of choice—powerful. Maybe collaborative writing, even more than collaborative reading, seems like it really needs the safety net of feeling like you chose your collaborators and the direction of the group’s creation.

Other teacher candidate comments aligned with this sentiment: “My perception of writing circles at the beginning . . . was that they were boring and I did not find them interesting. The actual work of finding a topic to write about is what stands out to me”; “The best thing was being able to research and write about something I enjoyed”; and “I thought it would be difficult, but I was excited that I got to choose the topic.”

The emerging theme of choice seemed to provide tangible enjoyment within the writing process, as noted in these responses: “I really enjoyed writing circles! It is interesting to . . . see how everyone feels about the topic we chose”; “I really enjoyed the time . . . to generate ideas for the topic. Also, I was very interested in the topic [teaching abroad] which motivated me even more”; and “was excited to learn more about our topic.” Certainly, for many of the preservice teachers, choice resonated as a key component in

experiencing writing circles.

The significance of improvement of the writing product. Teacher candidates' responses to the open-ended probe about the best thing about writing circles indicated that the improvement of their writing skills was valued. The significance of improving their collaborative piece throughout the semester was a strong theme noted by nine of the 28 (32.1%). The theme was substantiated by the following representative responses, which can be seen as echoing Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on more capable peers: "The best thing was definitely being able . . . to work together as a group to improve our writing"; "I think the best thing about joining a writing circle was seeing the final product put together after the efforts of all the members"; and "I think it has helped me a great deal to work with others. Our project turned out great!" At the end of the semester, one teacher candidate, who identified as an average writer at the beginning of the semester but later as strong, wrote: "Collaboration. . . . Together, we produced a great product." The instructor's field notes recorded this observation: "Growing up in the southeast during high-stakes testing, few students engaged in the joy of truly revising work in their own childhoods; they only knew the punitive feeling of recopying and correcting a paper." Therefore, the momentum candidates experienced as part of writing circles elicited many positive comments, such as this teacher candidate who echoed the theme of improvement: "I loved working with my group, and I felt like my writing improved."

Writing is hard work, as acknowledged by many of the preservice teacher candidates, yet the social expectations of being accountable to make improvements for an authentic audience led to comments from one self-identified average writer: "It takes a ton of drafting and peer reviews to get a great end product." This theme of improvement also was supported by the instructor's weekly minilessons crafted by a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978) based on the distinct needs related to submitting a piece of writing to a practitioner journal for the participants' future colleagues in the state.

The value of feedback. In reading and re-reading the open-ended responses of the teacher candidates, we noted responses such as "You get feedback on your own writing as well as helping others build their parts." Thus, the theme of valuing feedback throughout the writing process emerged as a strong theme, echoed in nine of 28 (32.1%) of the teacher candidate responses. The instructor's field notes included this comment regarding collegiality and feedback:

Tomorrow, I am going to do a short procedural minilesson on how to give and receive feedback. I hope this will allay fears and will set us all at ease. Sheryl Crow may set a positive tone—"You're my favorite mistake." We grow through mistakes.

Comments from preservice candidates substantiated this theme: "I was introduced to suggestions [for improvement] that I would have never come up with on my own" (from a participant who identified as a strong writer at the beginning of the semester); "The best thing was bouncing ideas . . . and receiving immediate feedback on my writing from my peers" (from a participant who identified as a weak writer at the beginning but as an average writer at the end); and "I was able to . . . receive positive feedback and work with these ideas to make them the best possible" (from a participant who identified as an average writer at the beginning but as a strong writer at the end).

Teacher candidates reported feeling anxious about their knowledge of conventions and related skills. Yet after the experience in writing circles, one candidate who ranked

herself as a weak writer before this experience wrote, “We gained a great amount of knowledge learning from one another’s thoughts and ideas. We also were able to better our writing skills as we corrected each other.” Further comments supported this theme of feedback and echoed the advantages of eliciting and receiving feedback in a group: “I learned so much from each of them and . . . groups encourage students to practice listening skills, cooperation, and create . . . that allow them to think and do!” and “Working in the group was actually beneficial because there were more options and ideas to choose from and you never truly got ‘writer’s block.’” Initially, teacher candidates’ preferences not to share their writing in a group project were tied to their apprehensiveness about sharing drafts and fears of harsh critique. However, by the end of the semester, the responses of teacher candidates who self-identified across the board as strong, average, and weak acknowledged feedback as an important theme. Ironically, the very feedback they initially feared proved to be one of the best things they experienced in writing circles.

Quantitative Findings and Discussion

The nature of this mixed methods exploratory study allowed for substantiation from other quantitative portions of participants’ reflections. When asked to rank their collaborative experiences in writing circles as either positive, neutral, or negative, teacher candidates’ responses clearly corroborated the above themes derived from their open-ended responses (see Table 2): 23 (82.1%) checked positive, five (17.9%) checked neutral, and none (0.0%) checked negative.

Table 2

Teacher Candidates’ Perceptions of the Collaborative Experience of Writing Circles

Perception	Number of candidates
Positive	23 (82.1%)
Neutral	5 (17.9%)
Negative	0 (0.0%)
Total	28 (100%)

Perceptions of authorship. This mixed methods exploratory study focused not only on the themes derived from the qualitative analysis, but also on several quantitative probes. This section of the findings is based on exploring the second research question: What shifts in attitudes about themselves as authors do teacher candidates report after participating in writing circles? In studying this form of collaborative writing, an important component was the writing circle’s possible inherent value in improving writers’ perceptions of their ability to co-author a paper. Therefore, in the retrospective reflection, teacher candidates were asked to quantify their self-perception as an author both before and after writing circles through a post-then-pre retrospective reflection in the following set of probes (see Appendix A):

1. How would you rank yourself as an author BEFORE this semester began?
Circle one. 5-strong 3-average 1-weak
2. How would you rank yourself as an author at the END of the semester?
Circle one. 5-strong 3-average 1-weak

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test, a nonparametric version of the paired t-test, was utilized as the statistical tool for a variety of reasons. First, this study had only 28 participants, and it compares ordinal ranks before and after writing circles with repeated measures in the

post-then-pre retrospective data. Nonparametric statistics were used because the sample was too small (<30) to assume a normal distribution. The retrospective results, as measured by the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, indicated that student self-perception of authorship demonstrated a statistically significant difference in self-perception of authorship post-writing circle intervention ($p < .05$). This was further demonstrated in the mean increase in writing circle self-perception from 3.11 (neutral feelings of self-perception of authorship) pre-writing circle intervention to a mean of 4.21 (neutral-strong feelings of self-perception of authorship) post-writing circle intervention (see Table 3).

The results indicate that none of the teacher candidates had a higher score pre-writing circle experience (i.e., pretest > posttest). A majority of 17 out of 28 teacher candidates (60.7%) had a higher self-reported perception of authorship post-writing circle experience, 11 reported no change, and none reported a decrease (see Table 3). These changes in perception of authorship led to a statistically significant difference ($p < .05$, $z = 3.88$; see Table 4), with an increase from pre-writing circle (mean = 3.11) to post-writing circle perception of authorship (mean = 4.21). Writing circles accounted for 25% of the variance in scores as calculated by the effect size of .52, which signifies a large effect.

Table 3
Comparison of Retrospective Post-Then-Pre Writing Circle Self-Perceptions of Authorship

Descriptive statistics								
	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Percentiles		
						25th	50th (median)	75th
Self-perception before	28	3.11	1.031	1	5	3.00	3.00	3.00
Self-perception after	28	4.21	4.21	3	5	3.00	5.00	5.00
Ranks								
				N		Mean rank		Sum of ranks
Self-perception after		Negative Ranks		0 ^a		.00		.00
Self-perception before		Positive Ranks		17 ^b		9.00		153.00
		Ties		11 ^c				
		Total		28				

a. Self-perception after writing circles < self-perception before writing circles.
 b. Self-perception after writing circles > self-perception before writing circles.
 c. Self-perception after writing circles = self-perception before writing circles

Additionally, one can see from Table 4 that the Wilcoxon signed-rank test of comparisons revealed that for this exploratory group, the findings regarding authorship were significant at $p < .05$ with $z = 3.879$.

Table 4

Comparison Using Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Based on Negative Ranks

Test Statistics ^a	
	Self-perception after writing circles-
	Self-perception before writing circles
Z	-3.879b
Asymp. Sig. (two-tailed)	.000

a. Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test

b. Based on negative ranks

Also, reinforcing these significant effects were the simple descriptive statistics gathered from the reflection. Based on a separate probe, overall, 19 of the 28 participants (67.8%) self-identified as making an improvement in their writing skills through the collaborative writing circle experience.

More findings regarding future implementation. The final probe on the retrospective reflection (see Appendix A) asked teacher candidates: “What will you take from this experience into your future classroom? Or not?” The open-endedness of this probe was intentionally vague in hopes of not biasing participants to simply check “yes” in answering a more straightforward question such as “Will you use writing circles in your future classroom?” Even with this more ambiguous probe, teacher candidates corroborated the above positive indicators gleaned from the direct responses related to the two research questions. All teacher candidates, with the exception of one, indicated their desire to implement similar writing circles in their future classrooms. Teacher candidates highlighted the importance of time to write collaboratively, as indicated by this representative statement:

I learned how beneficial it can be for my future students to have time set aside for them to write collaboratively in writing circles. Through working with other students, they are given the opportunity to share their ideas and examine new ones.

Additionally, teacher candidates saw value inherent in the authenticity provided by their writing circle participation: “I have learned more about the steps of the actual writing process through authentic hands-on experience in writing circles” and “I will implement writing circles in my class to build writing ability and confidence in my students.” Therefore, we could not help but feel encouraged by this small group of teacher candidates’ hopeful and positive responses. These comments further corroborated the five themes and solidified the participants’ intent to provide authentic and collaborative writing experiences for their future elementary students.

Limitations

Methodologically, limitations arise from a small sample size and the fact that this was a sample of convenience. Also, the participants in this study all possessed a level of writing skill that allowed them entrance into the academic community of a state university. Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. In an exploratory

sense, however, the information gleaned from this small group was encouraging in terms of positive perceptions of writing circles as an effective structure as well as in terms of the future research that will result from this experience.

One limitation is the need for external measures of quality. In the future, a means of evaluating the quality of the written product alongside the candidates' perceptions will be invaluable. Teacher candidates performed informal self-evaluations of writing quality as they became familiar with Spandel's (2012) analytic categories. However, in retrospect, we wish we had followed a more careful protocol for blind evaluations of the writing quality of the teacher candidates' manuscripts.

Conclusions

On the first day of this language arts methods course, the instructor recorded in her field notes:

The countenances of the students really changed from smiles to furrowed brows when I switched from explaining a project on the syllabus related to literature circles to writing circles. . . . I could feel their anxiety and apprehension in sharing their writing. Not sure how to help them overcome this, but we'll take baby steps.

It is worth noting that the responses to the end-of-semester reflections were turned in on the last day of class, which was also the day that writing circles submitted their final collaborative manuscripts. When teacher candidates turned in their reflective responses, they did not yet know that their manuscripts would be accepted for publication, nor had they seen their names in print. Of course, when notices of acceptance were sent out, the course was long over, given the elongated timeline of publication outlets.

However, the collaborative nature of writing circles seemed to offer this set of teacher candidates a positive venue for exploring, helping, motivating, and sustaining each other to work through the stages of the writing process alongside a more knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978) to produce a manuscript. Likewise, the teacher candidates' themes of ideas, improvement, and feedback link back to essential elements associated with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development and reinforce prior findings that writing support or instruction is essential and/or valued in collaborative writing (Graham et al., 2012; MacArthur et al., 1991; Min, 2005; Onrubia & Engel, 2009; Storch, 2005; Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam, Sercu, & Van den Bergh, 2010; Yarrow & Topping, 2001). In addition to the theme of feedback, the two remaining themes of relationships and choice (of groups in particular) directly link to the essential elements of observational learning, modeling, and associated motivational factors in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and to prior findings in studies of writing related to group composition, peer review, modeling, and feedback (Noel & Robert, 2004; Patchan, Hawk, Stevens, & Schunn, 2013; Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam, Van Bergh, & Sercu, 2014).

Upon seeing the reward of the teacher candidates' writing coming together during writing circles, the instructor wrote that teacher candidates appeared to "become more confident in their writing ability and more intrinsically motivated maybe by pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment." In accordance with these findings, teacher candidates engaged in the writing task with a more sustained focus and demonstrated the effort required of a collaborative writing project.

Considering that no qualitative or quantitative studies of the implementation of writing circles (Vopat, 2009) with either students or teacher candidates have yet to be

published, this research provides data, although limited, that offer valuable insights into this collaborative strategy for developing authors around a particular interest and topic of the participants' choosing. Given the historical context of the writing process (Graves, 1983), the social learning foundations of collaboration, and effective literacy experiences such as literature circles and writing workshop (Bogard & McMackin, 2012; Daniels, 2002; Institute of Education Science, 2012), this exploratory study provides a strong rationale for looking deeper and longer into writing circles.

Vopat (2009) posited, "Writing circles help learners become better writers through a recurrent workshop structure that defines an ongoing supportive audience, honors and develops writing voice, encourages experimentation and collaboration, and rehabilitates the writing wounded through low-risk writing experiences" (p. 6). The exploratory study reported here aligns with Vopat's assertions that writing circles are an effective means of enhancing writing through authentic, collaborative efforts, since 67.8% of participants reported improving their writing through writing circles. Implemented along with weekly relevant minilessons, writing circles were perceived by a strong majority of teacher candidates to be a positive collaborative experience leading to subsequent publication and to the possibility of future implementation in their own classrooms.

Furthermore, almost all candidates showed enthusiasm for using writing circles in their future elementary classrooms. Findings revealed that most teacher candidates reported positive growth as an author, improvements in writing, and enjoying writing collaboratively in writing circles. Future research is needed that focuses on fine-tuning the impact on less proficient writers, especially in regard to the ZPD; in addition, on the individual growth of writers who participate in writing circles; and on the quality of writing produced using writing circles in educational settings. Studying the influence of writing circles on resistant writers might provide a window into the possible benefits or downfalls of the collaborative experience in terms of building writing skills and/or confidence. Certainly, attempts to model and facilitate the writing process with writing workshop formats can allow these future elementary teachers to experience the arduous path of being a writer and of becoming published as well as provide experience with writing circles for their future classrooms. The themes identified in this study surrounding ideas, relationships, choice, improvement, and feedback should be further explored to determine their impact in regard to negotiating meaning and conveying information, 21st-century problem solving, and improving the quality of writing to grow confident and effective writers in elementary schools.

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APPENDIX A: REFLECTION ON WRITING CIRCLES

1. How would you rank yourself as an author BEFORE this semester began?
Circle one. 5-strong 3-average 1-weak
2. How would you rank yourself as an author at the END of the semester?
Circle one. 5-strong 3-average 1-weak
3. Please comment on participating in writing circles at the BEGINNING of the semester:
What were your perceptions then? Does anything stand out to you?
4. Now, looking back, what was the best thing about writing circles?
5. What was the least favorite thing about being a member of a writing circle?

6. How did the experience of writing collaboratively affect your attitude? Your skill?

Attitude

- ____ Positively
- ____ Neutral
- ____ Negatively

Skill

- ____ Positively
- ____ Neutral
- ____ Negatively

Please comment:

7. What have you learned from the process of writing circles?
8. What will you take from this experience into your future classroom? Or not?

Demographic Information

What is your major? ____ ELEM ____ EXED

Check one:

- ____ <25
- ____ 26–35
- ____ 36–45
- ____ 46–55
- ____ 56+

Any prior experience as a writer/author? ____ In what ways?

About the Authors

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Norine Blanch is a lecturer in elementary education at the University of Central Florida. She spent 16 years as a former elementary school teacher and assistant principal in Ontario, Canada. Her experiences and current research reflect her dedication to ensuring that preservice teachers receive the most effective preparation for increasingly diverse settings. Exploring effective teaching strategies, such as writing circles and school-based coursework in high-needs classrooms, continues to inspire Blanch's research and teaching.

Nandita Gurjar recently completed her PhD in elementary education with a focus on literacy and technology. As a former classroom teacher and current teacher educator, she is interested in transforming literacy and professional learning through innovative educational practices. Her research interests surround building professional capital through online social networking and technology adoption among preservice teachers.