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## **Encouraging Shifts in Preservice Teachers' Beliefs About Writing and Plans for Future Instruction**

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Encouraging Shifts in Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Writing and Plans for Future  
Instruction

**Abstract**

Preservice teachers' (PSTs) writing attitudes have been well formed through countless positive and negative interactions by the time they enter higher education. The present study examined 17 PSTs' beliefs about teaching writing, confidence levels, and plans for future instruction, before and after a semester-long language arts methods course. Participants participated in pre and post belief exercises and pre and post online surveys. We examined differences between PSTs' beliefs over the course of three time points. Overall, findings revealed that after self-reflection, strategy instruction, and engagement in writing, PSTs were more likely to believe in children's writing capabilities, reported higher confidence levels in teaching writing, and described plans for integrating more specific writing strategies into their future practice.

## 1. Introduction

When preservice teachers (PSTs) enter a language arts methods course, they have had a multitude of writing experiences, and their writing identities have been well formed through countless positive and negative interactions with teachers and peers (Morgan, 2010; Giles & Kent, 2015; Pajares, 1992). Personal beliefs and knowledge about writing lead to PSTs' development of writing attitudes or learned biases toward teaching writing (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). PSTs' attitudes toward teaching writing are also shaped by the value they place on writing, their interest in writing, and their competence in writing (Author, 2016). For the purposes of this article, "writing attitudes" refer to PSTs' feelings toward and interest in teaching writing to young children.

PSTs' writing attitudes and personal histories influence, not only how receptive they are to learning new strategies in college courses, but also their confidence levels in teaching writing and the pedagogical decisions they plan to implement in their future classrooms (Giles & Kent, 2015; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Pajares, 2002). Similarly, inservice teachers' writing attitudes affect how often they choose to engage their students in writing (Morgan, 2010), the amount of time they spend conferencing with students (Bizzaro & Toler, 1986), and the quality of conversations they have with students about writing (Lane, 1993). Thus, teachers' own writing attitudes affect the quantity and quality of their writing instruction and in turn, the writing attitudes of their students (Daisey, 2009).

PSTs with negative writing attitudes often describe writing as a skill they struggled with throughout school and recount experiences learning about the mechanics and conventions of writing taught in prescriptive ways (Author, 2011; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Street, 2003). They also describe writing ability as an inherent gift, which implies that it is not malleable and cannot

be significantly improved through instruction (Norman & Spencer, 2005). Unsurprisingly, PSTs with negative writing attitudes are usually timid writers themselves and feel inadequately prepared to teach writing (Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Draper, Barksdale-Ladd, & Radencich, 2000; Giles & Kent, 2015). In addition to feeling inadequate, Draper and colleagues (2000) found that many PSTs with negative writing attitudes describe their knowledge of the writing process (i.e., prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing) as nonexistent.

We have identified a cycle of negative writing attitudes based on existing literature (See Figure 1) that stems from teachers' lack of understanding surrounding children's capabilities as writers and the importance of writing in children's lives. Although links have been found between teacher attitudes and quality of instruction (Giles & Kent, 2015; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Pajares, 2002), limited research is available to support teacher educators in breaking this cycle of negative writing attitudes.

<INSERT FIGURE 1>

The purpose of the current study was to explore ways to encourage shifts in PSTs' beliefs and attitudes toward teaching writing to break the negative cycle of writing attitudes and improve future instruction. Specifically, we examined changes related to self-reflection, strategy instruction, and engagement in writing on PSTs' beliefs and attitudes about teaching writing, their confidence levels as teachers of writing, and their plans for future instruction. We hope the findings from this study will inform future language arts methods courses and in turn, encourage shifts in PSTs' attitudes and personal relationships with writing. Through these shifts, PSTs will be more likely to impact the writing lives of young children positively.

## 1.1 Background for the Study

The background for the current study includes theoretical perspectives and empirical investigations of effective instructional methods used in language arts methods courses.

**1.1.1 Theoretical perspectives.** In their theory of reasoned action, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) describe the evolution of beliefs to attitudes, attitudes to intentions, and finally, intentions to actions. This theory supports the cycle illustrated in Figure 1, in which PSTs develop negative beliefs about the importance and value of writing, due to years of negative influences from K-12 writing experiences, which leads to the development of negative attitudes toward teaching writing. Without a significant disruption in this cycle, PSTs plan to spend limited time on writing instruction when they enter the classroom, and these intentions link to their future actions (Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Weinburgh, 2007).

Specifically, teachers' personal beliefs and attitudes affect the amount of time they choose to spend on teaching writing and the quality of their instructional strategies (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Robinson & Adkins, 2002; Street, 2003). Essentially, research supports that teachers' attitudes toward teaching writing are a critical element in determining the quality of writing instruction they plan to and will provide to their students (Cho, Kim, & Choi, 2003).

Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory posits that one's participation in a social community influences learning through reciprocal interactions with other people and the environment. During reciprocal interactions with college instructors and peers, PSTs may expand their prior perceptions about writing, and attitudinal shifts may occur (Bandura, 2001; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Zimmerman, Morgan, & Kidder-Brown, 2014).

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) refer to these interactions with outside influences as subjective norms in their theory of reasoned action (TRA). According to TRA, PSTs' beliefs about the

consequences of their behavior, in conjunction with their evaluation of these consequences, determine how their writing attitudes stay the same throughout their lives or shift in response to their experiences in a social context (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

**1.1.2 Empirical investigations of effective instructional methods.** Studies examining PSTs' beliefs and attitudes about writing instruction (Batchelor, Kidder-Brown, Morgan, & Zimmerman, 2014; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Street, 2003; Tulley, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2014) have described the importance of self-reflection, strategy instruction, and engaging PSTs in writing. Norman and Spencer (2005) and Street (2003) conducted qualitative case studies examining the use of autobiographies as a vehicle for PSTs' self-reflection. As PSTs in their studies examined their personal writing histories, they were able to better envision writing in relation to the broader educational context and why it was important for their future students to engage in writing. Similarly, in a synthesis of effective literacy teachers conducted by Williams and Baumann (2008), results indicated that effective writing teachers used self-reflection often to share how they valued writing and their anxieties about teaching writing.

Grisham and Wolsey (2011) found that focused instruction on specific writing strategies led to increases in the complexity of PSTs' knowledge about writing instruction and the strategies they planned to use in their future instruction. Similarly, Zimmerman et al. (2014) found that introducing research and theory (i.e., conceptual tools), while integrating pedagogical tools (e.g., how to organize and manage a writing workshop), had positive effects on shifting PSTs' attitudes toward teaching writing.

In the 2012 practice guide, *Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers*, experts suggest the importance of creating an engaged community of writers. Their first

suggestion for building this type of community is “Teachers should participate as members of the community by writing and sharing their writing” (Graham et al., 2012, p. 1). Studies of effective language arts methods courses describe ways that instructors model this recommendation with their PSTs (Batchelor et al., 2014; Morgan, 2010; Tulley, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2014). For example, effective courses across multiple studies describe instructors who guide their PSTs through the writing process from pre-writing to publishing, while modeling writing their own stories during the process.

They also describe engaging their students in writing for a variety of purposes, participating in peer and teacher conferences about their writing, and sharing their writing through classroom celebrations (Author, 2015; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2014). Morgan (2010) suggests PSTs’ beliefs and attitudes about teaching writing shift because they are engaging in writing themselves, in addition to receiving instruction in how to teach writing. As PSTs focus on themselves as writers, they filter information about teaching writing with a new lens and expand their conceptions of writing (Morgan, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2014).

## **2. Method**

The goal of this mixed-method study was to examine how PSTs’ attitudes toward writing instruction and their beliefs about teaching writing changed over the course of the semester through the integration of self-reflection, strategy instruction, and engagement in writing. In this study, qualitative tactics were employed to gather information on the PSTs’ perceptions of writing over time. Quantitative data helped determine whether there were significant changes in beliefs over time. The study was guided by the following research question: What changes are observed related to participation in a semester-long language arts course on PSTs’: (a) beliefs



about children's capabilities as writers, (b) beliefs about the importance of writing instruction, (c) confidence in teaching writing, (d) plans for future writing instruction, and (e) actual writing instruction?

## **2.1 Participants**

Before the start of the semester, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval for the research protocol. PSTs from an early childhood education program located at a large public university in the southeast United States were recruited during a class orientation and completed consent forms without the instructor present (first author). All students consented to participate. Seventeen PSTs chose to participate in the pre and post phases of the study (in August and December of their final year in the program). Ten of these same participants chose to complete a follow-up survey one year later as first-year *novice teachers*. Participants were all white females between the ages of 21-22 years, which is representative of the early childhood student population at this institution.

## **2.2 Instructional Context**

The study took place in a required language arts course that met twice a week for 2 ½ hours between weeks three and eight of the semester and during the final two weeks of the semester. PSTs participated in a full-day field placement four days a week for the first two weeks of the semester and during Weeks 9-14 of the semester. The course introduced emergent literacy skills, storytelling, and poetry, but the primary focus was on writing instruction. This course was selected for the study because of its heavy focus on early childhood writing and its corresponding field placement, which enabled students to enact newly learned strategies. Within this course, "writing" was defined as making marks on paper with intended meaning and was

supported through knowledge of developmental writing stages (i.e., drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, letter strings, invented spelling, conventional writing).

During the first class session of the fall semester, PSTs were asked to reflect on their personal beliefs and attitudes toward writing and writing instruction and how their K-12 schooling experiences helped shape these beliefs and attitudes. Following this open-ended written reflection, PSTs shared their thoughts in small groups and then as a whole class. After reflecting on their personal beliefs and writing experiences, PSTs completed an online survey, which included questions about PSTs' attitudes toward children's capabilities as writers, the importance of writing instruction, their confidence in teaching writing, and their plans for future instruction.

During subsequent class sessions, PSTs analyzed examples of children's writing in grades PreK-3 and completed readings from three texts, *The Writing Workshop* (Fletcher & Portalupi, 2001), *Interactive Writing* (McCarrier, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000), and *Already Ready: Nurturing Writers in Preschool and Kindergarten* (Ray & Glover, 2008), as well as from selected research articles on weekly topics. Weekly topics included writing development, emergent writing instruction, interactive writing, bookmaking, the writing process, Writer's Workshop (including mini-lessons on various genres), writing conferences, sharing, publishing, writing celebrations, struggling writers, English Language Learners as writers, and writing assessment.

The instructor presented information and relevant research on each weekly topic and modeled each strategy that was discussed. Each class included time for self-reflection to help PSTs connect new content to their past and current experiences and their plans for future instruction. Throughout the semester, the instructor implemented strategies to engage PSTs in the

writing process, modeled drafting, and shared writing to build an engaged community of writers. For example, when introducing Writer's Workshop, the instructor taught a mini-lesson on finding story ideas from personal photographs. She brought in a photograph of her grandmother and herself riding a train to a family reunion and demonstrated prewriting on the board by listing what happened in the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Next, PSTs shared photographs of their own in small groups and selected one to be the topic of their first story. Finally, the instructor invited volunteers to share their memories in an author's chair to complete the modeled Writer's Workshop.

During future lessons, the PSTs used their selected memories to work through the writing process including drafting, conferencing with the instructor, revising, conferencing with a peer, editing, and finally publishing their own children's book. The course concluded with a writing celebration where PSTs shared their children's books in small groups. The children's book assignment modeled the workshop approach so that PSTs would understand the student perspective of working through the writing process over time. Although many students reflected on the difficulty of generating ideas, revising, and illustrating, they also shared how much insight it gave them into the difficult process of writing for young children.

In addition to self-reflection, writing together, and learning about writing strategies in class, the PSTs practiced teaching writing in an early childhood field placement. During their first two weeks in the field, PSTs collected writing samples and conducted a teacher interview to help plan appropriate writing lessons for their field placement students. Then, following class sessions on strategy instruction, PSTs designed and taught four interactive writing lessons over the course of the semester. The instructor provided three rounds of feedback through individual conferences (approximately 5 minutes each for a total of 15 minutes) before PSTs conducted

their lessons. Following the lessons, PSTs wrote reflections noting what went well, what did not, whether children were engaged in the writing project/topic, if the lessons fit well with current standards being covered in the class, whether they felt they met their objectives, and what they would change if they taught the lesson again.

At the end of the semester, PSTs completed a final video assignment reflecting on how their beliefs about writing had changed throughout the semester. Students created videos on Adobe Spark. The videos included images, voiceover, and background music and PSTs shared them as a whole group during the final class meeting. Students also completed a post-survey on their attitudes and beliefs about writing.

## **2.3 Data Sources**

**2.3.1 Pre and Post Belief Exercise – Qualitative.** During the first course session on writing, students completed an open-ended belief exercise by responding to the following prompts: (1) What do you believe to be important when thinking about teaching young children to write?, (2) How did you form your beliefs about teaching writing?, (3) Who or what experiences influenced your beliefs?, (4) How confident do you feel about teaching writing to young children right now?

During the final weeks of the course, students completed a video reflection assignment with similar prompts. For this assignment, students reflected on how their beliefs and attitudes toward writing and teaching writing had changed through their participation in course readings, lectures, and activities. After reflecting on their past and current beliefs, they created a 1-2 minute Adobe Spark video entitled "What I Believe about Teaching Writing." Their videos were required to include the following components: (1) their core beliefs about teaching writing, (2) why they held these core beliefs, (3) how they felt their beliefs changed throughout the course (if

they had), (4) how they thought their beliefs would influence the way they would teach writing in the future, and (5) how they planned to share their beliefs with children and parents.

**2.3.2 Pre and Post Survey with Follow-up – Quantitative.** In addition to the pre and post belief exercises, PSTs completed a researcher-designed online survey at the beginning (Time 1) and the end of the course (Time 2), and a follow-up survey (Time 3) one year after taking the course (into participants' first year of teaching). PSTs were asked a series of quantitative questions related to their confidence and plans for future writing instruction. Quantitative results were used to frame the qualitative analysis. In the following paragraph, we provide an overview of the quantitative measures.

To start, PSTs reported the extent to which they were confident teaching writing to young children. Responses spread across a three-point Likert-type scale labeled: very confident (3), somewhat confident (2), and not confident (1). The survey also contained questions related the PSTs' plans for future writing instruction. Three questions prompted PSTs to think about a typical week and indicate the amount of class time (minutes per week) the PSTs planned to devote to writing-related activities. Specifically, the first question asked the PSTs to predict how much time they would devote to allowing their students to write (e.g., planning, drafting, revising, editing). The second question asked how many minutes per week they would devote to allowing their students to share their writing with others (e.g., peers, teachers, visitors). The third question asked how many minutes per week they would devote to teaching their students to write (e.g., how to plan, draft, revise, and edit text). For each of these questions, participants reported the minutes per week they planned to spend on the activity.

PSTs also reported the type of writing curriculum they intended to use to teach writing. Choices included: (a) writing process approach (i.e., focused on the steps of the writing process -

drafting, revising, editing, and publishing), (b) skill-based approach (i.e., focused on specific skills related to conventional writing such as grammar, sentence formation, and punctuation), (c) combination of approaches, and (d) other. The one-year follow-up survey explored participants' experiences with writing instruction as a new teacher in addition to the aforementioned measures related to confidence and writing instruction.

## **2.4 Data Analysis**

**2.4.1 Qualitative analysis.** Utilizing the written exercises and transcribed videos, we analyzed and coded the data through a content-analysis approach with an emergent coding scheme (Neuendoff, 2002; Saldaña, 2014). Author 1 and Author 2 independently made a list of identified themes by segmenting the text into words, phrases, and sentences. Author 1 identified the prevalence of key phrases (e.g. authentic writing, writing process) using a frequency distribution of participants' responses. Author 2 developed codes for key themes (e.g., preservice teacher beliefs) that emerged with each question and used the codes to categorize each participant response. Author 1 and Author 2 then met to discuss discrepancies and reached an agreement on shared themes. Subthemes emerged during this process, such as preservice teachers' beliefs about children's capabilities as writers.

**2.4.2 Quantitative analysis.** Data were analyzed using SPSS version 24. Given the small sample size and use of the same instrument, we opted to run within subject *t*-tests to determine whether any differences existed between the PSTs' views across the two time points, beginning of the semester (Time 1) and end of the semester (Time 2) (de Winter, 2013). For the 10 participants who completed the follow-up survey, *t*-tests were used to determine whether there were differences between their views at the end of the semester (Time 2) and upon follow-up (Time 3). Due to attrition between the end of semester and follow-up survey, we excluded

incomplete pairs from the Time 3 analysis. For example, if a participant completed the Time 1 and Time 2 survey but did not complete the Time 3 survey, they were included in the first analysis and removed from the second analysis. Therefore, the participant mean scores at Time 2 are different.

### 3. Results

We examined differences between PSTs' beliefs over the course of three time points. We used qualitative and quantitative data to determine shifts in beliefs over time. To evaluate possible shifts in PSTs' practices, quantitative survey data were used to determine whether there were statistical differences. First, we present the findings of the PSTs' Pre and Post belief exercises and survey. Second, we describe the results of the one-year follow-up survey.

#### 3.1 Preservice Teacher Findings

Analyses of pre and post data indicate shifts in PSTs' (1) beliefs about teaching writing, (2) confidence levels in teaching writing, and (3) plans for future writing instruction. We elaborate on these findings below. Exploration of participants' beliefs about teaching writing after engaging in this semester-long language arts course, pointed to two sub-themes: (a) beliefs about children's capabilities as writers, and (b) beliefs about the importance of writing instruction.

**3.1.1 Beliefs about children's capabilities as writers.** Participants' language shifted from being doubtful of children's capabilities at the beginning of the semester to firmly believing in children's capabilities at the end of the semester. For example, one participant early in the semester commented, "I feel that if a child has no background with writing then they should trace the letters." On the contrary, students at the end of the course shared the belief that all children are writers despite their developmental stage. One participant responded, "I believe every student

is capable of writing, as long as they have the chance and the opportunities.” Another stated, “I believe that all students have the potential to be good writers.”

Participants also demonstrated a new understanding about the different stages in writing at the end of the semester, as they noted that writing was a process with multiple stages and that children may go through these different stages at their own pace. They commented on the concept of developmentally appropriate practice, which complimented their new beliefs about children’s capabilities as writers. As one participant commented, “All children are writers. Some students may write by using scribbles, some students may write by drawing, and others will write using correct letter forms, sentence structures, and punctuation.” Another participant wrote, “I know that children go through different stages in writing, and they should be encouraged to write in whatever stage is developmentally appropriate for them.” In discussing their understanding of children’s capabilities as writers, several participants expressed the belief that writing is a way for children to express themselves. One PST stated, “As long as someone is expressing themselves through pictures or words on paper, then they are conveying a message, and they are a writer.” Some participants also noted the relationship between children’s confidence in writing and their ability to become writers. For example, one participant wrote, “...let the students believe that they are writers as much as I do. That enforces their confidence and allows them to produce even better writing.” Another stated, “I feel strongly that children must have confidence in themselves when writing to want to share their thoughts and beliefs.”

**3.1.2 Beliefs about the importance of writing instruction.** We also found shifts in participants’ beliefs about the importance of writing instruction after participating in this course. In the beginning of the course, PSTs’ language focused on the importance of writing within the context of teaching basic skills. As one participant responded in the pre-survey, “I think teaching



writing is very important in the classroom. It's important to know how to write with decent, legible handwriting and to be able to form full sentences that are proper grammar and sound professional.” At the end of the semester, PSTs focused more on the importance of writing related to meaning and expression. One participant reflected, "My core belief about writing is that it is integral to the development of the student. It helps student's creativity, language, and expressive abilities.” Another participant commented on the shift in her belief about the importance of writing, “I used to think that teaching writing had to do with teaching students how to write their letters correctly and using prompts that all the students had to write about. Now I know every student needs to be able to write to be successful, and as a teacher, our goal and job is to help every student in every possible way become the most successful they can possibly be.”

Participants reported in the post-survey that writing is a separate subject and should have its own time daily in the classroom. One participant stated, "At first, I thought that writing could be taught mainly through other subjects, but now I understand the importance of teaching writing separately as well. Giving students opportunities to write and focus only on their writing will help students become more confident and write across all subjects.” Another responded, “I believe teaching writing is an extremely important component of early childhood education. Writing is an integral part of all subjects and should be focused on each day in early childhood classroom to best teach children.”

**3.1.3 Confidence level in teaching writing.** Qualitative evidence from participant responses also demonstrated a change in their confidence levels related to teaching writing. Many came to the understanding that writing instruction is not as difficult as they thought it would be. As one participant reflected, "At the beginning of this semester, I was really nervous

about teaching writing since I grew up not liking writing in school. The thoughts that I would not be capable of teaching writing to children have slowly decreased throughout this semester because I have learned different ways to teach writing through this course.” PSTs stated teaching writing can be fun and used as a tool to help learn about students. One PST stated, “After this course, I realized how fun writing instruction can be and how much you can learn about your students through it.” and another stated, “Before this course, I thought teaching writing would be difficult to do, but now I have learned that teaching writing is enjoyable and not difficult to do.”

A paired-samples t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores on PSTs’ reported confidence to teach writing to young children pre ( $M = 1.6, SD = .49$ ) and post ( $M = 2.2, SD = .44$ ) survey. Specifically, PSTs demonstrated statistically significant increases in confidence,  $t(16) = 4.78, p < .0005, d = 1.15, \alpha = .05$ . See table 1 for descriptive statistics.

**3.1.4 Plans for future writing instruction.** Participants were asked to *think of a typical week and indicate the amount of class time (minutes per week) they plan to devote to the following activities—allowing students to write, allowing students to share their writing with others, and teaching students about how to write.* Table 1 provides an overview of the PSTs’ plans for weekly writing instruction. There were no significant changes in the weekly time dedicated to writing between pre ( $M = 312.9, SD = 166.0$ ) and post ( $M = 312.6, SD = 191.2$ ) survey,  $t(16) = 0.006, p = .995$ .

<INSERT TABLE 1>

**3.1.5 Plans for curriculum and teaching strategies.** When asked *“What type of writing curriculum do you plan to use to teach writing?”* on the pre-survey, the percentage of participant answers showed 47.1% of PSTs would use the process approach to teach writing, 11.8% would

use a skill-based approach, and 41.2% would use a combination of process and skill-based approaches. A paired-samples *t*-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the writing curriculum PSTs' reported at pre ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = .97$ ) and post ( $M = 1.23$ ,  $SD = .66$ ) survey. PSTs demonstrated statistically significant changes in their writing curriculum,  $t(16) = 2.78$ ,  $p < .05$  from a primarily skill-based or combination approach to a process approach. See table 1 for descriptive statistics. To find out more details about specific strategies participants planned to use for future writing instruction, we used qualitative data analysis on the question, *What do you feel strongly about including and not including in your future instruction?*

Before taking the course, some participants mentioned giving students an opportunity to free write and incorporating writing instruction into the curriculum daily, but none provided specific strategies they would use to teach writing. Moreover, many participants perceived teaching conventions (e.g., handwriting, spelling, grammar) as the focus of writing instruction. For example, one PST commented, "As a future teacher of writing, I envision my role definitely being to help students understand punctuation, spelling, capitalization, grammar, etc...". Another PST noted, "For early childhood instruction, I feel strongly about including the basics so as to not overload my students."

At the end of the course, when thinking about plans for future writing instruction, PSTs did not mention skill-based instruction. Moreover, compared to earlier responses that were broad and conveyed general ideas, participant answers became much more specific regarding what they would include in their future instruction. All participants expressed a willingness to implement some of the strategies learned in the course. Specifically, PSTs stated that they planned to incorporate Writer's Workshop, interactive writing, and an author's chair into their writing

curriculum. One participant stated, “Once I’m a teacher, I will provide multiple opportunities for writing throughout the day. I will do this through Writer’s Workshop, writing stations, interactive writing, and by integrating writing into stations and other parts of the day.” Another said, “I feel strongly about including Writer’s Workshop to give students more opportunities to write and create stories. I also think interactive writing is a fun activity that can take place a few times a year.” Modeling is another strategy that many participants considered useful for students. For example, one PST stated, “I will model writing for my future students and show them writing is enjoyable and should be something that they look forward to doing.” Another PST stated, “I want to include modeling times throughout the year so that the class can see different writing techniques and then can go work on them on their own.”

### **3.2 Novice Teacher Findings**

We examined how participants’ attitudes toward writing changed after entering their first year of teaching by conducting a follow-up survey with a subset from the larger group of preservice teachers. Findings are elaborated from this group of novice teachers’ (1) beliefs about writing instruction; (2) confidence level in teaching writing; and (3) writing instruction implemented in their classrooms.

**3.2.1 Beliefs about children’s capabilities as writers.** Regarding beliefs about children’s capabilities as writers, inservice teachers still showed a firm belief that all children are writers as they did at the end of the language arts course. One participant stated “I believe that all students can write.” and another said “I believe each child is a writer. A third participant said “All children can write, no matter what stage they are in”. It is reassuring to see that these new beliefs about children’s capabilities and the sense that “every child is a writer” continued into first year practice. Despite barriers that inservice teachers faced, these beliefs were reported to

guide instructional decisions and supported teachers in keeping writing instruction as an important of their school day.

The inservice teachers also focused on instilling confidence in children and helping their students believe in their abilities as writers. One participant responded, "I believe that every child can write and I try to promote that confidence in my students through my writing instruction." Another expressed, "I believe that for children to be successful writers they have to enjoy it and feel confident in their ability to write. When I teach writing, I really push effort and transferring thoughts onto paper. As long as a student is trying, I will accept what they give me."

**3.2.2 Beliefs about the importance of writing instruction.** Entering the teaching profession did not significantly change participants' beliefs about the importance of writing instruction. They still held strong beliefs that teaching writing is extremely important for children. For example, one participant stated, "Teaching writing is extremely important for children because writing is such a vital skill in practically every profession and several areas of life." Another participant stated, "It's very important to teach writing. It's a major form of communication and students need to start learning early on". Others commented that it is extremely important to teach writing at a young age and that it is an important part of a child's education. In conjunction with these beliefs were reports of teachers giving students opportunities to freely write, visit a writing center, and to select different genres.

**3.2.3 Confidence level about teaching writing.** After entering the classroom as a professional, several participants expressed frustration and worries about teaching writing, realizing that it was not as easy as they thought it would be. As one participant wrote, "Teaching writing has been one of the most challenging areas for me so far this year. It is one thing to teach the mechanics of capitalization and punctuation, but teaching the craft is much different."

Another commented, “I use and make time for Writer's Workshop in my classroom every day. I also feel that interactive writing is important and that children benefit from them, but I have struggled with implementing them in my classroom schedule regularly.” A third participant commented “Writing is a difficult topic to teach because there are so many ways to approach it.” Although quantitative data below does not suggest a drop in teachers’ confidence levels, teacher comments did suggest that some were finding it difficult during their first year to carry out their plans for instruction.

A paired-samples *t*-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores on PSTs’ reported confidence to teach writing to young children post ( $M = 2.2, SD = .44$ ) and follow-up ( $M = 2.1, SD = .31$ ) survey. Specifically, participants did not demonstrate statistically significant differences in confidence between the two time points,  $t(9) = 1.94, p = .05$ . That is, participants maintained their increased levels of confidence between the end of the course and their first year teaching.

**3.3.4 Writing instruction.** At the end of this course, Writer’s Workshop and interactive writing were two main strategies that most participants wanted to try out in their future writing instruction. However, as they started teaching in their classrooms, freewriting and modeling became the most frequently reported strategies. One participant stated, “I feel strongly about having students just freely write, so we do creative writing exercises frequently where they do not have to worry about spelling or writing.” Another participant stated, “I feel strongly about including a lot of modeling...I also have focused a lot on writing as a process and modeling how to think, sketch, write, etc.” For the 10 participants who responded to the one-year follow-up survey, there were no significant changes in the curriculum between the post ( $M = 1.20, SD = .63$ ) and follow-up ( $M = 1.90, SD = .99$ ),  $t(9) = 1.90, p = 0.08$ . That is, participants followed

through on their plan to use a process or combination approach to teaching writing during their first year.

Similarly, the follow-up survey revealed participants reported changes in the amount of time they spent on writing (compared to the post-survey). A paired-samples t-test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores on participants' predicted teaching time on the post-survey ( $M = 312.7$ ) and follow-up ( $M = 211.0$ ) survey. The change was statistically significant between the two time points,  $t(9) = 2.26$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.72$ .

Based on participants' written responses, they spend less time than intended on teaching writing mainly for two reasons. First, there is a huge emphasis on other subject areas (especially math and reading) from their school or district. As one participant wrote, "My district, as I'm sure most districts do, has a huge emphasis on literacy, specifically reading fluency." Another participant said, "The curriculum I am given and expected to follow for reading and language arts does not include much writing in any forms in 1st grade." Second, participants reported that their schedules are tight every day with "special" things that happen in school, which makes it difficult to fit writing into the day. One participant commented, "There are so many 'special' things that take time from the school day and writing is just the easiest to do without. Between fire drills, career days, guidance lessons...it is hard to spend as much time as I'd like on writing daily". Another participant said, "I have tried so hard to figure out a schedule where I can integrate subjects so that I have more time in the day, but with testing and the recent snow days, time is so precious."

#### **4. Discussion and Implications**

Current literature suggests teachers' personal beliefs and attitudes toward teaching writing affect the amount of time they choose to spend on teaching writing and the quality of their instructional strategies (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Robinson & Adkins, 2002; Street, 2003). In this study, we found that as PSTs' confidence levels and beliefs about the importance of writing increased and strengthened, as did their plans for future instruction. Specifically, they reported planning to spend more time on writing instruction and to use curriculum strategies focused on meaning and expression rather than skill-based instruction.

PSTs began the course with an understanding that writing is important, but their reasons for this assumption dramatically changed after participating in course activities. Based on new understandings about children's capabilities and development as writers, PSTs expanded their conceptions of children's writing abilities. Instead of focusing on the importance of learning to use basic skills, PSTs began to see writing as a powerful form of expression for their students, and as a necessary tool for success in future schooling and their day-to-day lives.

Recent empirical investigations describe the importance of self-reflection, strategy instruction, and engaging PSTs in writing in order to shift beliefs and attitudes (Batchelor, Kidder-Brown, Morgan, & Zimmerman, 2014; Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Morgan, 2010; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Street, 2003; Tulley, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2014). The benefits of incorporating these aspects in the current study were evident in the findings. Through reflecting on their K-12 writing experiences, students were able to identify factors that contributed to their negative attitudes toward writing. As they learned about writing development and examined children's writing samples, they reflected on how their written expression was often undervalued and limited in the classroom setting. They used these reflections as a springboard to explore new strategies and to make plans to break the negative cycle of writing instruction.



The findings from this study suggest that providing PSTs with conceptual and pedagogical tools (Zimmerman et al., 2014), and engaging them in writing (Batchelor et al., 2014; Morgan, 2010; Tulley, 2013) can boost their confidence in teaching writing and that these confidence levels remain high into their first year of teaching. The findings also suggest that PSTs are willing to adapt new pedagogical tools and continue using these tools in their first year of teaching.

Although PSTs entered the course with well-established beliefs and attitudes about writing, the findings reinforce that PSTs' beliefs are still evolving and that it is possible to help them develop new attitudes and understandings over time (Ng et al., 2010). This study is unique in that it goes beyond what PSTs plan to do in their future writing instruction and explores the challenges of implementing these plans during their first year of teaching.

#### **4.1 Limitations and Future Research**

We collected participant demographic data to increase the external validity of this study. However, the generalizability is still limited by the small sample size. Also, the retention rate on the follow-up survey for novice teachers was low due to some PSTs attending graduate school instead of entering the teaching profession. The pre and post belief exercises were not identical, making it more difficult to measure changes in PSTs attitudes and plans for instruction. Although these findings may inform future language arts methods courses, they must be interpreted with caution as they are non-experimental. We recognize that this is a pilot study and understand the necessity of conducting randomized controlled studies in the future to determine significant changes between groups and that validated tools should be used to measure confidence levels and plans for future instruction. In addition, the first author was provided the instruction and was in a supervisory role during data collection.

Despite these limitations, findings indicate that incorporating self-reflection, strategy instruction, and engagement in writing in language arts methods courses can lead to important shifts in PSTs' writing beliefs and attitudes. To break the cycle of negative writing attitudes (See Figure 1), longitudinal research needs to investigate the relationship between PSTs' new beliefs and attitudes and their instructional actions. Furthermore, research needs to explore whether changes in PSTs' actions lead to positive writing attitudes among their students. This study suggests PSTs are not able to spend as much time on writing instruction as they planned or hoped to once they enter their classrooms; therefore, further research on inservice support and continued education would be beneficial.

### **5. Conclusion**

Given the well-established attitudes of PSTs and the complexities of writing instruction, it is not surprising that methods courses are only one factor in breaking the cycle of negative writing attitudes and improving teacher practice. This study suggests that engaging PSTs in self-reflection, strategy instruction, and writing can shift beliefs about children's capabilities as writers and influence PSTs' confidence level and plans for teaching writing. Although these shifts remain constant into the first year of teaching, actual time spent on instruction is reportedly less than planned for the majority of PSTs. In addition to encouraging shifts in beliefs and attitudes, language arts courses need to address the demands and barriers that inservice teachers face in implementing research-based practices.

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