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## A Study of Teacher Candidates' Changing Perceptions of Confidence within Writing-Focused Methods Courses

Kelly N. Tracy

*Western Carolina University, kntracy@wcu.edu*

Roya Q. Scales

*Western Carolina University, rqcales@email.wcu.edu*

Joy Myers

*James Madison University, myersjk@jmu.edu*

David Scales

*Western Carolina University, wdscales@wcu.edu*

Sonia M. Kline

*Illinois State University, skline@ilstu.edu*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## **A Study of Teacher Candidates' Changing Perceptions of Confidence within Writing-Focused Methods Courses**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

Author Note: Authors are members of the Literacy Research Association's (LRA) Teacher Education Research Study Group (TERSG). They represent eight universities from across the eastern and mid-western United States.

### **Authors**

Kelly N. Tracy, Roya Q. Scales, Joy Myers, David Scales, Sonia M. Kline, Amanda Wall, Chinwe Ikpeze, Jenn Raskauskas, Vicki McQuitty, Grace Y. Kang, and Linda D. Smetana

## **A Study of Teacher Candidates' Changing Perceptions of Confidence within Writing-Focused Methods Courses**

### **Abstract**

This convergent mixed methods study explores changes in teacher candidates' perceptions of confidence in themselves as writers and writing teachers after completing a writing-focused methods course. Quantitative results indicate that 80% of candidates felt confident or extremely confident as a writer, and most participants (nearly 79%) grew in their confidence to teach writing by the end of their methods course. Qualitative data indicate that candidates' writing skills influenced how they perceived themselves as writers and that definitions of writing and being a writer vary. The results provide areas of consideration for improving writing pedagogy in teacher preparation and beyond.

As teacher educators, we are faced with the challenge of preparing teacher candidates (hereafter referred to as candidates) to become teachers of writing while also navigating their confidence in themselves as writers. As we ask them to use writing instructional practices such as modeling and shared writing, they are making their writing visible to their students. Gardner (2014) suggests that engaging in such practices assumes that "all teachers have confidence in themselves as writers" (p. 128). However, prior research indicates that candidates often lack writing confidence, which may translate into their writing instructional practices (Gardner, 2014; Morgan, 2010). Hodges et al. (2019) note that understanding candidates' beliefs means examining their confidence as writers and teachers of writing. They determined that many candidates value writing but do not enjoy it and lack self-assurance in their writing ability. To better prepare our candidates to become excellent writing teachers, we must understand their views and beliefs about writing and writing instruction (Morgan & Pytash, 2014).

To study candidates' confidence related to writing, we designed a convergent mixed methods study. Our study adds to the literature and is important because "...what students learn about writing will be influenced by their teachers' experience teaching writing, knowledge about how to teach it, attitudes about writing, and confidence as a writer and writing teacher" (Graham & Harris, 2019, p. 10). A review of the research revealed several findings influencing candidates' confidence as writers and as teachers of writing, including their prior experiences and attitudes about writing and teacher education experiences.

## Literature Review

### Prior Experiences and Attitudes

Many candidates come to their teacher preparation programs with writing anxieties (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011). They may dislike writing, believe they were inadequately taught how to write, or consider themselves poor writers (Cremin & Oliver, 2016; Gallavan et al., 2007; Hall et al., 2021). Compared to their feelings about reading, candidates generally express more difficulty with writing, even using metaphors such as graves, death, or torture to describe the act of writing (Ozenc & Ozenc, 2018). Despite these negative perceptions, findings indicate that candidates “need and want to be taught how to write, how to communicate, and how to teach writing to their PK-12 students” (Gallavan et al., 2007, p. 67).

Candidates’ prior experiences and attitudes also influence their confidence levels in teaching writing (Giles & Kent, 2015). Candidates with negative writing attitudes are usually less confident writers and feel unprepared to teach writing (Colby & Stapleton, 2006). In a study of 150 middle-grade teacher candidates, Hodges et al. (2019) found that although they valued writing, they did not feel confident about many aspects of writing instruction. They assert that confidence in writing *and* writing instruction makes effective writing teachers. Many researchers argue that a teacher’s confidence in their ability to impact students’ performance is strongly linked to their beliefs about their abilities to successfully perform specific teaching and learning tasks within the context of their classrooms (Dellinger et al., 2008; Filatov & Pill, 2015; Gardner, 2014). This is important since confidence in a subject matter, such as writing, impacts teachers’ willingness to engage in instruction in that subject area (Graham et al., 2001; Hodges et al., 2019).

Attention needs to be paid to prior experiences and attitudes about writing that candidates bring with them into their teacher preparation programs and that teachers bring into their classrooms. In Cremin and Oliver’s (2016) systematic review of research from 1990 to 2015 on teachers as writers, they note that teachers’ writing identities were strongly affected by their early writing experiences and that these experiences often left lasting impressions, both positive and negative. Teachers formed beliefs about themselves as writers, and these beliefs and experiences affected their attitudes.

### The Influence on Teaching

When teachers go into their classrooms with negative past experiences or beliefs, this may translate into lacking confidence in their teaching of writing (Street & Stang, 2009), which can lead to avoiding teaching it (Cremin & Oliver, 2016). Harward and colleagues (2014) found a difference in the writing confidence of teachers who regularly engaged students in writing and those who did not. Those who did tended to perceive themselves as good writers, while those who did not

perceived themselves as inadequate writers. Similarly, those who lack confidence in their understanding of writing mechanics hesitate to teach writing to their students (Gartland & Smolkin, 2016; Hall & Grisham-Brown, 2011). Considering teachers' writing histories and their writing self-efficacy is an important part of understanding and improving writing instruction (Bruning & Kauffman, 2016; Hodges et al., 2019).

### **The Role of Teacher Education**

Studies suggest that candidates' beliefs about writing are still evolving as they enter teacher education programs and that these programs, particularly the literacy methods courses within them, can play an influential role in shaping beliefs and attitudes (Morgan, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2014). In Bomer et al.'s (2019) review of empirical research focused on the preparation of writing teachers, 39 of the 82 studies indicated that beliefs or attitudes about writing emerged as an important factor in how candidates understand the teaching of writing. Offering experiences that position candidates as writers is one means of expanding their notions of teaching writing (Bomer et al., 2019). Many teacher educators engage preservice teachers in the writing process during undergraduate courses as a way of helping them learn about writing instruction (Batchelor et al., 2014; Scales et al., 2019). Sanders et al. (2020) further outline patterns of practice in writing teacher education, including experiential instructional strategies that engage students as writers and help them “develop self-efficacy and positive perceptions of themselves as writers” (p. 399). The hope is that candidates gain insight into the writing process and empathy for students' experiences as they “do what they require their students to do” (Gooda, 2016, p. 271). Further, Hall (2016) found that coursework emphasizing self-reflection, focused instruction, and field practice shifted candidates' beliefs and attitudes about writing and writing instruction, including their confidence in writing instruction. In a later study, Hall et al. (2021) found that candidates who took a language arts methods course maintained their increased level of confidence, specific to teaching writing, between the end of the course and their first year of teaching.

Other scholars, such as Saidy (2015), suggest that teacher education programs should better understand how teachers' knowledge of writing pedagogy and experience as writers impact their early instruction and how candidates are asked to think of themselves as writers and writing teachers. Harward and colleagues (2014) note, “Quality preparation in writing instruction is a must for school success and learning in school and beyond” (p. 221). Findings from their study suggest that the quality of preparation and in-service professional development make a difference in what happens in terms of writing in K-6 classrooms. They argue that efforts should not only focus on curricular concerns but also on how teachers view writing (Harward et al., 2014).

Cremin and Oliver (2016) explain the complex relationship between teachers' writing experiences and their teaching. While they found the research base too limited to be conclusive on the impact of teachers as writers on student outcomes, the review concludes:

Pre-service and in-service training programmes appear to have important roles to play in developing teachers' conceptions of writing and sense of self as writer. Findings suggest that sustained opportunities to reflect on personal writing histories, engage in writing, discuss textual processes and participate in a community of practice, can influence teachers' self-assurance as writers and their pedagogical approaches. (p. 24)

Understanding more about how teacher education programs and writing methods courses influence candidates' confidence can provide teacher educators with important information specific to making program and curriculum decisions (Helfrich & Clark, 2016; Pajares, 1992). However, much of the existing literature on the influence of methods courses on teacher confidence has been specific to reading methods rather than writing methods (Helfrich & Clark, 2016). In addition, the previous studies we examined focus on specific populations (e.g., elementary education undergraduate students). Hence, our research on candidates' perceptions of their confidence as writers and as teachers of writing after a semester in a writing-focused methods course in varied programs adds to the body of literature related to candidates' conceptions of writing and sense of self as writers. Our research questions follow:

1. How do candidates rate their confidence as *writers* as they enter their writing-focused methods courses, and does this change after completing the course?
2. How do candidates view what it means to be a writer?
3. How do candidates rate their confidence as *teachers of writing* prior to taking a writing-focused methods course, and does this change after completing the course?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Over time, writing research has evolved from a mechanical view to a cognitive model and, more recently, focusing on sociocultural perspectives (Behizadeh & Engelhard, 2011). As researchers and instructors of the courses featured in this study, we believe that writing is an inherently social process (Bakhtin, 1986), as language is always socially constructed and socially mediated and reflective of one's social worlds (Devitt, 2008; Dyson, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978).

Thus, sociocultural theory guided this study by providing a lens “to understand how culturally and historically situated meanings are constructed, reconstructed, and transformed through social mediation” (Englert et al., 2006, p. 208). Although Prior (2006) argues, “Sociocultural theories represent the dominant paradigm for writing research today” (p. 54), we recognize that mechanics and cognitive processes are also important aspects of writing (Behizadeh, 2014).

Learning to write involves “being socialized into a set of values, practices, and symbol systems” (Daiute, 2000, p. 256). Sociocultural theory emphasizes motivation, affect, and social influences as components of writing (Hodges, 2017). From this perspective, writing extends beyond one’s immediate context to include prior knowledge, understanding of language, multiple genres, and influences of technology. Throughout their participation in our courses, candidates worked to socially construct their understanding of teaching writing and their perceptions of themselves as writers, given what they learned from the methods courses and experienced in practicum. Thus, a sociocultural lens provided a more nuanced understanding of candidates’ views and beliefs about writing and writing instruction so that we, as teacher educators, could best prepare them to teach writing.

### **Methodology**

As members of a national literacy organization’s teacher education special interest group (SIG), we discussed our shared interest in studying our writing-focused methods courses. We designed the study during the SIG meetings and continued planning implementation after the conference, using video conference calls. Researchers obtained IRB approval from their institutions, which included permission to share de-identified data across institutions.

It is important to note that our goal was not to compare the institutions or participants’ learning across institutions. Instead, we sought to explore changes in candidates’ perceptions of themselves as writers, in their ratings of confidence as writers, and in their ratings of confidence as teachers of writing after taking a semester-long writing-focused methods course. Collecting data from our varied institutions allowed for greater participation and multiple perspectives in the review of the data.

A convergent mixed methods design allowed qualitative and quantitative data to be collected simultaneously, analyzed separately and then merged (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The reason for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data is to use the different methods to confirm each other. Data were collected from the participants using the same instruments through a beginning-of-course and end-of-course survey. The survey was constructed in consultation with a psychometrician, and the same questions were asked both times. For qualitative data, we focused on

the open-response survey question asking candidates if they would describe themselves as writers and why or why not. For quantitative data, we focused on two Likert-type survey questions rating confidence. Questions analyzed for this study are found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Survey Questions*

Open-ended Question	Likert-type Questions
Would you describe yourself as a writer? Why or why not?	How confident do you feel as a writer? 1 = not confident at all; 5 = extremely confident How confident do you currently feel as a teacher of writing? 1 = not confident at all; 5 = extremely confident

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from writing-focused literacy methods courses in six public, four-year institutions in the United States: Georgia, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Six of the authors were also instructors of these courses. See Table 2 for information about institutions. Candidates enrolled in writing-focused literacy methods courses were provided a letter explaining the study as part of each institution's IRB process. To mediate influence on participation, a guest colleague briefly explained the study and distributed consent forms. Candidates indicated their preference for participation, signed the forms, and submitted them to an envelope that was sealed until final grades were submitted at the conclusion of the semester.

**Table 2**

*University Overview*

Institution pseudonyms	Location	Program
Auk University	Midwest, urban	B.S.Ed. Elementary Education; Reading Teacher Elective Track
Bluebird University	Mid-Atlantic, rural	M.A.T. Elementary Education
Cardinal University	Southeast, rural	B.S.Ed. Elementary Education B.S.Ed. Elementary & Special



		Education
Dove University	Northeast, urban	M.S. Literacy Education
Egret University	Southeast, rural	B.S.Ed. Middle Grades
Finch University	East, suburban	B.S.Ed. Early Grades (PK-4) B.S.Ed. Early Grades & Special Education

We were purposeful in our sampling, as we were most interested in gathering data from research team members' institutions to indicate what candidates gained from writing-focused methods courses across a variety of programs. In total, 115 candidates participated in the overall study. Participants' self-identified demographic information can be found in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Participant Self-Identified Demographic Information*

	Qualitative Analysis		Quantitative Analysis	
	<i>n=115</i>	%	<i>n=94</i>	%
Preferred Gender Identity				
Female	110	96%	91	97%
Male	5	4%	3	3%
Race/Ethnicity				
White/Caucasian	105	91%	86	91%
Black/African-American	4	3%	3	3%
Latinx	1	>1%	1	1%
Asian	1	>1%	1	1%
Pacific-Islander	1	>1%	0	0%
Biracial	3	3%	3	3%

Data from all 115 participants were used in qualitative analysis. Of the 115 participants, 104 were enrolled in an undergraduate initial licensure program in early childhood, elementary, middle grades, and/or special education. Eleven were enrolled in graduate-level programs, with nine in initial licensure programs (M.A.T.) and two in a literacy specialist graduate program. Of the 115 total participants, 94 completed the Likert-type items for the beginning and end of course

survey; thus, only 94 participants were included in the quantitative analysis. Table 4 shows the breakdown of participants across different types of programs. Because beliefs are dynamic rather than static (Richardson, 1996), it is reasonable to assume that participants in different types of programs had varied experiences and beliefs about teaching writing. This variation among participants adds to the range of responses collected. The intent of this study was not to compare the different types of program participants; rather, we looked at the data set collectively to see change in confidence levels after completing a writing-focused methods course; however, this type of comparison in confidence levels could be an important direction for future research.

**Table 4**

*Participant Program Information*

Program	Qualitative Analysis		Quantitative Analysis	
	<i>n=115</i>	%	<i>n=94</i>	%
Early Childhood (B.S.Ed.)	19	16%	18	19%
Early Childhood & Special Education (B.S.Ed. – dual degree)	15	13%	15	16%
Elementary Education (B.S.Ed.)	47	41%	33	35%
Elementary & Special Education (B.S.Ed. - dual degree)	13	11%	7	7%
Elementary Education (M.A.T.)	9	8%	9	10%
Middle Grades Education (B.S.Ed.)	10	9%	10	11%
Literacy Education (M.S.)	2	2%	2	2%

While each course was designed to meet the required literacy objectives set forth by the institutions' licensing bodies and goals of the programs, the premise of each course was similar, and many commonalities existed in course designs, including course structure and components. That is, courses held a shared vision for developing candidates' knowledge of writing pedagogy and their confidence as writers within a socio-cultural perspective. Similarities across courses included engaging candidates in varied forms of writing and having them reflect as writers, including on their histories and experiences, as they learned about teaching writing. Candidates were provided with regular opportunities to engage in writing for various purposes. Due to the instructors' shared belief that writing is a process and should be shared, candidates worked through pieces of writing in workshop formats with their classmates to then revise their work before informally publishing and sharing the published work with a larger audience (classmates and beyond). By engaging in such activities, the instructors promoted the social nature of writing and how exchanging ideas helps build a community of writers while also attending to candidates' confidence as writers. Through workshops, candidates learned about clarifying their ideas in writing while engaging in writing about a topic of their choice and for the audience of their choosing. Throughout these experiences, candidates engaged in writing themselves, but the instructors continuously returned to how it related to writing pedagogy. A common question asked of candidates was, "How will you use this in your classroom?" Overall, the study's intent was not to compare courses or examine specific practices but to consider how confidence changed across a variety of similar but not identical writing-focused methods courses. This broad examination of the influence of writing methods courses is particularly important given the limited number of teacher education programs that include such a course (Myers et al., 2016).

### **Data Sources**

Data were collected through a beginning and end-of-course survey, including open-response and Likert items. Candidates were provided a link to the online survey at the start of the semester and then again at the end of that same semester. All candidates completed the survey, but only data from those who consented to participate were used. The typical length of a semester across institutions was approximately 15 weeks. One hundred fifteen candidates fully completed the end-of-course survey with open-ended response items, and their data were used to understand how candidates understand what it means to be a writer. However, only 94 participants completed the Likert-type survey items both times. Unfortunately, 21 participants received a link to an earlier iteration of the survey that did not include the Likert-type questions. As such, only data from the 94 candidates who completed the beginning-of-course and end-of-course ratings on confidence were included in the quantitative analysis.

## Analysis

Quantitatively, two correlated-means t-tests were conducted on the data for both the writing confidence and teaching confidence measures, using the beginning-of-course survey and end-of-course survey responses. This was done to look for significant changes from the beginning-of-course to end-of-course ratings. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between ratings of confidence as writers and as teachers of writing.

Qualitative analysis began with downloading open-ended response data from the online survey software, de-identifying data by numbering participants, and inserting data into a spreadsheet in a password-protected site. We then assigned participants with pseudonyms. Once data were organized, we followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) steps for coding participants' open-ended responses.

Three researchers served as the initial coding team. That team taught literacy methods courses but did not collect data from their students. Thus, they were uniquely positioned within the team to code because they did not know any participants. First, the three-member coding team individually combed through the data and noted what stood out from participants' open-ended responses and then met to share their initial thoughts and to create a more condensed spreadsheet to focus on candidates' perceptions of themselves as writers at the beginning of the course and the end of the course. This spreadsheet included candidate pre/post responses to the open-ended question "Would you describe yourself as a writer? Why or why not?" and the initial notes on responses.

As the researchers did this initial data review, they looked for segments of text that represented units of meaning, inserted them into a coding column on the spreadsheet, and began assigning labels as preliminary categories. Due to the brevity of survey responses, researchers agreed to assign the most prominent code instead of assigning multiple codes. It was decided that units of meaning could occur at the phrase, sentence, or paragraph level. Similar codes were grouped together, collapsing and expanding codes as needed. Through discussions, the researchers came to agreement on codes and coded 20% together to ensure the clarity of the process and the definitions of each code.

Once this was completed, the three researchers coded each response independently and then met again to discuss individual codes for each response. Any disagreements in codes were discussed and resolved. Once the team reached complete agreement, the spreadsheet was shared with the larger research team to review and verify the codes. Team members were assigned one-fifth of the data to review, with overlapping responses, so that at least one other team member read all responses. Feedback resulted in changes to code names for clarity (e.g., "assignments" changed to "writing as a task"). All data were re-examined with the altered codes in mind to make sure the codes held. When the researchers did not

agree on a code, others were asked to review the response until a code could be agreed upon. See Appendix A for codes and definitions.

To determine the accuracy of our findings, we used peer debriefing with researchers unaffiliated with this study to validate our interpretations. We also asked peers to serve as external auditors to review the entire project. To ensure reliability in our study, we maintained protocols and met regularly to discuss any shifts in codes.

### **Limitations**

Sampling bias is frequently a concern in this kind of research, as the sample is not truly random in nature. However, the sample size for both the writing and teaching items is large enough to temper this effect. Initial data analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, was done by researchers who did not teach any of the participants.

We relied on self-report data from candidates in our writing-focused methods courses during one semester. With this kind of data, there is always the possibility that candidates tell us what they think we want to hear. However, safeguards were in place so that instructors could not see the data until after final grades were posted for the semester, and they did not know which candidates had agreed to participate. All data were de-identified for complete confidentiality prior to sharing with the larger research team.

Participants are in varied programs and have differing levels of experience. While we see this as a strength of the data set, it may also be seen as a limitation. We do not compare the data for differences across demographics (e.g., Master's/Bachelor's degree, urban/suburban/rural); thus, the influence of these factors is unclear. Additionally, while the demographics of our participants are reflective of our programs, the lack of gender and racial/ethnic diversity can be viewed as a limiting factor of our study.

### **Results**

Each of the research questions organizes this section. Organizing results for each question in this way focused our attention on each question while also prompting us to consider the convergence of findings.

**“How do candidates rate their confidence as *writers* as they enter their writing-focused methods courses, and does this change after completing the course?”**

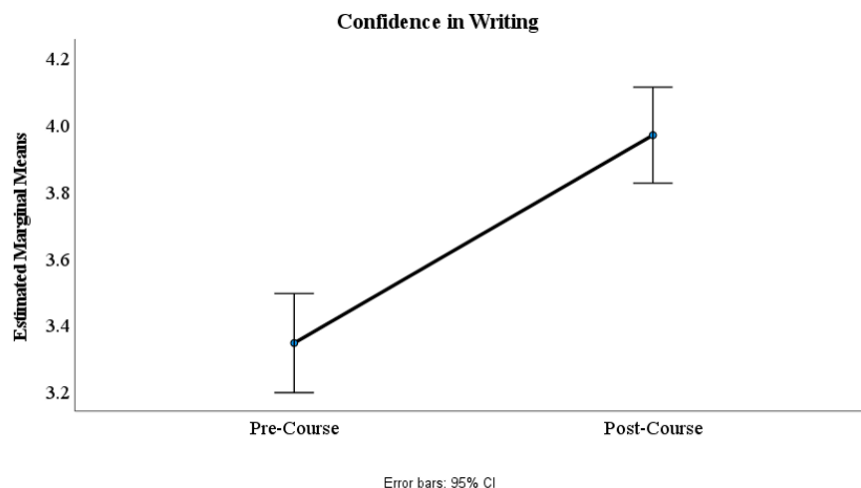
To answer this question, we began with a simple analysis of how candidates rated themselves from 1-5 on the question “How confident do you feel as a writer?” with “1” being “not confident at all” and 5 being “extremely confident.” We only used responses from those participants who completed this question on the pre- and post-

survey. At the beginning of the semester, five candidates rated themselves as extremely confident (5%) and 32 as confident (34%). Fifty candidates were neutral (53%). Five candidates were not confident (5%), and one was not confident at all (1%).

At the end of the semester, 18 of these candidates rated themselves as extremely confident and 57 as confident, meaning 79.8% of respondents had some level of self-confidence in their writing compared to 39.4% at the beginning of the course. Eighteen candidates rated themselves as neutral, with one candidate rating themselves as not confident at all. A closer look at this data shows that 54 candidates increased their self-rating of confidence, 34 remained the same, and six decreased. See Figure 1 for change in estimated marginalized means of writing confidence from pre- to post-survey.

Figure 1

*Change in Confidence as a Writer*



To further understand these changes in confidence and to see if they were statistically significant, a correlated-means *t*-test was calculated to determine if candidates changed in their confidence levels as writers between the pretest and the posttest. Candidates expressed significantly more confidence in their abilities as writers from pretest to posttest ( $t_{93} = 6.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Cohen's *d* (1988) was calculated as the appropriate measure of effect size. Values of Cohen's *d* near .2 indicate a small effect, values near .5 indicate a moderate effect, and values near .8 or above indicate a large effect. A moderate-to-large degree of practical effect was observed ( $d = .644$ ; Cohen, 1988). In short, we found an overall statistically significant positive change in candidates' confidence in themselves as writers after taking a writing-focused methods course.

### **How do candidates view what it means to be a writer?**

In addition to rating themselves in their confidence, candidates also responded to the open-ended question, “Would you describe yourself as a writer? Why or why not?” at the beginning of the course and again at the end of the course. Reviewing these brief, 1-3 sentence responses allowed for a better understanding of how candidates view what it means to be a writer and their self-perceptions as writers.

The most prevalent code was **broadened awareness**, with 31 participants indicating that their views of what it means to be a writer, as well as what writing is and the forms it takes, were expanded. Having a more inclusive definition of writing meant that some candidates who originally did not describe themselves as writers did so by the end of the class. For example, Dakota (all names are pseudonyms) went from stating, “No, I do not enjoy writing” to sharing, “I have realized that being a writer means so much more than writing papers, which I despise. I like to jot down my thoughts and funny stories, imaginative stuff, etc.” All candidates with “broadened awareness” saw themselves as a writer at the end of the course. Some, like Shannon, recognized “...that everyone is a writer.”

Interestingly, the second most prevalent code was **writing as a task**, with 27 participants indicating that writing was required for specific purposes. Often, these candidates classified writing for leisure/pleasure or writing for academic purposes, such as when River stated, “Now that I’ve taken a few writing courses, I kind of would [consider myself a writer]. I only write for class, never on my own time.” River’s response implies a delineation of writing for school and writing outside of school with a need to do both to “fully” be a writer. Some candidates saw themselves as writers *because of* the writing they did for class. For example, Michelle noted, “I would describe myself as a writer because I feel I write good pieces when I need to for a class, but that’s the only time I will write is for class.” However, most mirrored River’s sentiment that to be a writer means writing for your own purposes. This is seen in Joanna’s answer, “Not necessarily. I write when I need to for school, but I do not write on my own for pleasure.”

The third most prevalent code was **enjoyment**, with 20 indicating they maintained or discovered a liking for writing. Quinn shared the following:

I would definitely describe myself as a writer! The writing experiences I've had during this semester made me love writing. In school, writing was made to be this tedious task. My teachers never taught us about the important components of good writing and we never learned about revision. Learning about this made me realize that writing CAN be fun.

Quinn's response is particularly interesting in juxtaposition with those of candidates who saw writing as a task performed inside or outside of school and categorized enjoyable writing as that done outside of school.

Fifteen participants' responses were coded as **confidence** because they discussed their growth and identity as writers. Many of those who discussed their growth as writers indicated that they saw this as an ongoing process that would continue. For instance, Rory wrote, "Yes because I have been writing every week and even if I'm not that great I'm still learning and writing!" While our quantitative data looked at self-ratings of confidence for all participants, we selected the code "confidence" for these written responses because it best captured how these candidates described themselves as writers.

We coded 14 participants as **self-expression**. Their responses focused on the expressive nature of writing when discussing themselves as writers. These candidates used terms like expression, power, and feelings. For example, one candidate noted, "I would describe myself as a writer. I appreciate the power of words and how I can express things in a better way on paper." These responses were distinct from those identified as enjoyment, where respondents noted they liked writing rather than distinctly sharing how it is a tool for expression. Each of the candidates who discussed self-expression clearly defined themselves as a writer. Unlike many of the other responses, those coded as self-expression did not define the type of writing one needs to do to be considered a writer nor indicate evaluation of writing with statements such as being a "good writer." Instead, these responses focused on writing as a means of communication and expression.

Finally, some candidates were openly critical of their own writing. These eight responses were coded as **self-criticism**, such as Emerson, who stated, "I have never liked writing that much because I have never been good at it." One response, in particular, was striking because the student went from sharing that they "love to write" at the start of the course to the following, "Every time I turn in my written work, it always comes back with a bad grade and lots of feedback." While this response was an anomaly within the data, it gives a clear example of the effect an instructor can have on a student's self-perception of themselves as a writer.

Digging deeper into the open-ended responses helped us better understand patterns across candidates and how they understood "being a writer." For many candidates, this meant describing how they define writing (broadened awareness, writing as a task). For others, it was about the affective aspects of writing (enjoyment, self-expression). For another group, it was considering their perceived skills and abilities as writers (growth, self-criticism).

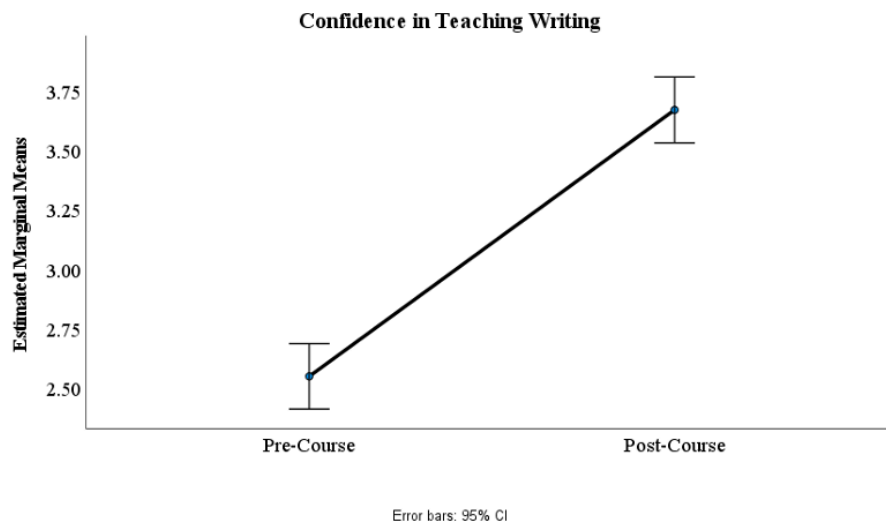
**"How do candidates rate their confidence as *teachers of writing* prior to taking a writing-focused methods course, and does this change after completing the course?"**



Again, we did a simple analysis of how candidates rated themselves from 1-5 on their confidence levels for *teaching* writing with “1” being “not confident at all” and 5 being “extremely confident.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, as the semester began, none of the 94 respondents rated themselves as extremely confident (0%), and only four identified themselves as confident (4%). Forty-eight candidates were neither confident nor unconfident (51%). Thirty-seven were not confident (39%), and five were not confident at all (5%).

At the end of the semester, eight of these candidates were now rating themselves as extremely confident and 49 as confident, meaning just over 60% of respondents had some level of self-confidence in their ability to teach writing compared to 4% at the beginning of the class. Thirty-six candidates rated themselves as neutral, with one candidate rating themselves as not confident at all. Overall, 74 candidates increased their self-rating of confidence in their ability to teach writing, 19 remained the same, and one decreased. The decrease was seen in the same candidate who had such a striking response about the feedback on her writing, again highlighting the impact of negative experiences. See Figure 2 for change in estimated marginalized means of confidence in teaching writing pre- to post-course.

Figure 2  
*Change in Confidence to Teach Writing*



To see if these increases were significant, a second correlated-means *t*-test was calculated to determine if candidates changed in their confidence levels as teachers of writing between the pretest and posttest. Candidates expressed significantly more confidence in their abilities to teach writing to others from

pretest to posttest ( $t_{93} = 10.57, p < .001$ ), with a very large degree of practical effect ( $d = 1.09$ ; Cohen, 1988). There is a moderate positive correlation between the change in candidates' perceived abilities as writers and the change in their perceived abilities to teach writing to others ( $r = .495$ ).

### Discussion and Implications

For merging data to explain convergence, we used a side-by-side comparison of qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). That is, we considered what each set of findings revealed and compared them. According to both types of data, most of our participants grew in their confidence as writers and as teachers of writing. Pairing qualitative and quantitative data allows us to make assertions with complementary data to support our claims and aligns with our sociocultural framework that sees writing as multifaceted (Hodges, 2017).

#### Confidence as Writers

Quantitatively, our results indicated that 80% ( $n=74$ ) of candidates felt confident or extremely confident as a writer by the end of their methods course. Building candidates' confidence as writers is important, given that previous research demonstrated that their confidence can affect how often teachers teach writing (Cremin & Oliver, 2016; Harward et al., 2014). The primary function of a writing methods course is to help candidates understand how to teach writing; however, our results indicate that this course can also support growth in their overall writing confidence.

Although these numbers are strong, we also note that there is room for growth. Thirty-four candidates' ratings remained the same, with six candidates' ratings decreasing from the beginning-of-course to end-of-course surveys. One candidate, in particular, had a striking drop from confident to not confident at all. Candidates with decreased confidence were spread across courses, so there is no indication that a specific method of instruction or instructor was a factor. However, the candidate with the greatest decrease in confidence shared on the post-survey that these feelings were attributed to the grades and feedback received during the class. This candidate is an anomaly among the full data set and the subset of her class. However, she clearly had perceived negative experiences that strongly affected her self-perception. If early negative writing experiences can influence how teachers teach writing (Cremin & Oliver, 2016), then one would expect that this experience, in a writing methods course, could likely negatively influence this candidate's future instruction. Instructors who teach writing-focused methods courses must remember that these courses are powerful and that research, such as this study and others (e.g., Cremin & Oliver, 2014; Hall, 2016; Saidy, 2015), show that the shifts in candidates' thinking over one semester suggest that their

understanding of writing instruction is still evolving. In addition, our study examined confidence overall rather than in specific types of writing. Candidates and teachers may need more support in some types of writing than others.

### **Confidence as Teachers of Writing**

The vast majority of the participants (nearly 79%) grew in their confidence to teach writing. While it may be an obvious result of taking a writing methods course, it speaks to the need for such courses. However, research indicates that few institutions provide specific coursework to candidates learning to teach writing (Myers et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2014). As such, teachers may feel unprepared to teach writing (Ahumada et al., 2023). Given this situation, it appears essential for teacher educators to advocate for more emphasis on writing pedagogy in teacher preparation programs. Also, leaders in colleges of education need to work to ensure that candidates complete courses devoted to preparing them to teach writing. Before the course, only four candidates rated themselves as confident in their ability to teach writing. Without coursework aimed explicitly at teaching writing, these candidates would likely have gone into their classrooms feeling unprepared and thus spent less time teaching writing (Brindle et al., 2016).

While we saw statistically significant growth in candidates' confidence to teach writing, 36 candidates (38%) still rated themselves as neither confident or unconfident. While one writing methods course may help candidates be prepared to be novice teachers of writing, they need continued development and support.

### **Being a Writer**

Diving into our qualitative data, some interesting ideas arose. How candidates define writing and “being a writer” seems to influence how they view themselves. For many, their responses indicated a more inclusive definition (“broadened awareness”) that allowed them to see themselves and others as writers. This could lay an important foundation for their future classrooms that, at a minimum, should include the premise that all students can learn to write and be writers. Over 25 years ago, Graham and Harris (1997) worked to counter the myth that “good writing can’t be taught” (p. 415). They noted that this misconception stemmed partly from “our beliefs about professional writers: they are artists who possess a special talent; therefore, good writers are born writers” (p. 415). If candidates go into their classrooms recognizing a range of types of writing and what it means to be a writer, they may be more likely to embrace the idea that all students can write. Of course, just believing that students can be taught to write is not enough. They must actually be taught. A broader awareness may also mean that candidates do not limit their students to traditional forms of in-school writing (e.g., the five-paragraph essay) but instead recognize that writing can and should be done beyond the confines of a classroom. Teaching writing from a sociocultural perspective can help candidates

extend their understanding of writing from their immediate context to include prior knowledge and experiences in and out of school.

This recognition of writing occurring outside of the confines of school may also be true of those candidates who discuss enjoyment and self-expression. For these candidates, writing is less likely to be a task to be completed and more likely something with personal value. The sense that writing can be for enjoyment and expression may carry over into their future classrooms, influencing how writing is taught and what sort of writing students engage in. Thus, there is potential for this perception of writing to nurture motivation, which is affected in part by task interest and value (Troia et al., 2012).

Conversely, for some of the candidates who primarily see “writing as a task” for specific purposes – often either for school (requirement) *or* for pleasure (fun) – it may be more difficult to teach writing in a way that invokes interest and value. Responses where candidates shared that they only wrote for class and “not for fun” or “by choice” indicate that they perceive in-school writing as unpleasant. This could be problematic if they take this attitude toward writing into their classroom, particularly related to motivating their student writers. Many of these candidates were reluctant to call themselves writers because they did not write outside of what was required of them, typically for school assignments. While they recognize that writing happens outside of school, these candidates do not seem to connect writing that is taught in school and the “real world.” This implies a need for candidates to have more opportunities with authentic writing and to better understand how writing inside of school connects to writing in our lives. As Freedman (2016) and colleagues noted, “From what is known about effective teaching and how young people learn to write in and out of school settings, it is clear that to teach well, teachers of writing require an expansive vision of composing as meaningful communication (rather than only as the mastery of discrete skills)” (p. 1419). This aligns with a sociocultural perspective that recognizes writing as purposeful rather than a task for evaluating skill (Bazerman, 2016).

Other aspects of the qualitative data also indicate a need for candidates to have continued opportunities to grow in their confidence as writers. Those responses coded specifically as “confidence” demonstrate that a semester focused on writing helped candidates see their writing skills develop and improve. Within those responses were mentions of a need to continue to grow. Teacher educators could capitalize on candidates’ recognition of their growth, connecting it to their future students’ writing development and the need for them to have writing instruction. Related to this idea of writing development and the need for continued opportunities to explore their writing are the candidates who remain self-critical. These may be candidates who, without future chances for positive writing experience, avoid the teaching of writing (Cremin & Oliver, 2016). Teacher educators must make space within writing methods courses to help candidates

recognize how their feelings about writing could influence their future writing instruction (e.g., Cremin & Oliver, 2016; Gartland & Smolkin, 2016; Hall, 2016; Harward et al., 2014).

Additionally, in-service teachers, administrators, curriculum specialists, and other school personnel are key stakeholders who play a valuable role in supporting novice teachers' understanding of writing beyond their teacher preparation. Saidy (2015) argues that districts can continue to support the writing instruction provided in higher education by encouraging teachers to seek out existing communities of practice, such as local affiliates of the National Writing Project (NWP) or the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). This may "have the potential to sustain their teaching beyond the early years" (p. 121).

If those beyond the walls of higher education invest in continuing to build capacity in their teachers by taking on a sociocultural perspective, they can also develop a more nuanced understanding of novice teachers' views and beliefs about writing so they can continue to support them on this journey.

### **Conclusion**

It is promising to see positive changes for many participants after completing a writing-focused methods course. Seeing changes in our candidates' confidence in themselves as writers and as teachers of writing after a semester in a writing-focused methods course fills us with hope that candidates will implement writing instruction they learned from their writing-focused methods course. As Graham (2019) writes, "It is essential to realize that all changes leading to better writing instruction, no matter how small, are a move toward the goal of changing classroom practices broadly" (p. 297). However, our data also indicate that there remains work to be done to sustain these changes and, in some instances, to attempt to counter continued negative self-perceptions or views of writing as a task. Further research needs to examine how candidates' beliefs and experiences are enacted in their classrooms and what contextual factors continue to shape their belief systems. Sociocultural theory posits that "ideologies of schooling share school writing experiences and students' trajectories of learning to write" (Bazerman, 2016, p. 17). The expectations of schools and their curriculums will no doubt influence the way they enact their ideas about writing in their classrooms. While our study adds to the literature on the influence of writing methods courses on candidate confidence, further understanding is needed of how this translates into practice and how this confidence is sustained. We have looked broadly at the influence on confidence as a writer and teacher of writing, but further studies should continue to examine the specific practices within methods courses that support and sustain this confidence.

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## Appendix A

### *Codes and Definitions*

Code	Definition	Example
Confidence	Growth in skills as writers as well as identity as a writer	<p>Example from Phoenix:            Beginning of course: "I just don't feel like I am a strong writer and most of the time I only write when I need to for a school assignment. I only occasionally write for myself and even then I usually just throw whatever I wrote away."            End of course: "I would describe myself as writer now because I feel as though I have developed techniques through this class that have helped me develop my writing skills."</p>
Self-criticism	Remain critical of own writing at the end of the course	<p>Example from Emerson:            Beginning of course: "I am not so good at grammar and how to put things in the right order and make it flow."            End of course: "I have never liked writing that much because I have never been good at it."</p>
Self-expression	Candidates speak to sharing their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge through writing	<p>Example from Amari:            Beginning of course: "I do not do free writing."            End of course: "...to be a writer you do not have to do it everyday. Plus, I have learned that writing is a release for me."</p>
Enjoyment	Candidates maintained or discovered a liking for writing	<p>Example from Connor:            Beginning of course: "I would not describe myself as a writer because I have had such bad experiences with writing that it has caused me to not want to write."            End of course: "I used to only write because I was made to do it. It has just been recently that I find joy in it. It may not be the best all the time but it is a place for me to just express myself."</p>

Broadened Awareness	Expanded views of what writing is and the forms it takes (genre)	Example from Drew: Beginning of course: “I feel that I am a decent writer but sometimes I have a rough time trying to convey what I am thinking in my mind, on paper.” End of course: “At the beginning of this course I would have laughed if someone asked if I was a writer. I have learned now that all it takes to be a writer is to just write. And I can do that pretty well.”
Writing as a Task	Required tasks for school and everyday life	Example from Peyton: Beginning of course: “I would only describe myself as a writer in a school setting. I do not spend time outside of school writing in my free time.” End of course: “During the school year I would consider myself a [writer] due to the amount of work that I am required to write. I am not a writer in the way that I do not write for fun in my free time.”

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