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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Nurse teachers' conceptions and practices of written feedback in Karachi

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ABSTRACT

Background: Written Feedback (WFB) plays a significant role in student's learning in terms of improvement of their academic writing skills. However, the quality of WFB may be affected by various personal and contextual factors. This study aimed to identify nurse teachers' conceptions and practices of WFB on written assignments in nursing degree offering institutions in Karachi, Pakistan.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive study design was used to answer the study questions. The study was conducted at 11 nursing schools in Karachi by recruiting those teachers who were teaching in nursing degree programs. The sample size of the study consists of 80 teachers. Universal sampling technique was used to select the subjects of the study.

Results: The study result consists of demographic information of the participants, teachers' conceptions and their practices of WFB. Although majority (92%) of the teachers believed that WFB is important for students' learning, they acknowledged that they were not able to provide WFB at optimum level to their students. This gap in practice is attributed to various personal, contextual, and organizational factors; among them, the highest reported factors were teachers' lack of training for provision of WFB (84%), distraction in the environment (78%), and constraints of time due to teacher's workload (74%).

Conclusions: The importance of WFB for students' learning is well established in the literature. However, the preparation of teachers and an enabling environment to facilitate teachers for optimum practices of WFB needs considerable attention by educational institutions.

Key Words: Teachers' conceptions, Teachers' practices, Written Feedback, Students' learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have acknowledged the positive role of WFB to identify gaps in expected students' performance.^[1-6] In addition, researchers believe that WFB can help the students to improve their academic writing skills^[3,6-9] and making them reflect on their progress.^[1,2,10] Furthermore, it is also used to justify the students' grade or rank,^[11] and offers an opportunity for experiential learning.^[12,13] However, the

provision of WFB is affected by a number of personal and organizational factors.

Extensive literature is available about the students' conceptions of WFB.^[14-18] However, very few of the studies conducted from teachers' perspective on provision of WFB,^[4,10,19] among them, only one study^[10] explored teachers' accounts and experiences of teachers about WFB in

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Pakistan's context. Hence, the study was undertaken to answer the following three research questions:

- (1) What are the conceptions of teachers about giving written feedback to students?
- (2) What are the practices of teachers regarding written feedback to students?
- (3) What factors influence teachers' practices of providing quality written feedback to their students?

In this study, the term 'WFB' refers to any form of teachers' anecdote, comment, or suggestion on written assignment which is submitted by the student to the teacher.

Literature review

The usefulness of WFB has been extensively explored by the researchers in national and international literature in terms of students' learning and improving their academic writing skills. However, there is a difference in teachers' conceptions and practices of providing WFB.^[19] A study was conducted in the UK to explore the lived experiences of 48 lecturers about WFB on students' assignments. The lecturers were interviewed about their perceptions for providing WFB. The study reported variations among teachers' perceptions and beliefs regarding WFB such as, uncertainty about the purpose of providing WFB to their students. Similarly, authors investigated the perceptions of postgraduate medical students and faculty members regarding the amount and tone of WFB at the University of Washington, USA.^[20] They found that faculty's satisfaction level about providing WFB was significantly higher than the students' satisfaction level. Similarly, researchers examined the statements of undergraduate medical students regarding WFB on their clinical performance.^[21] They determined that only 16% of the WFB statements focused on suggestions for areas of improvement, while the rest of the statements indicated that the work was either correct or incorrect. Likewise, a study conducted in the UK to explore the teachers' practices of WFB by recruiting both faculty and students.^[22] They reported that the focus of the feedback was errors in the students' assignments rather than suggestions for improvements. Similarly, another study analyzed 3,000 written comments of teachers on 106 students' assignments and interviewed the students regarding the utility of those comments.^[23] He reported that some comments were useful for the students; such as, what was wrong, why it was wrong, and how to correct it. Whereas, in Pakistan, a study analyzed teachers' written comments on students' assignments and reported that 50% of WFB were complete sentences while the rest of the WFB was in the form of different symbols i.e., a question mark, tick mark, and happy and sad faces.^[14] In Pakistan, a study conducted by interviewing 12 teachers about their accounts and practices of providing WFB and reported

factors affect teachers' practices of WFB.^[10] Teachers' workload, lack of conducive environment, and teacher-student relationship were the significant factors affecting teachers' practices of WFB.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional descriptive study design was used to collect the data and answer the research questions. The study was conducted in public and private PNC recognized nursing schools that were offering undergraduate and graduate nursing degree programs in Karachi. The nursing schools that did not have the practice of providing WFB were excluded from the study. For eligibility of the participants, it was required to have had a minimum of one year of experience in teaching, irrespective of what their teaching subjects and gender were. The selection of the participants was done in two stages; in stage one, the potential institutions were recruited and in stage two, potential participants were recruited. There were 15 PNC recognized nursing institutions in Karachi. Following the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 11 institutions were included in this study. There were 161 teachers in the 11 institutions, 57 teachers were excluded due to non-eligibility and being on leave. Rest of them (n = 104) potential participants were invited for the study. Out of 104, finally, 80 (76.9%) teachers were voluntary participated in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from ethical review committee of the Aga Khan University followed by institutional permission from the head of each institute that participated in the study. The returning of filled questionnaire from the participants was considered their individual consent for the study. The principles of anonymity, confidentiality and dignity were maintained throughout the research process. The data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire that was developed after thorough review of national and international literature. The universal sampling technique was employed in the study. The study questionnaire contained of three sections A, B, and C; section A consisted of nine items on demographic information of the participants, section B consisted of 22 statements on teachers' conception of WFB, and section C contained of 22 statements on teachers' practices of WFB respectively. The responses of the participants were measured on Likert scale from 1 (disagree) to 3 (agree) for conceptions, and from 1 (least frequent) to 3 (most frequent) for practices. The content validity index was computed for section B and C; it was 0.97 for relevance and 0.90 for clarity and questionnaire was pilot tested to ensure its validity. To ensure reliability of the tool, items were worded both positively and negatively. The Cronbach's alpha for both conception and practices part was 0.668. The SPSS-version-19 was used for statistical analysis of the data.

The percentages and frequencies were calculated for demographic information of the participants and constructs were made for conception and practices part of the questionnaire.

3. STUDY RESULTS

The study results consist of demographic information of the participants followed by teachers' conception and practices of WFB. Constructs were reported under teachers' conceptions and practices of WFB.

3.1 Demographics of the study participants

Out of 80 teachers, majority of the participants were 31- 40 years old, followed by 20-30 years and >40 years old (see Figure 1a). The majority of the study participants were Master's degree holders, followed by bachelors and Ph. D degree

(see Figure 1b). With regard to their designation, 1/5th of the participants were at the Assistant Professor level while the rest were Senior Instructors and Instructors (see Figure 1c).

Most of the participants were female and they were teaching to the undergraduate students at private institutions (see Table 1). The teaching experience of the participants ranged from one to 30 years. The mean year of experience was 7.8 years ± 6.1 years. When the participants were asked about the means through which they learnt to give WFB, it was revealed that 89% of the participants had learnt it informally while only (5%) of the participants have had attended a formal course or training on how to give WFB. While, rest of them learnt to give WFB through trial and error method. Nearly, 90% of the participants affirmed that they need formal training on provision of WFB.

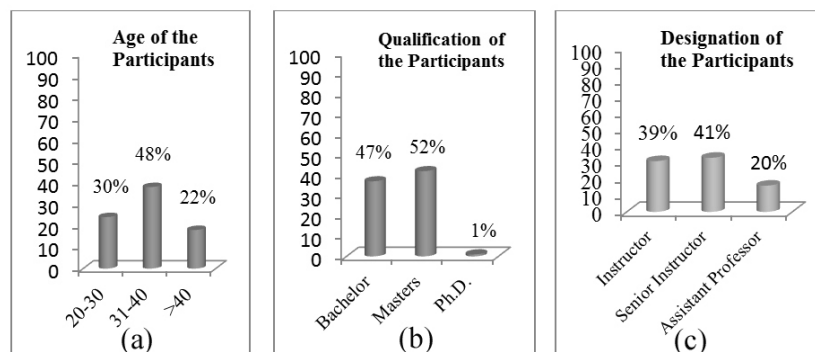


Figure 1. (a) Age of the Participants, (b) Qualification of the Participants, (c) Designation of the Participants

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Variables	Frequency n	(%)
Gender		
Male	29	(36)
Female	51	(64)
Teaching program		
Undergraduate	44	(55)
Graduate	36	(45)
Institution		
Public	22	(28)
Private	58	(72)

3.2 Teachers' conceptions about WFB

Teachers' conceptions of WFB are organized into four constructs i.e., teachers' beliefs about WFB, reasons of providing WFB, followed by anticipated students' response and factors affecting the quality of WFB.

3.2.1 Teachers' beliefs about WFB

As presented in Table 2, with regard to teachers' conceptions about WFB, majority of the teachers agreed that WFB is as

important as verbal feedback and most of them stated that the comments of the teacher should match with the grades. The participants were divided in their view whether negative feedback leads to poor evaluation of the teacher by the students, while 66% agreed that WFB should focus on both the strengths and the areas of improvement.

3.2.2 Reasons of providing WFB

The majority of the teachers agreed that WFB enables students to self-assess their work. Likewise, most of them agreed that they give WFB to communicate their expectations, justify the grades on the paper, and to help students to overcome the gaps in their work. More than 60% reported that they have had no institutional policy on provision of WFB to their students.

3.2.3 Anticipated students' response

Most of the study participants reported that students improve their work after receiving feedback from their teachers. While, teachers were divided in their responses whether students rarely accept teacher's comments and pay attention to their grades only (see Table 3).

Table 2. Constructs for Teachers' conceptions of WFB

Variables	Agree (%)	Undecided (%)	Disagree (%)
Teachers' Beliefs about WFB			
WFB is as important as verbal	92	5	3
Remarks should match with marks	87	5	8
WFB should focus on good work only	21	12	66
Negative WFB can lead to poor evaluation	44	20	36
Reasons of providing WFB			
Students' self-assessment	88	10	2
Communicate gap about performance	86	10	3
Communicate teachers' expectations	85	13	2
Justify the grades	80	9	11
Meet students' expectation	48	32	20
An institutional policy	29	9	62

3.2.4 Factors affecting the quality of WFB

As depicted in Table 3, a majority of the teachers agreed that the quality of WFB is affected by the teacher's workload, the training of the teachers in providing WFB, and distracting environment. However, nearly half of the participants agreed that the quality of WFB is also affected by the length of the assignment and student-teacher relationship.

3.3 Teachers' practices regarding WFB

3.3.1 Focus of WFB

It was gratifying to note that, the majority of the participants reported that, most of the time, they use pre-defined guidelines to check students' papers and pay more attention to the content as compared to the grammatical accuracy of the paper (see Table 4).

Table 3. Constructs for Teachers' conceptions of WFB

Variables	Agree (%)	Undecided (%)	Disagree (%)
Anticipated Student's response			
Students improve their work	89	5	6
Students rarely accept teacher's WFB	46	13	40
Students pay attention to grades only	40	15	45
Critical WFB demotivates students	35	15	50
Factors Affecting the Quality of WFB			
Teacher's training	84	10	6
Workload of teacher	74	10	16
Length of assignment	51	15	33
Distracted environment	78	11	11
Student-teacher relationship	49	10	41
Individual student's reaction	44	26	30
Student's identity is known	58	20	22

3.3.2 Approach towards correcting students' errors

As shown in table 4, an equal percentage of the participants reported that they hesitate to highlight students' errors on their papers; and they use positive language to soften the effect of critical feedback on students' papers.

3.3.3 Opportunity for seeking clarification regarding WFB

With regard to providing students the opportunity for seeking clarification, Table 4 presents the results on the different approaches teachers use for discussing WFB with their students. More than 3/4th of the participants revealed that, they do not

have time to discuss WFB with the students. However, when they get an opportunity, they do discuss WFB with students on individual basis. While, rest of them reported different approaches for seeking clarification about WFB with their students (see Table 4).

3.3.4 Mechanics of WFB

With regard to the mechanics of WFB, the participants' response indicated that majority of them provide WFB via anecdotes on relevant pages of the assignment. However, their views varied on other aspects as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Teachers’ Practices Regarding WFB

Variables	Most frequent (%)	Sometimes (%)	Least frequent (%)
Focus of WFB			
Grammar	41	36	23
Content	85	10	5
Assignment guidelines	85	11	4
Approach towards Correcting Students’ Errors			
I don’t hesitate to indicate students’ errors	13	16	70
I deliberately use positive language to soften critical FB	70	22	7
I correct the errors as I find them	60	21	18
Opportunity for seeking clarification about WFB			
Individually	76	16	7
In a group	31	18	50
Students have low grades	35	18	46
Upon student request	37	16	46
Have no time to discuss WFB	78	16	5
Mechanics of WFB			
I write comments:			
On relevant pages	85	10	5
On one page	47	16	36
Via track changes	26	18	55
For writing comments, I use a:			
Designed checklist	52	11	36
Lead pencil	25	13	62
Red pen	46	18	35

4. DISCUSSION

This study revealed that nearly 90% of them showed interest in attending a formal training on giving WFB, if provided an opportunity as very few of the participants had learnt to provide WFB through a formal course. Whereas, the highest percentage of the participants reported that they learnt to give WFB by reading their teachers’ comments: when they were in the role of students. This indicates the significance of the teachers WFB on the students’ papers, as giving feedback not only improves the performance of an individual student, but also transmits the practice of giving feedback to the next generation and so on. As researchers explored students’ perceptions on WFB in the same context and reported that even students perceived that teachers are not trained in providing WFB to the students.^[14] This strongly indicates the teachers’ need for formal training on provision of WFB.

Concurrent with the findings of several other studies,^[15,16,23,24] teachers in the current study, have asserted that WFB should not only focus on the areas of improvement, but should also appreciate the students’ strengths demonstrated in the given assignment. In addition, they reported that they

do not have institutional expectation for consistent provision of WFB to their students. In their studies,^[8,10] researchers reported that most of the institutions do not have a policy for providing WFB; consequently, teachers do not bother to give WFB. To motivate teachers, a formal policy on the provision of WFB would be essential.

The teachers had variations in their focus of WFB focused on the content of the paper as compared to the language and grammar. The most probable reason for providing more feedback on the content could be that nursing graduates require content expertise in their subject before application in the clinical setting. On the other hand, the reason for overlooking the grammar of the paper could be the fact that usually the assignments are written in the English language and English not being the first language of the teachers, they may not have enough command of it to provide meaningful feedback.^[8]

The current study reported that, the majority of the teachers use “red pen” more frequently, as compared to the lead pencil for writing comments on students’ papers. The choice of using red pen for writing comments on black and white paper

creates a messy look on the paper. In addition, writing comments with red pen could be overwhelming for the students and may affect their receptivity. Moreover, if the teacher writes comments with a lead pencil, it could be easier for the teacher to erase the comments, if needed; on the contrary, if red pen is used, it may not be possible to erase the comments once written on the paper.

For better utilization of WFB, most of them asserted the importance of students seeking clarification regarding WFB from the teachers. However, in teachers' practices, Ghazal et al. reported that if this opportunity is not provided to the students, students seek peers' help in interpreting the WFB – a practice that may lead to misinterpretation of comments and hence undermine the teachers' efforts of feedback.^[14]

The majority of the participants admitted that they often hesitated to point out the mistakes on students' papers; however, it was encouraging to know that, they made a conscious effort to use positive language in their comments. On the contrary, scholars also reported students' perspective that teachers highlight the mistakes on students' paper but do not provide positive feedback on students' assignments.^[8]

For effective utilization of WFB, it is better to discuss WFB on individual basis for its clarification. However, teachers were unable to do so because they were overburdened and did not have conducive environment that would help them to concentrate on WFB. Researcher suggested that, teachers may use abbreviations and different symbols to highlight strengths and areas of improvement on students' papers.^[25]

In line with existing literature,^[10,16,26] the participants reported that teachers' lack of skills in providing WFB was the most significant factor, which affected the quality of WFB. Unlike the international literature, in the current study, in addition to teachers' workload, the participants also identified distracting environment as an important factor affecting the quality of WFB. Moreover, as reported by some previous studies,^[8,10] the quality of WFB is also affected by the student-teacher relationship and students' identity being known to the teacher. In such cases, students exercise politi-

cal power to influence teachers' WFB on their assignments. As^[8] reported that students perceive that teachers provide WFB by considering individual students' identity. In this regard, teachers are required to ensure the anonymity of students' assignment while checking their papers and providing comments without any form of bias.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

In the current study, the data relied on the recall of the participants' experiences of providing WFB. The questionnaire used in the study was self-administered; therefore, as Stomeland Wills suggested that the responses may have been distorted to match the social desirability.^[27]

6. CONCLUSION

The current study highlighted the teachers' conceptions and practices of WFB. The participants affirmed the significance of WFB; however, in the absence of institutional expectations for them to provide WFB to their students. Therefore, it all depends on the teachers' choice and preferences to provide WFB. Moreover, other factors, such as, lack of skills and conducive environment hampered their desire to provide effective FB. First and foremost, teachers should get continued education to improve their feedback practices, in order to make it effective for the students. In addition, institutions should ensure that the teachers have the required skills for providing WFB provision of formal trainings/workshops on skills building for WFB in practice. Providing feedback is an essential skill for the teachers.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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