

Fall 2014

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“I am kind of a good writer and kind of not”: Examining Students’ Writing Attitudes

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### Abstract

Since writing ability has been found to be an important predictor of school success and college readiness, it is important for teachers to understand the connections between students' attitudes toward writing, writing self-efficacy, and writing achievement. This article describes the findings from focus groups conducted with 81 students in grades K-5 during which participants discussed their attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs about writing. Focusing on the power of students' voices, this study adds a unique perspective not often found in the affective domain of writing research. Five broad themes emerged related to students' writing attitudes including: (1) feelings about writing, (2) writing self-efficacy, (3) motivators for writing, (4) teacher influence, and (5) writing preferences.

Keywords: Writing, Elementary, Attitudes, Self-efficacy

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Although writing ability has been found to be an important predictor of school success and college readiness (Graham, Harris, Fink, & MacArthur, 2001; Norman & Spencer, 2005), the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) report card on writing indicates a deficiency in the preparedness and writing ability of most students in the United States. As U.S. students' literacy skills continue to lag behind competitor nations' (Thompson et al., 2012), there is a growing acknowledgement that changes need to be made to current instructional practices.

Recent shifts in the U.S. education system include a stronger focus on preparing all students to be college and career ready with the adoption of K-12 Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by the majority of states. In this time of increased accountability, it is critical to gain insights into writing attitudes of elementary school children if we are to motivate all writers to engage with literacy tasks and improve their proficiency as writers (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007). To gain these insights, it is imperative that students' voices are reflected in research on writing in the affective domain. The purpose of this study was to explore elementary school students' writing attitudes and self-efficacy and to examine how these motivational factors change and develop over time as a result of experiences within their home and school writing environments. In this study, we asked the following questions: What attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs did students in grades K-5 hold regarding writing? What were the major influences (e.g., teacher, family, personal experience) on these attitudes or beliefs? What were the differences (if any) between younger and older students' writing attitudes and self-efficacy?

### **Theories of Writing Development**

Socio-cultural theories of writing development gained momentum in the late 1970s as researchers challenged cognitive models of writing processes and began developing social models of writing (Nystrand, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1977; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). These new

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models focused on the functioning of written language within context (e.g., within a classroom writing community), in contrast to previous models which described writing as a solitary cognitive act. Social models of writing continued to garner attention in the 1980s as a result of the success of the process writing movement (Nystrand, 2006). Additionally, motivational research in the area of writing increased during the past two decades, revealing attitudes and self-efficacy as important influences on writing development (Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998; Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007; Piazza & Siebert, 2008). These developments led to a richer understanding of the writing process as demonstrated by revised cognitive models, in which motivational factors have a more influential function (Hayes, 1996; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006).

Due to the interdependent nature of attitudes, feelings, and beliefs, researchers often struggle to define affective constructs and measure interrelations of affect (Graham et al., 2007; Piazza & Siebert, 2008). There have been mixed findings on how writing attitudes change and develop through the school years, with some researchers reporting a decline in positive attitudes toward writing and perceptions of writing ability (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Knudson, 1991, 1992; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995) and others reporting no difference in writing attitudes of younger and older writers (Graham, Schwartz, & MacArthur, 1993; Graham et al., 2007) or an increase in positive attitudes with age (Pajares, 2003).

In this study, we used socio-cultural theories of writing (Prior, 2006) to frame our understanding of children's writing development and the possible impact of teachers, curricula, and experiences on children's attitudes towards writing. While interviewing the children, we listened carefully for comments about specific interactions with teachers, peers, and family members, and how these interactions and expectations affected children's writing experiences. Our interest in listening to children and trying to understand how they viewed themselves as

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developing writers, was grounded in the notion that attitudes, beliefs, and self-efficacy are influenced by social settings such as the classroom. It is possible that by listening to children and studying their experiences, the importance of social influences on writing development and achievement can be illustrated, and in turn help teachers reexamine their curriculum and teaching practices.

### **The Relationship between Writing Attitudes, Self-Efficacy, and Writing Achievement**

The connections between students' attitudes toward writing, writing self-efficacy, and writing achievement are important considerations for teachers in the current school climate of accountability and Common Core implementation. In regards to attitudes, research demonstrates students with more favorable attitudes toward writing have higher efficacy beliefs and are likely to write more often and exert more persistence and perseverance when obstacles arise (Jones, 2008; Kear, Coffman, McKenna, & Ambrosio, 2000; Pajares, 2003; Zumbunn, 2010). In a recent study, Zumbunn, Bruning, Kauffman, and Hayes (2010) observed a positive significant relationship between elementary students' writing attitudes and writing self-efficacy. The findings from this study and others suggest that writing attitudes can influence students' beliefs about their writing competence and in turn affect their writing achievement (Graham et al., 2007; Kear et al., 2000; Knudson, 1995).

Positive attitudes toward writing and high levels of writing self-efficacy may be mutually beneficial. Hidi, Berndorff, and Ainley (2002) found students engaging in interesting activities experienced positive emotions which can provide feedback and information that may strengthen students' writing self-efficacy. Judgments of writing efficacy and personal writing attitudes affect the choices students make by influencing the amount of effort they expend, the types of

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strategies they use when writing, and the risks they are willing to take on writing assignments (Anderman & Wolters, 2006; Pajares, 2003).

Graham et al. (2007) suggest these differences in student attitudes and writing behaviors often lead to individual differences in writing achievement. In their study designed to test different models of the structural relationship between primary grade students' writing achievement and attitudes toward writing, Graham and colleagues (2007) found students with more positive writing attitudes had greater writing achievement than their peers with less favorable attitudes toward writing. The model that best fit the data in their study suggested that writing attitudes significantly predicted writing achievement.

### **Methods**

This study was informed by socio-cultural theories of writing (Prior, 2006) and writing research focused on the affective domain (Alexander et al., 1998; Graham et al., 2007; Piazza & Siebert, 2008). Using qualitative methods, we examined elementary students' attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs about writing (including their feelings and motivation for writing). We used qualitative inquiry because our goal was to learn about children's experiences and their perspective on their development as writers in school. In order to accomplish this goal, we used focus group interviews to collect data because they are useful in promoting conversation among participants and allow participants to "stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their views are" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 109). By generating data based on the synergy of the small groups, we were able to gather information about a range of attitudes and experiences, as well as explore the differences in perspectives across grade levels (Rabiee, 2004).

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### **Participants**

The data from this study were collected in accordance with the standards and guidelines of the human subjects review board at the authors' home institution. The participants in this study were 81 students in an elementary school in the South. The school is a neighborhood school with a focus on the arts. Both authors were familiar with the school because it is used as a field placement site for their institution. The demographics of the school are the following: 70% White, 21% Black, 5% Latina/o, 4% Asian. The participants in our study mirrored the demographics of the school.

Using purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), we contacted one teacher at each grade level (K-5) based on our knowledge of their daily use of writing instruction from our student teachers, comments from parents and the principal at the school, and observations from visits to the school. We asked each teacher to send home a letter to all of her students (i.e., approximately 25 students per class) with information regarding the study and permission for their child to participate in the focus groups. We received responses from 10 kindergarten students, 16 students in grade 1, 14 students in grade 2, 13 students in grade 3, 14 students in grade 4, and 14 students in grade 5. All students that returned consent forms were invited to participate in the study and gave verbal consent.

### **Data Sources and Methods of Analysis**

The authors, both familiar with teaching writing in the elementary school setting and experienced with focus group research, moderated the focus groups to ensure an environment in which students felt relaxed and encouraged to engage in conversation about their attitudes and feelings toward writing. Following each focus group, we recorded general impressions and unique responses from students in their group. A research assistant was also present to observe



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body language and gestures (to add context to oral responses), record the names of speakers, and document the general content of the conversations in order to supplement the oral transcripts.

Krueger & Casey (2000) suggest 6-8 participants as an optimum size for focus groups in order to gain a variety of perspectives, while being small enough to converse in an orderly manner. Using these guidelines, we randomly divided the children into groups of 5-8 by grade level (depending on the total number of participants for each grade) and began by introducing ourselves and inviting the children to tell us their names.

We asked students a series of introductory questions such as: (1) Do you like to write?, (2) What do you like about writing?, (3) What does your teacher do to help you write?, and asked them to respond orally. We then used their answers and comments to ask follow-up questions to better understand their responses and attitudes toward writing. For example, in the second grade class the children talked about writing for a school-wide contest. Follow-up interview questions then asked specifics about why they enjoyed writing for the contest, what made a piece of writing “good” for the contest, and why the contest made them feel excited about writing. Focus group conversations were audio recorded and later transcribed.

Using framework analysis (Krueger, 1994; Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), we analyzed our data through four key interconnected stages including familiarization with raw data, identification of themes, indexing and organizing the data, and interpreting the data. Our initial data analysis was our conversations after each focus group to discuss themes that emerged and responses from children that seemed to resonate (or not) with the existing literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Based on these initial conversations, we created a list of themes and ideas with which to code our transcripts and observation notes. We chose these initial themes based on comments or ideas from the children that stood out to us, ideas that helped us to answer our

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research questions, and comments that were unexpected. These themes included: role of teacher in students' perception of writing, motivators, sense of self in relation to writing, utility of writing, discourse of writing, and affective statements about writing.

First, we each coded our individual transcripts (including observation notes) by highlighting student comments with different colors in Microsoft Word that related to our initial themes. Frequency distributions of students' responses were then created by each author and compared to determine agreement in prevalence of themes. Student responses ranged from 19-56 related comments per theme and 2-29 comments per subtheme (prevalence is noted below in the study findings).

Next, we individually noted additional themes that emerged that were not on our initial lists (i.e., where children prefer to write, what topics children prefer to write about, and what genres of writing children prefer) and coded transcripts a second time by highlighting and creating a frequency distribution of additional themes. After coding for initial and additional themes, we reviewed our shared transcripts to discuss discrepancies and reach an agreement on shared themes and their prevalence.

### **Findings**

Five prevalent themes emerged during the analyses of focus group data including: (1) motivators for writing, (2) writing preferences, (3) writing self-efficacy, (4) feelings about writing, and (5) teacher influence. Each of the themes with supporting evidence, are described below in order from most prevalent to least prevalent. The number of student responses are listed parenthetically after each key theme and subtheme below.

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### Motivators for Writing (56)

Since motivation is strongly correlated with academic achievement in writing (Alexander et al., 1998; Graham et al., 2007; Piazza & Siebert, 2008), it makes sense to ask children about factors that make them *want* to write. In the current study, four sub-themes emerged within motivators for writing including: *topic choice* (29), *sharing* (14), *freedom* (7), and *praise* (6). Despite the class or age group interviewed, topic choice was the most frequently discussed issue during our focus group sessions. In classrooms where children were given topic choice often, comments were made describing the importance of choosing their own topic and how it motivated them to write. When discussing *topic choice*, children described the importance of being familiar with writing topics and the restrictions they felt when writing about assigned topics. Three children commented on their feelings about familiar topics:

“I really like it when we write about ourselves and things that we know.” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

“I like choosing my topic because you can tell people stories that you did over the weekend and stuff because they weren’t there.” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

“I like writing on my own cause you can keep it secret if it’s private and you can write stuff about anything.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Others commented on the restrictions of assigned topics and the freedom they felt when allowed to write about their own topics:

“What you really like, you can’t write about, cause that person tells you what to write and you have to do it.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

“We just don’t know how to write about fairies because we don’t have the word fairies on our popcorn words, cause in classrooms there’s normally not fairies.” (Kindergarten)

“I like choosing because you know what you want to do and you’re the boss of yourself, so you do what you want to do.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

“...pretty much what he’s trying to say is the sky is the limit when you write about your own topic.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

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Older children (i.e., 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade students) also talked about appreciating *topic choice* within an assigned genre and described instances when they appreciated the teachers' assistance with topic choice. Two children stated:

“Well, she normally tells us what to write about. Like we are writing our goals piece now and she told us we had to write about our goals, BUT we could come up with our goals and she helped us to kind of get a feel for that.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

“I like getting an idea of what to write out or else I'm kinda stuck and having a little trouble. Sometimes after that, I can write on my own if I get a good start. Then I can build onto that and make it better.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Some students talked about the daily act of *sharing* as a motivator for writing while others found sharing time to have a negative influence on their attitudes toward writing.

Students who enjoyed sharing appreciated feedback from their peers, the feeling of accomplishment when sharing a finished piece, and the emotional connection felt with their audience. Three students described positive experiences with sharing their writing:

“I like sharing because my friend might say maybe you should take out this sentence.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“It makes me feel like I've accomplished something, like all of that practice of writing and help really paid off.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

“When you share with the class, they just realize what you are going through.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Although children in grades 4-5 reported positive experiences with sharing, they were also more likely to report negative attitudes toward sharing than students in grades K-3. Three older students described negative attitudes toward group sharing because of the personal nature of their writing or because of the quality of their writing:

“I don't like other people to see my writing. I only like one person. Like just my teacher.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“Sometimes I like to, but sometimes I don't, because if we're doing a piece about a part of our lives, it's kind of personal so you don't really want people to listen.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

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“I love sharing...but ...sometimes when I feel very strong about what I write and how I feel and stuff, I’ll want to share it, but usually if I don’t want to, if I don’t think it’s the best it can be, I don’t want to share it.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

In addition to sharing, *freedom* was a theme that was interwoven throughout students’ discussion about their motivation to write. Freedom to choose where to write, what to write about, and for which audience were all mentioned with multiple students discussing the benefits of writing at home.

“I like writing at home because nobody else is there and I have a quiet room.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

“I like it better at home because I don’t have anybody watching me. Sometimes when people are watching me, I get a little nervous like “why are you watching me?” right? Like it’s pressurizing so I don’t really concentrate.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Finally, *praise* was a motivator for the young writers interviewed in this study. Comments about *praise* included descriptions of eliciting emotion from others and experiences with public recognition of their writing. Two students described emotional writing moments with their teacher and peers:

“Most of the time with my writing, when I’m reading it to the class, she’ll [teacher] start crying.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“...and usually all our friends say “yeaaaaaaah!” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Three other students recalled times when their writing had been recognized by the judges of the monthly school wide writing contest:

“There’s this [school wide] contest and you can enter it and they’ll read your poem or writing or whatever you do and they’ll look at it, and if they like it, you win.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“I have entered a lot of my work in [the school wide contest] and it feels good if you win it because it kinda boosts your writing confidence a lot.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

“When it’s entered, you feel like you’ve accomplished something, and if somebody else likes it, and they think you’ve done it to the best of your ability, and you know that you did, and if it’s all you could do, and it gets picked, you know that it was enough and maybe over the top.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

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### **Writing preferences (41)**

In our original meeting to discuss coding themes, we did not identify writing preferences as a major theme. But as we began our secondary analysis of the transcripts, we both found that the writing *genres* (17) students like to use, *what* (16) students like to write about, and *where* (8) students like to write were very important factors in the development of students' attitudes toward writing.

Students discussed many different writing genres that they preferred including poems, stories, jokes, comics, letters, posters, and songs. Three students shared their genre preferences:

“I like to write letters to the tooth fairy.” (Kindergarten)

“Sometimes I go home and I write a little song.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

“I like to write in my journal about my day sometimes.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

There were obvious differences between the writing topic preferences of girls and boys. Boys wanted to write more about “things” such as vampires, zombies, race cars, chemistry sets, Legos, star wars toys, and robots. Girls preferred writing about more personal experiences or places such as vacations, family members, their neighborhood, and gardens. Finally, many students preferred writing in locations outside the classroom (e.g., in the car, outside, at home) and especially in environments free from noise. One student described her ideal location for writing:

“I'd like to write in the quietest building in the quiet world that has quiet things with no intercoms and no cameras.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

### **Writing Self-Efficacy (32)**

It is not surprising that students with higher levels of writing self-efficacy (i.e., belief in their competence as writers) experience higher levels of writing achievement (Graham,

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Berninger, & Fan, 2007; Kear et al., 2000; Knudson, 1995). As with any complex task, beliefs of competence can affect the effort and persistence level students are willing to expend on writing (Anderman & Wolters, 2006; Pajares, 2003) as well as their enjoyment level.

Four sub-themes emerged when asking students to reflect on their sense of self in relation to writing. Regardless of whether they felt themselves to be “good” or “bad” writers, students reported *experience (10)*, *use of conventions (9)*, *elaboration (7)*, and *teacher response (6)* as indicators of writing competence. Students reported that experience with writing influenced their beliefs in their writing ability and that practice was an important factor in becoming a proficient writer.

“I’m a good writer because I’ve had a lot of experiments... well, not experiments... experience... [laughs]... experiences.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“If you write a lot and if you practice, you make mistakes over and over and eventually you don’t make those same mistakes.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Students also reported that they were “good” or “bad” writers based on their ability to use writing conventions such as spelling and punctuation.

“I’m a good writer because I always use capital letters and commas and periods. It’s really important because you need to know when to stop.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

“Good writers can spell and put their words together in the right places.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

Others suggested their ability to elaborate and use details made them a good writer.

“I’m a good writer - I think it’s because I use a lot of details.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

“You have to use specific things and you have to make it so people will like it and you have to use words that would make sense.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Although teacher influence is discussed as a separate theme later in this paper, it is important to note here the influence of teacher response as it specifically relates to students’ sense of writing

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self-efficacy. When students were asked how good of a writer they believed themselves to be, many substantiated their answers based on teacher response.

“I know I’m a good writer when I get a 100 or an A+.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

“I only usually have like one or two mistakes and she [teacher] compliments me.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

### Feelings about Writing (31)

When examining affective statements from the students, we found that many students had positive attitudes toward writing, but few preferred writing over alternative activities such as playing outside. Girls were more likely than boys to report having a positive attitude toward writing, which is consistent with findings from Graham et al. (2007) and Knudson (1993). We also found that attitudes toward writing declined with age with the most dramatic decline occurring between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade and continuing into the 5<sup>th</sup> grade year. This trend is also consistent with findings from previous studies (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Knudson, 1991,1992; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995).

During the discussion portion of the focus groups, students discussed both *positive* (16) and *negative* (15) feelings about writing. *Positive* feelings centered on expressing ideas through writing and being creative. Three students described their positive feelings:

“I like writing because I can write things that happen instead of talking.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

“I like writing because you can keep it secret if it’s private and you can write stuff about anything.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

“One of my favorite parts about writing is that it is sort of like legos. You can build your own characters.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)



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*Negative* feelings were most often associated with the difficulty and complexity of writing including figuring out how to spell and use punctuation, writing lengthy sentences, and organizing thoughts and ideas. Four students describe their struggles with writing:

“I don’t like writing the words because sometimes I don’t know the words and I want to figure them out myself and I can’t.” (Kindergarten)

“My hand gets tired.” (Kindergarten)

“I don’t like when you have to write something like a very long sentence like fifty something words.” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

“You have so many ideas in your head and you just keep losing them.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Students also stated that writing takes time away from other more enjoyable activities. One student stated this concern clearly:

“I don’t have a lot of free time and I’d rather spend it on something else.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

### **Teacher Influence (19)**

When children were asked about the role of their teachers in their writing lives, they had a range of answers from positive and supporting to negative and limiting. Children’s responses regarding teachers’ positive roles fell into three categories: (a) *encouragement* (7), (b) *direct assistance with writing* (4), and (c) *tips for improving writing* (2). Two children described experiences of receiving *encouragement* from their teacher:

“She tells us to write more!” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

“I like writing when my teacher tells us to do it, because everybody else is doing it. That makes me feel like, yeah, I wanna do writing.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

Examples of *direct assistance with writing* included the teacher providing topic ideas, spelling words for children, providing a writing model to be copied, and helping with punctuation. Four children described *direct assistance with writing* received from their teacher:

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“When you’re at home, you’re like I’m stuck and I don’t know what to do, but if you’re at school the teacher can help you and put ideas in your head.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

“If I make mistakes, she tells me. Like if I spell a word wrong, she would tell me how to spell it and then when we did our final draft, I would know how to spell it and get it right.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“I am kind of a good writer and kind of not, cause sometimes I get like...sentences, eh, jumbled up. But usually I think I’m a good writer because, um, my teacher helps me and we practice a lot.” (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

“She writes down what we’re supposed to write ...and then we copy it”. (Kindergarten)

Beyond direct assistance, children found a variety of tips from teachers helpful in improving their writing. *Tips for improving writing* included providing examples, suggesting different word choice and sentence structures, and asking children to read their work aloud to hear where changes were needed. One child described how her teacher provided tips through daily conferencing:

“She comes around the room and conferences with us and tells us to read our piece out loud, and she says when we read it, we can see our mistakes more. Then as we read, she tells us where we should change something and keep something. She tells us if it’s really good or not.” (5<sup>th</sup> grade)

Two negative sub-themes emerged when children were asked about their teachers’ role in their writing process including *limited writing time* (4) and *uncomfortable writing environments* (2). It was obvious interviewing different classes that some teachers allowed more consistent and extended periods for writing than other teachers. An overwhelming complaint from students in classes with limited writing time was that they were “just getting started” and writing time was over. Four children described their frustration with *limited writing time*:

“She always gives us ten minutes and I’m like getting started and I’ve got one dot on my paper and then we have to clean up.” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

“If she let us have more time, it would make us more smart.” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

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“We would have more time to do bigger sentences or it’d be a really nice picture.” (1<sup>st</sup> grade)

“I wish we could have a certain time for writing, a writing time like for 15 or 30 minutes so that we could write whatever we wanted.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

Other children described the teachers’ role in creating *uncomfortable writing environments* due to noise and criticism. Many talked about desiring a quieter work space where they could concentrate and write “like they do at home.” Others focused on feelings they experienced when their teacher critiqued their writing in front of their peers.

Two children described their struggles with their *uncomfortable writing environments*:

“It’s too noisy – and it’s so annoying...and you probably just mess up at some point.” (2<sup>nd</sup> grade)

“Well, my teacher shared my writing with the class last year and I got really sad cause you don’t know if she is gonna say you need to fix this in front of the class or if they’ll laugh or something.” (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)

While children reported both positive and negative roles that their teachers played in their writing lives, it was apparent throughout the interviews that teachers have a major influence in the development of children’s attitudes toward writing. We see the importance of the environment that teachers establish in their classrooms for writing, both in terms of physical environment and time allotted, as well as creating a climate of a writing community where children feel comfortable and supported in their writing.

### **Limitations**

There are several methodological limitations to this study. Although all of the participating teachers taught writing on a daily basis, the school did not have a consistent writing program or philosophy across all of the grades or classrooms. Therefore, our use of only one teacher per grade level gave us a limited perspective on the writing experiences of children across the school. Children’s writing experiences in classrooms were dependent on their

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individual teachers' writing curriculum and philosophy, as well as varying home experiences, therefore the changes we noticed in writing attitudes over time may or may not have been directly related to age and development. In future studies, we would suggest including all of the teachers at the school in order to understand the writing experiences across the entire school.

We also relied exclusively on the children's perspective and description of their experiences. We did not conduct classroom observations in order to observe writing experiences; however, while this is a limitation of our study, this was also a deliberate choice because we were most interested in understanding the children's perspectives and sense of self as writers.

### **Conclusions**

Although the results of this study are supported by years of writing research and the process writing approach movement, the power of students' voices reflected in this study remind us of the importance of balancing their needs as developing writers with curricular expectations. As teachers transition to CCSS, writing instruction has garnered national attention. Yet in the flurry of implementation, what we have learned from writing research in the affective domain over the past twenty years has been greatly ignored. The findings from this study remind us of the importance of understanding the relationship between children's attitudes and self-efficacy toward writing and their writing achievement.

Five broad themes emerged related to students' writing attitudes including: (1) motivators for writing, (2) writing preferences, (3) writing self-efficacy, (4) feelings about writing, and (5) teacher influence. Each of these themes can support classroom teachers as they develop and implement their writing curriculum and inform teacher education programs on how to better prepare effective writing teachers. Additionally, the study itself, can serve as a model for teachers to ask their students about personal writing experiences, explore their students' attitudes

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and self-efficacy towards writing, and inform their teaching practices by building on their own students' beliefs and experiences.

### **Implications for Practice**

In order to improve teachers' writing instruction, it is imperative to build on evidence-based practices by examining students' perspectives on writing. Each of the five themes that emerged from our study has important implications for practice.

#### **Motivators for writing**

It is important that teachers understand the relationship between writing motivation and writing achievement (Graham, Berninger, & Fan, 2007; Kear et al., 2000; Knudson, 1995). If teachers understand this important link, they will be more likely to make instructional choices based on the needs and interests of their students. For example, if teachers realize that topic choice is a strong motivator for students, they will be more likely to provide choice of topic even within cycles of writing genres required by CCSS (Fletcher, 2006). Teachers will also be more likely to use process-oriented approaches to writing instruction if they understand the benefits of constructive feedback, a variety of sharing opportunities, and freedom to express one's ideas (Graham et al., 2007).

#### **Writing preferences**

Another key implication from this study was the importance of recognizing audience and purpose (Ray & Glover, 2008). For the younger children in the study, they valued teachers sharing their work or writing for a particular audience, such as the tooth fairy. Their writing preferences seemed less personal in nature versus the older children who recognized the difference between writing for a public audience versus private writing (e.g., writing in a diary or to express feelings). Teachers could choose to offer children the opportunity to write for a variety

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of purposes and audiences in order to help develop voice as well as explore writing across genres. The children in our study were excited about the opportunities that they had to write in self-selected genres such as poetry, comics, songs and many expressed that these were the forms of writing that they enjoyed outside of the classroom. In a few cases, children who expressed a lack of interest in writing within the classroom were excited about writing in these genres outside the classroom. Teachers can build on these findings by exploring the incorporation of a variety of genres into their writing curriculum in order to engage diverse learners and support each child's unique development as a writer.

### **Writing self-efficacy**

Students reported that practice and experiences with writing, together with the use of conventions and elaboration in writing made them good writers. We noticed that these skills and behaviors that they identified reflected their experiences with classroom practices and teacher beliefs of "good writing," and few focused on the content and coherency of the writing process or product. As teachers strive to use evidence-based practices and transition to new writing standards, it is important to consider what practices increase students' feelings of competence as writers (Gillespie, Olinghouse, & Graham, 2013; Graham et al., 1993). To give children the "practice" they recognize as valuable, the writing curriculum could include a variety of daily opportunities to write, both formal and informal so that children can learn to write for different audiences, use different voices and learn how to develop their voice as writers (Ray & Glover, 2008). To help children become confident in using conventions and elaboration, teachers could embed mechanics and craft lessons into authentic writing experiences such as Writer's Workshop.

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### **Feelings about writing**

Although students' feelings about writing are often well-established when they enter a teacher's classroom, feelings and attitudes continue to evolve as students have writing experiences in different grade levels and with different writing teachers (Author, 2010; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Norman & Spencer, 2005). Beyond establishing best practices for writing instruction, our findings imply that teachers could create opportunities for students to share their feelings about writing, as a way of informing instruction and understanding each student's personal relationship with writing. The method of this study can serve as a model for having meaningful conversations with children about their feelings toward writing.

### **Teacher influence**

The role of the teacher was influential in the development of student writing attitudes in the current study. We can see from the data that children's attitudes towards writing were often directly linked to their experiences in the classroom and children who seemed to prefer writing expressed that their teachers valued writing and were enthusiastic in their teaching of writing. As teachers reflect on their own writing attitudes and instructional practices, they might be encouraged to observe the effects that their personal dispositions have on students' writing attitudes and motivation toward writing (Author, under review).

### **Final Thoughts**

Given what we heard from the students in this study, we encourage teachers to appreciate the differences in their students' writing interests and build on their individual strengths. We also encourage teachers to consider changes in writing attitudes that develop over time, so that if teachers move between grade levels or work with different populations of students, they will take these changes into consideration as they learn about their students' writing attitudes and

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experiences. As writing expectations continue to increase, it is important to consider future research on the influence of the affective domain on writing achievement and the role teachers play in helping students develop positive attitudes toward writing and a strong sense of efficacy in their writing abilities. Fletcher (2006) states that:

Writing teachers draw on three distinct pools of knowledge: what we know about teaching, what we know about our students, and what we know about the craft of writing itself. (p. 6)

Keeping this in mind, it is crucial for teachers to focus on these inseparable crafts of teaching and writing while keeping a strong focus on each child as author.



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