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Who Counts as a Writer? : Examining Child, Teacher, and Parent Perceptions of Writing

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### **Abstract**

The current study used a mixed method design with 245 preschool children, 255 teachers, and 156 parents. Researchers interviewed children and surveyed teachers and parents about their perceptions of preschool children's writing abilities and developmental writing stages. The results of the study showed that each group defined writing differently and parents were less likely to have positive perceptions about preschool children's writing abilities than children and teachers. Correlation analysis demonstrated that teacher and parent perceptions of children's writing abilities were not related to children's own perceptions of their writing abilities in this study. This study illuminates that alignment of home and school writing practices could be improved through parent education about developmental writing stages, by asking children about their own writing perceptions, and by encouraging sharing between parents and teachers about their home and school practices and philosophies related to writing.

*Keywords:* writing, early childhood, preschool, emergent literacy

## **Introduction**

As a sociocultural theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1978), proposed children's emergence as writers is influenced by concrete interactions with the materials, languages, institutions, and people they encounter in their day-to-day lives. Through these mediated activities that occur in the home and at school, children externalize, co-act, and internalize their individual perceptions and understandings about writing. This process leads to the development of their own writing identities (Prior, 2006; Schultz & Fecho, 2000).

Work by Bandura (1997) on identity formation has established strong connections between children's self-referent beliefs and their capabilities in a variety of developmental domains. Specifically, Bandura posited that children's self-efficacy (i.e., their confidence about their capabilities) helps determine how they will behave or use the knowledge and skills they possess (Pajares, 2003). In relation to writing development, Bandura's sociocognitive perspective (1977) proposes that children's judgments and perceptions of their own abilities consistently predict their writing behaviors and directly influence their motivation and academic progress in writing.

Because writing plays a critical role throughout children's academic lives, it is critical to examine factors that influence children's writing identities and lead to healthy levels of writing self-efficacy. The purpose of the current study was to investigate children's writing self-efficacy and their perceptions of writing ability and development. In addition, this study examined how teachers and parents define writing and possible relationships between child and adult perceptions of writing ability. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How do children, teachers, and parents define writing and writing ability?

2. How do adults' (teachers & parents) perceptions of writing ability relate to children's perceptions?

We hypothesized that the three groups (children, teachers, and parents) would define writing differently based on their varying life experiences with writing. For example, children would draw on their limited experiences with writing to explain its purposes, parents would draw on their own K-12 experiences with writing, and teachers would draw on their personal experiences with writing and also their experiences as a teacher of writing. We also hypothesized that adults' perceptions would influence children's perceptions. For instance, if a parent or teacher thought the child was a writer, we hypothesized that it would be likely that the child would also consider himself a writer.

### **Writing Development in a Social World**

In order to better understand factors that contribute to children's writing identities and successful growth as writers, it is important to first recognize the developmental stages of emergent writing development and to examine developmental influences.

**Developmental writing stages.** In this article, writing refers to the act of putting marks on paper to communicate or express meaning. Infants as young as 12 months of age often imitate adult writers and even begin experimenting with writing tools such as sidewalk chalk and crayons in the earliest stages of emergent writing (Sulzby & Teale, 1985). By 2 years of age, many children understand their marks carry meaning and they use one or more forms of emergent writing (drawings, scribbles, and letter-like forms) to record their ideas (Dinehart, 2015; Rowe & Neitzel, 2010; Schickendanz & Casbergue, 2009). As children move into preschool and kindergarten, they begin to experiment with writing, using letter strings (i.e., random series of letters that do not phonetically spell a word) and invented or phonetic spelling

(Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2008; Puranik & AlOtaiba, 2012). Others begin to use conventional spelling for familiar high-frequency words (e.g., is, the, cat; Strahan et al., n.d.).

**Developmental influences.** Although most children follow a similar developmental trajectory when learning to write, their distinct journeys are embedded within their own identity, experiences, and history. Catalysts for writing development include plentiful opportunities to write, availability of writing tools and materials in the home and at school, adult modeling, scaffolding, and encouragement, and meaningful peer interactions focused on writing (Bingham, Quinn, & Gerde, 2017; Christie & Enz, 1992; Gerde, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2015; Gerde, Foster, & Skibbe, 2014; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Morrow, 1990). In addition to providing time to write and writing materials, parents and teachers provide language experiences that help children build their oral and written vocabulary. Adults also serve as models, as they demonstrate functional uses of writing in their everyday lives (e.g., making a list, writing a letter; Aram & Biron, 2004; Vukelich, 1994). Positive developmental influences are critical in children's writing lives because they provide the foundation for a strong sense of writing self-efficacy, which has been found to correlate with future success in academic writing (Bandura, 1997).

**Teacher influences.** One teacher characteristic that may influence children's writing is teachers' perceptions of writing. Childcare and preschool settings provide varying levels of early writing experiences given different curricular philosophies and instructional priorities. Unfortunately in many early care settings, writing activities are based primarily on procedural tasks (e.g., writing names) instead of activities that encourage children to compose or express their thoughts, and time spent on writing is limited or non-existent (Pelatti, Piasta, Justice, & O'Connell, 2014). Schachter, Spear, Piasta, Justice, and Logan (2016) found teachers who

reported holding research-aligned beliefs about writing were actually less likely to spend time on some types of literacy instruction in their classrooms than their counterparts. They hypothesized their findings may be based on teachers reporting research-aligned beliefs, while enacting different beliefs due to social desirability (Phillips & Clancy, 1977) or teachers' inability to transfer their research-aligned beliefs into practice.

One explanation for the lack of writing opportunities in early childhood settings is that few universities provide specific coursework to adequately prepare preservice teachers in the area of writing (Zimmerman, Morgan, & Kidder-Brown, 2014). Further, undergraduate-level literacy courses often focus primarily on reading with little attention devoted to writing (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Norman & Spencer, 2005). In a nationwide survey conducted by Cutler and Graham (2008), only 28% of early childhood teachers indicated their college preparation to teach writing was either "very good" or "outstanding."

Due to the limited preparation teachers receive at the university level, many of their beliefs and attitudes toward writing instruction are based on their own experiences in school. During their own K–12 schooling, many teachers learn to define writing in terms of procedural skills (e.g., handwriting, name writing) and writing mechanics (e.g., grammar, spelling), rather than the process, craft, and meaningful uses of writing (Colby & Stapleton, 2006; Author, 2011). Based on these early experiences, teachers often form ideas about which pedagogical writing methods to use in their future classrooms and their ideas and decisions are difficult to influence and change once they enter the profession (Cross, 2009; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010). Teachers' perceptions of writing may be related to children's perceptions because their instructional choices lay the foundation for how enjoyable and valued writing is in their classroom.

***Parental influences.*** The primary settings in which children spend their time and the significant people children interact with on a daily basis, greatly influence their opportunities for writing growth. One parent characteristic that may impact children's writing is parents' perceptions of writing. For example, Bradford & Wise (2013) found important links between parents' perceptions of writing and the amount of writing opportunities they provided at home. Positive parent perceptions of their children's writing abilities were linked with focusing more attention on the meaning of writing, while negative perceptions were linked with focusing more on writing as a procedural task (Bradford & Wise, 2013). Parents' perceptions of writing are based primarily on their own writing experiences in K-12 school settings (Author, 2011). In addition, awareness of developmental writing stages varies widely based on parents' experiences and educational training. Parents with limited understanding of writing development often feel children's writing must be conventional for it to count as writing. In addition, they think children's undecipherable marks on paper do not represent meaning or true writing ability (Bradford & Wise, 2013). As such, parents' perceptions of writing abilities may be related to children's perceptions. However, this assumption remains an empirical question. Indeed, one previous study found that parental perceptions of children's reading and math skills are strongly associated with children's perception of skills (Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, 1997).

### **Writing Self-Efficacy**

Writing self-efficacy can be described as students' confidence that they can carry out writing tasks successfully and that their writing abilities can lead to desired outcomes (Graham Harris, Fink, & MacArthur, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Pajares (2003) explains that students' judgments of personal efficacy are very important to consider because they affect choices and effort level, along with levels of persistence and perseverance. Writing



self-efficacy is therefore thought to be tied to students' behavioral outcomes, motivational constructs, and academic performance (Pajares, 2003).

Students make judgments of their self-efficacy based on their own writing performance, social comparisons that they make with other writers (e.g., same-age peers, younger and older peers, and adults), and verbal messages they receive from others (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Because writing plays a critical role throughout children's academic lives, it is critical to examine factors that lead to healthy levels of writing self-efficacy.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Two hundred and forty-five children from 12 classrooms participated in the current study. Fifty-two percent of participating children attended Head Start centers and 48% attended public 4K preschool programs. The children were 18% African-American, 70% White, 4.5% Biracial, 4.5% Asian, 2% Latino(a), and 1% Other. Sixty-eight percent of children were four years old and 32% of children were five years old at the time of data collection. Children were 52% male and 48% female.

Teacher participants consisted of 12 teachers from the classrooms with child participants and 243 other teachers recruited to complete a national online survey. Additional teachers were recruited in order to balance the sample sizes of the three groups (i.e., children, teachers, and parents). Teachers who completed the online survey were primarily selected from public preschool programs because their email addresses were more readily available than Head Start teachers. Seven percent of participating teachers were Head Start teachers and 93% were public pre-K teachers. The teachers were 15% African-American, 78% White, 1% Biracial, 1% Asian, 4% Latino(a), and 1% Other. Teachers ranged in age from 26-68 years, with an average age of

41 years. Teachers were 2% male and 98% female. Fifty-one percent of teachers taught in four year-old classrooms and 49% taught in multi-age preschool classrooms. Sixteen percent of teachers had 0-5 years teaching experience, 25% had 6-10 years, 22% had 11-15 years, 15% had 16-20 years, and 22% had 20 or more years. The majority of teachers (92%) held a bachelor's or master's degree. The remaining 8% held a high school diploma or associate's degree. Fifty-two percent held a specialized degree in Early Childhood Education and 65% held a standard state teaching certificate (35% were unlicensed).

One hundred and fifty-six parents participated in the study and all were parents of participating children. Parent surveys were sent home with each participating child; therefore the total parent sample was less than the child and teacher groups based on unexpected low return rates. The parents were 22% African-American, 64% White, 4% Biracial, 1% Asian, 6% Latino(a), and 3% Other. Parents ranged in age from 21-61 years, with an average age of 33 years. Parents were 16% male and 84% female. Fifty-five percent of parents held a high school diploma, 10% held an associate's degree, 19% held a bachelor's degree, 6% held a master's degree, 3% held a Ph.D. and 7% did not choose a response.

### **Data Sources**

In order to interview and survey a similar amount of children, teachers, and parents, multiple data collection sites (including an equal mix of Head Start and public preschool settings) in South Carolina and Ohio were used for child interviews, parent surveys, and teacher surveys. After approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board at all sites, local teachers were invited to participate through email after first gaining permission from center directors. Then, local children and parents were invited to participate through a letter sent home by their classroom teacher. Due to the fact that at least 20 children participated in each local teacher's

classroom, additional teacher sampling was needed to obtain a balanced sample. Additional teachers were randomly selected and recruited nationwide to participate via an online survey (identical to the paper survey given to local participants).

**Child interviews.** Children who returned signed consent forms were individually interviewed for 5-10 minutes by trained researchers in the library of their schools. The child interview protocol began with an explanation that the child and the researcher would be talking about writing. Followed by general warm up questions (“Do you like to read? Are you a reader? Do you like to draw? What can you draw?”), the interviewer asked two open-ended questions to gauge children’s writing self-efficacy, “Do you like to write?”, and “Are you a writer yet?” followed by prompts of “Why or why not?”.

Interviewers then narrated five writer identification and explanation photos and captions. These items included a photo of a child writing displayed next to a photo of the same child’s written text so that the study participant could see the child who was writing and what their writing looked like when answering the question. Photographs for these five items were selected using a Google Images search to represent children from various backgrounds (See Limitations) and genders in the 4-5 year age range engaged in writing at each developmental writing stage (See Appendix A). Care was taken to select images of children who appeared to be the same age, so that size and/or apparent age would not influence participants’ perceptions about writing ability.

During this portion of the interview, the interviewer gave an oral description of the item (e.g., “The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says ‘I like dogs’.”), pointed to a photograph of a child holding a pencil to paper and an image of the child’s writing sample, and gave two follow-up oral prompts: 1) is this girl/boy a writer yet? y/n; 2) why or why not?). Each

of the five identification and explanation items pictured a different child at a different developmental stage of writing (i.e., drawing, scribbling, letter strings, invented spelling, and conventional spelling) and each item description explained the child's intended messages. As the interviewer read the item and pointed at corresponding images for the writing product or the child, the child's responses were written down verbatim (See Appendix A).

Interviewers were trained by the lead researcher and watched the lead researcher model an interview before conducting their own. Interviewer scripts were carefully designed based on the researchers' previous experience conducting interviews and focus groups with young children and survey research with adults. In addition to oral questioning (for children) and written questions (for parents and teachers), visual aids were presented (the photographs of the children writing) to assure the interview was developmentally appropriate for children and easily understood by all adults. This tool was designed by the researchers and piloted for this study, but has not yet been tested for reliability and validity.

**Paper teacher survey (local).** Local teachers of participating children were given a paper survey to complete with questions addressing teacher demographics (gender, age, race, years as a teacher, age taught, years teaching current age level, highest degree, type of teacher certification, and type of school), open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of their students as writers (when and why they considered them writers), six Likert-type items regarding teacher beliefs about preschool children (e.g., I believe preschool children should not write until teachers show them how to form each letter) rated from 1, strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree, and the same series of five identification and explanation items used during the child interviews and in the parent surveys. In addition, they were asked to label each participating student as a writer or not a writer (See Appendix B).

**Online teacher survey (national).** To recruit a larger sample of teachers, school districts were randomly selected nationwide to complete the online teacher survey and emails were sent to teachers inviting them to participate in the study. Emails included a link to the online survey which was identical to the paper teacher survey, except that it did not include the final question asking them to label their own students as writers or non-writers.

**Parent paper survey (local).** The parent survey was attached to the consent form for the child interview. Parent paper surveys included demographic information, two open-ended questions regarding the parent's perception of their child as a writer (when and why they consider their child a writer or not) and the same series of five identification and explanation items used during the child interviews (See Appendix C).

### **Data Analysis**

A mixed methods approach to data analysis was used to answer the research questions. To address research question one, survey data from teachers and parents were analyzed for frequency and summaries. Children's interview data were quantified when responses were easily dichotomized (for example, "Are you a writer yet?" Y/N). Open-ended survey responses from teachers, parents, and child interviews were coded through a content-analysis approach with an emergent coding scheme (Nuendorf, 2002; Saldaña, 2014). Accordingly, two researchers first reviewed all responses individually and created categories to code each participant's response. For example, children's responses related to why a child is a writer were coded as *children's definitions of writing ability*. Then, the researchers exchanged coded responses to discuss discrepancies and reach an agreement on shared categories. This resulted in a varying number of coding categories for each item. Once the coding categories were established, the researchers independently coded 10% of the data to establish inter-rater agreement. After reaching at least

90% agreement for each item, the researchers independently coded the remaining data. After the initial coding, individual codes were shared. The team discussed discrepancies and came to a consensus. Correlations were run between variables to analyze data corresponding with research question two.

## Results

To investigate child, teacher, and parent definitions of writing and children's writing self-efficacy, each study participant was asked if they considered themselves, their students, or their child a writer yet. Specifically, children were asked, "Are you a writer yet?", teachers were asked, "Do you have any students in your class that are writers yet?", and parents were asked, "Is your child a writer yet?" (See Limitations). Interestingly children and teachers answered "yes" to these questions with the same frequency (79%), while parents answered "yes" only 56% of the time. Similar results were found when the three groups were shown photographs of children in the five different developmental writing stages and asked whether the children in the photographs were writers (See Table 1). Children and teachers had similar responses for each developmental stage and parents consistently rated children lower for every stage except invented and conventional spelling.

<INSERT TABLE 1>

### Definitions of Writing

**Children's definitions of writing.** The majority of children in the study described writing as the ability to draw, trace, and write. Specifically, they said writers could draw well and write letters and words. They also tended to focus on the age and size of the child pictured as determining factors in who counts as a writer despite the fact that the children in the photographs were of similar age and size. Many children noted that "writers are older and bigger". In relation

to their own performance, 76% of children believed they were writers, demonstrating a high level of writing self-efficacy. One of these children said, "I'm a writer because I write pictures." Another child stated, "I'm a writer 'cause I can write my name and draw people." Children who did not consider themselves writers made comments like the following: "I'm not old enough yet", "I'm not a writer because I'm only four", and "Nobody taught me yet".

The majority of children said they could write their names (88%), write some of the letters in the alphabet (83%), and write their own stories (80%). More than half of children said they could write some words (66%). When viewing the photograph of the child drawing, and asked if the child was a writer, 84% of children said "yes". In explaining her answer one child stated, "She's a writer because she's writing a doggy", which indicated that this child acknowledged drawing as a valued form of writing.

When asked if a child who scribbles is a writer, half of children agreed she was (54%). Children who considered scribbling a valid form of writing stated that the girl in the photograph was a writer "because she loves writing" and "because she can draw". Children who did not consider the child who scribbles a writer explained their answer by saying, "Because she scribbled all over the place" and "That's just scribble scrabble".

The majority of children said a child who uses letter strings is a writer (92%) and a child who uses invented spelling is a writer (92%). Two examples of why they considered these children writers were "because she loves writing" and "because she writes with a pen". When asked if a child who uses conventional spelling is a writer, 92% of children said "yes". Examples of why they considered the child a writer in this stage included, "Because he did it by himself", and "Because he writes words".

**Teachers' definitions of writing.** When asked if a child who draws is a writer, 82% of teachers said "yes". When asked if a child who scribbles is a writer, 56% of teachers agreed she was. A majority of teachers (88%) said a child who uses letter strings is a writer and 100% of teachers said a child who used invented spelling is a writer. When asked if a child who uses conventional spelling is a writer, 97% of teachers said "yes".

In response to the question, "Please tell us when you think your students will become writers. What will they be able to do?" a majority of teachers (50%) indicated once children were able to describe or explain their pictures or marks, they were considered writers. Only one teacher mentioned the use of random letters or letter-like forms as defining a child as a writer. A few (16%) mentioned the need for children to first write their names, letters and/or familiar words before becoming writers. Only six teachers (or 14%) indicated students would need to reach the stage of invented spelling in order to be considered a writer.

When asked if the child *drawing* in the photograph was a writer, teachers' responses indicated most saw drawing as an acceptable form of communication. Interestingly, while not many responded this way, some teachers (4%) further defined this child as a writer because her drawing was recognizable. A majority of teachers (81%) took their responses a step further and mentioned that because the child can "tell you what her picture is about", she should definitely be considered a writer. In other words, teachers defined this sample as writing because the child clearly demonstrated an understanding that her marks convey an idea. Whereas, those teachers who responded this child was not a writer included the lack of letters or words as the primary reason this sample should not be considered writing.

When asked if the child *scribbling* in the photograph was a writer, 72% of teachers agreed she was because they thought her attempts to "convey meaning through marks on paper,"



regardless of how unconventional they looked, defined her as a writer. Those who did not consider this child to be a writer described the work as “just scribbles,” or did not view it as writing because it did not include recognizable letters or words. Others seemed to believe scribbles might be an appropriate way to communicate an idea, but since the image presented in this survey item was not recognizable and the marks were more random in nature, then this child should not be considered a writer. Some teachers mentioned wanting to further question the child’s intention and described feeling as if “maybe this wasn’t the child’s best work”.

When asked if the child using *letter strings* in the photograph was a writer, teachers overwhelmingly saw this child as a writer, given the use of letters and/or letter-like forms to communicate an idea. One teacher responded, “She has letters on there that to her say ‘I like family.’ Whether or not we can read or understand it. She is writing in her own way”. Those who did not see her as a writer explained it was because she did not incorporate *accurate* use of letters and sounds to write a complete sentence about her picture. Further, they thought since the drawing and letters/words were not fully recognizable, that this child could not be viewed as a writer yet.

When asked if the child using *invented spelling* in the photograph was a writer, teachers acknowledged the use of invented spelling as a major achievement in the development of a young writer. They accepted that this child (and others at this same stage) may not spell all words accurately, but celebrated his attempts to use letter sounds in his writing. Others mentioned the child’s use of invented spelling increased the chances others would be able to read the child’s work and therefore further helped to define him as a writer.

When asked if the child using *conventional spelling* in the photograph was a writer, almost all of the teachers answered “yes”, noting he formed a complete sentence, used correct

spelling and incorporated sight words, punctuation, and appropriate spacing in between words. The few who responded “no” seemed to misunderstand the item. For example, one teacher responded “The boy is not a writer yet because he didn’t write anything. He only expressed what he was thinking.” Another teacher stated, “He is verbally labeling his drawing and providing dictation to his teacher.”

**Parents’ definitions of writing.** The majority of parents indicated their own child was a writer based on his/her ability to form letters and words and/or write their first name. Only 25% of parents mentioned use of drawing to communicate ideas as their rationale for describing their child as a writer. When explaining why their child wasn’t yet a writer, 15% of parents responded that their child made little attempt to write and/or could not yet write his/her name. Further, 7% said their child only used drawing to communicate and therefore did not consider him/her a writer. Thirty-five percent of parents indicated their child could write his/her first name and/or individual letters of the alphabet, but they still didn’t identify him/her as a writer. Finally, 12% of parents specifically mentioned their child needed to use spelling appropriately before he/she could be identified as a writer. One parent mentioned fine motor difficulties and another mentioned English as a second language as reasons why they didn’t yet identify their child as a writer.

When asked if the child *drawing* in the photograph was a writer, slightly more than half of the parents (51%) said “yes” because they considered use of drawings to communicate ideas as an acceptable form of writing. Further, many explained that since the child used words to orally describe her picture, she could be thought of as a writer. Whereas, those who responded that this child was not a writer, included the lack of letters or words as the primary reason this sample should not be considered writing. Several of these parents indicated mixed feelings. For

example one responded, “It seems like ‘pre-writing’...she understands the concept of writing but isn't doing it yet.” Others identified her as an illustrator or storyteller, but not a writer.

When asked if the child *scribbling* in the photograph was a writer, 34% of parents agreed scribbled markings were acceptable ways for beginning writers to communicate ideas. One parent said, “She is learning that drawing lines and marks is the beginning of writing.” Others acknowledged, regardless of how conventional the writing looked, if the child was making an attempt to communicate an idea, then that child could be considered a writer. Furthermore, one parent responded “different kids explain their writing in different ways.” In explaining their answers, responses to this question varied, but a majority of parents didn't think this child was a writer because the sample didn't include letters or words. Others didn't see it as writing because they didn't see scribbling as a valid way to communicate an idea. One parent acknowledged this was “pre-writing”, but many responded that given the actual markings to illustrate “a baby” as described in the verbal prompt, it was difficult to label this child as a writer.

When asked if the child *using letter strings* in the photograph was a writer, over half of the parents (67%) responded this child was a writer because she used drawing to help communicate an idea or because she incorporated letters in her writing. Whereas those (33%) who did not view her as a writer, primarily indicated this was because she did not incorporate accurate use of letters, words or a complete sentence. However, some of these parents did indicate the child was close to being a writer and acknowledged she was making an attempt to communicate an idea through drawing and use of some letters and letter-like forms.

When asked if the child *using invented spelling* in the photograph was a writer, the majority of parents (95%) responded this child was a writer because he used words and made attempts to spell them correctly by sounding them out. Most agreed that misspellings were to be

expected at this stage and shouldn't take away from the child's overall writing ability. Some responded they thought this child was a writer simply given the child made an attempt to communicate ideas in print. A few mentioned the child's use of a complete sentence as justification for labeling him as a writer.

When asked if the child *using conventional spelling* in the photograph was a writer, 100% of parents answered "yes" because he used letters and words to communicate an idea. Some specifically mentioned the writing was valid because the child wrote a complete sentence. Further, some parents mentioned correct use of punctuation and capitalization in their responses and others mentioned the child's spelling ability as justification for being considered a writer.

### **Relationship between Adult and Child Perceptions of Writing**

Correlation analysis demonstrated that teacher ( $r = -0.32, p = .148$ ) and parent ( $r = 0.02, p = .7988$ ) perceptions of children's writing abilities were not related to children's own perceptions of their writing abilities in this study. Children perceived themselves as writers and non-writers equally, despite how their teacher and/or parents perceived their writing abilities.

### **Discussion**

This study illustrates that four and five-year old children in our sample usually have high levels of self-efficacy in writing, despite their developmental writing stage, and perceptions of important adults (i.e., teachers and parents) in their lives. Considering Vygotsky's theory (1978) demonstrating relationships between children's writing development and concrete interactions with materials, languages, and people and research demonstrating the importance of adult interactions in early literacy activities (Bingham et al., 2017; Christie & Enz, 1992; Gerde et al., 2015; Gerde et al., 2014; Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Morrow, 1990), it is interesting to consider which factors have the greatest impact on children's early perceptions of writing ability and how

these factors are interrelated. For examples, Bradford and Wise (2013) found that adult perceptions affected the writing materials and activities that they chose to provide to children.

This study demonstrated that adults (i.e., teacher, parent) may not have a significant impact on children's own perceptions of writing ability prior to elementary school. Further research is needed to explore the most influential factors in children's early definitions of writing and their writing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and when in fact, we see the shift from children making their own decisions about what counts as writing to when these perceptions are significantly affected by adult interactions.

This study also demonstrated that the majority of teachers valued emergent writing and could support their beliefs about writing with research-based examples at each developmental writing stage. This finding was somewhat surprising based on the lack of meaningful preschool writing instruction that has been observed in recent research (Pelatti et al., 2014) It may be that teachers have difficulty in transferring their beliefs about writing into instructional practices (Schachter et al., 2016). Thus, future research is needed on effective ways to help teachers negotiate the transfer of their beliefs into practice. Specifically, research is needed to help teachers negotiate curricular and scheduling demands with what they know is important for promoting early writing development in their classrooms. With a common gap in college level instruction in the area of teaching writing (Grisham & Wolsey, 2011; Norman & Spencer, 2005; Cutler & Graham, 2008), it is important that school districts and Head Start centers provide professional development in this area.

Finally, this study demonstrated that almost half of parents did not understand or value the earliest stages of writing development. If having adult models is an important influence as children continue in their development as writers (Aram & Biron, 2004; Vukelich, 1994), then it

is crucial that parents gain further understanding and appreciation of writing as a developmental skill, similar to learning to walk or talk. Future research is needed that supports informing or involving parents in children's growth as writers (Brashears, 2008). For example, it would be helpful to investigate ways that teachers, pediatricians, and community organizations could share vital information with families about developmental writing stages and milestones.

### **Limitations**

Because the surveys were conducted in only two locations, we urge caution in generalizing these results to the greater population. In addition, the parent sample size was half the size of the child and teacher groups, due to sampling limitations. We tried to alleviate this issue by sending multiple reminders to parents, but ultimately had to proceed with the smaller sample.

In regards to the survey, the tool needs to include updated photographs of children that represent greater diversity in ethnicity and are more similar in age and size. Further work on the tool is also needed with larger samples to strengthen the instrument and study the reliability and validity of the tool. In addition, a few teachers seemed to misinterpret the item involving the child using conventional spelling. Some seemed to think the teacher had written the words instead of the child. Their responses to "why the child was a writer" were therefore difficult to code. Future studies using this survey might look to revise this individual item to provide greater clarity.

Finally, the item asking children and parents about whether they (or their child) was a writer focused on a single child, while the item asking teachers whether they had "any" writers in their class focused on multiple children. This was problematic in comparing the three groups' responses, but we decided that this was the best way to ask the question based on the need to use

a nationwide teacher sample. Efforts were made to alleviate this issue in the correlation analyses by only including teachers' responses that were directly correlated to individual students they taught in their classes. In order to conduct these analyses, local teachers included responses about whether they thought each of their individual students was a writer or not.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggests that alignment of home and school writing practices could be improved through parent education about developmental writing stages, by asking children about their own writing perceptions, and by encouraging sharing between parents and teachers about their home and school practices and philosophies related to writing. In addition, although research suggests links between social influences and writing self-efficacy (Vygotsky, 1978; Bandura, 1997), this study revealed that preschool age children's own perceptions of writing are not significantly affected by adult perceptions. Future research is needed to replicate this study and then investigate if over time, during the early and late elementary years, these external influences have greater effects on children's perceptions, motivation, and achievement.

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## Appendix A

### Child Interview

Introduction: Today we are talking about writing. I want to ask you a few questions.

Warm-up questions:

1. Do you like to read?
2. Are you a reader?
3. Do you like to draw?
4. What can you draw?

Questions:

1. Are you a writer yet?  
If yes - Why do you think you're a writer? What makes you a writer?  
Do you like to write?  
If no - Why not? What makes someone a writer?
2. Can you write your name?
3. Can you write some of the letters in the alphabet?
4. Can you write any words?
5. Do you write your own stories? If, yes -- What do you write about?

Now I want to show you some pictures of children and their papers.

6. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says "I like dogs". Is this girl a writer yet? Why or Why not?



7. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “my family is fun.” Is this girl a writer yet? Why or Why not?



8. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “This is my baby right here.” Is this girl a writer yet? Why or Why not?



9. The boy below tells his teacher that his paper says “My dad took me to the zoo yesterday.” Is this boy a writer yet? Why or Why not?



My dad took me to  
the zoo yesterday.

10. The boy below tells his teacher that his paper says “I like to play soccer.” Is this boy a writer yet? Why or Why not?



I LIK to  
PLA SOKR.

Appendix B  
Teacher Survey

Teacher's Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender? MARK (X) ONE RESPONSE.

Male.....

Female.....

2. In what year were you born? 19

3. Which best describes your race? MARK (X) ONE OR MORE.

American Indian or Alaska Native.....

Asian.....

Black or African American.....

White.....

Biracial .....

Latino(a).....

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.....

Other.....

4. Counting this school year, how many years have you been a school teacher? PLEASE INCLUDE PART-TIME TEACHING POSITIONS.

Years

5. What grade level do you currently teach? MARK (X) ONE.

Preschool (3 year olds).....

Preschool (4 year olds).....

Preschool (multiage) .....

6. Counting this school year, how many years have you taught at the grade/age level you currently teach? PLEASE INCLUDE PART-TIME TEACHING AS A FULL YEAR.

Years

7. What is the highest level of education you have completed? MARK (X) ONLY ONE RESPONSE.

- High school diploma or GED.....
- Associate's degree.....
- Bachelor's degree.....
- At least one year of course work beyond a Bachelor's but not a graduate degree.....
- Master's degree.....
- Doctoral degree.....

8. What type of teaching certification do you have? MARK (X) ONE RESPONSE.

- None.....
- Temporary, probational, provisional, or emergency certification.....
- Certificate for completion of an alternative certification program.....
- Regular or standard state certificate or advanced professional certificate.....
- The highest certification available (permanent or long-term).....

9. In what areas are you certified? MARK (X) ONE RESPONSE ON EACH LINE.

- None .....
- Early childhood.....
- Elementary.....
- Special education.....

Other (PLEASE SPECIFY) \_\_\_\_\_

10. What type of school do you teach in?

- Head Start Center .....
- Public Preschool .....
- Private Preschool .....

11. Do you have any students in your class that are writers yet?

12. If YES: Please tell us more about your student writers. What can they do?



If NO: Please tell us when you think your students will become writers. What will they be able to do?

13. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “I like dogs”. Is this girl a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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14. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “my family is fun.” Is this girl a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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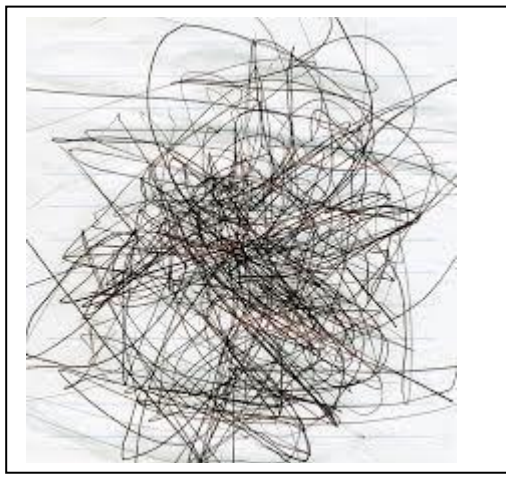
15. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “This is the baby. You see it?.” Is this girl a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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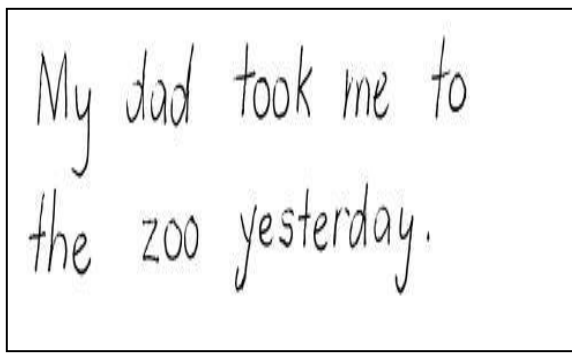
16. The boy below tells his teacher that his paper says “My dad took me to the zoo yesterday.” Is this boy a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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17. The boy below tells his teacher that his paper says “I like to play soccer.” Is this boy a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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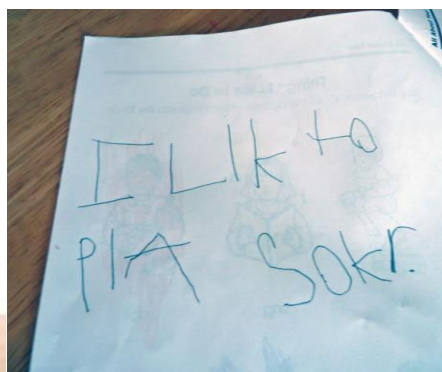
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	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
<b>As a teacher I believe preschool children:</b>					
a) Should not write until teachers show them how to form each letter.	1	2	3	4	5
b) Should write without worrying about spelling.	1	2	3	4	5
c) Should not waste time scribbling and drawing when they can be learning to write.	1	2	3	4	5
d) Learn to write by watching teachers write.	1	2	3	4	5
e) Learn to read before learning to write.	1	2	3	4	5
f) Can be taught letter names as they write their names.	1	2	3	4	5



Appendix C  
Parent Questionnaire

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Number in the Study \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your gender? MARK (X) ONE RESPONSE.

Male.....

Female.....

2. In what year were you born? 19

3. Which best describes your race? MARK (X) ONE OR MORE.

American Indian or Alaska Native.....

Asian.....

Black or African American.....

White.....

Biracial.....

Latino(a).....

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.....

Other.....

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed? MARK (X) ONLY ONE RESPONSE.

High school diploma or GED.....

Associate's degree.....

Bachelor's degree.....

At least one year of course work beyond a Bachelor's but not a graduate degree.....

Master's degree.....

Doctoral degree.....

5. What is your relationship to this preschooler? MARK (X) ONLY ONE RESPONSE

- Mother.....
- Father.....
- Grandmother.....
- Foster parent .....
- Other.....

6. What is your preschoolers' date of birth? Month/Date/Year

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7. Is your preschooler a:

- Boy.....
- Girl.....

8. Which best describes your preschooler's race? MARK (X) ONE OR MORE.

- American Indian or Alaska Native.....
- Asian.....
- Black or African American.....
- White.....
- Biracial.....
- Latino(a).....
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.....
- Other.....

9. Is your child a writer yet?

10. Please explain why your child is or is not a writer yet.

11. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “I like dogs”. Is this girl a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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12. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “my family is fun.” Is this girl a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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13. The girl below tells her teacher that her paper says “This is the baby. You see it?.” Is this girl a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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14. The boy below tells his teacher that his paper says “My dad took me to the zoo yesterday.” Is this boy a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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My dad took me to  
the zoo yesterday.



15. The boy below tells his teacher that his paper says "I like to play soccer." Is this boy a writer yet? Circle your answer **YES** or **NO**. Please explain why or why not in the space below:

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